DEFINING RELIGION:
INVESTIGATING THE
BOUNDARIES BETWEEN
THE SACRED AND
SECULAR

EDITED BY

ARTHUR L. GREIL
Division of Social Sciences, Alfred University, NY, USA

DAVID G. BROMLEY
Department of Sociology, Virginia Commonwealth University,
Richmond, USA

2003

JAI
An imprint of Elsevier Science
San Diego – San Francisco – Singapore – Sydney – Tokyo
DEFINING RELIGION: A PLURALISTIC APPROACH FOR THE GLOBAL AGE

Frank J. Lechner

That prejudice [that the idea of religion is universally valid] is not confined to missionaries; it is part of Euro-American civilization and modern culture.... "Religion" does not seem to constitute a meaningful, let alone a universal category that may be studied profitably by itself (Staal, 1998, pp. 67 and 75).

The task of identifying the essence or universal core of religion has largely been a failure, considering the lack of consensus among scholars (Saler, 2000, p. x).

DEFINING RELIGION: THREE QUESTIONS

(1) What definition of religion do I use? Instead of arguing for the virtues of one definition, I advocate a pluralistic approach. Since scholars have failed for over a century to settle on a single definition of religion as a distinct phenomenon with a universal core, attempting to establish such a definition at this late date is bound to fail. In scholarly practice, different definitions operate as tools within various fruitful research ventures, so it makes pragmatic sense to examine the benefits to be gained from following different definitional strategies. From a sociological standpoint, such a pluralistic approach promises to be more useful in addressing an important contemporary problem, namely how particular groups with different traditions contribute and respond to globalization. If meaningful responses to globalization are likely to take different forms instead of crystallizing into one set of shared sacred symbols, as one influential perspective on the subject suggests, then pluralism would seem to fit the
demands of the global age. At the same time, as I explain below, a fairly conventional “substantive” definition of religion offers one powerful entry point into the predicaments of the global age. This substantivist allegiance tempers my pluralism.

(2) What phenomena does this include/exclude? The point of advocating pluralism is to be cognitively inclusive. In effect, I propose to sidestep familiar controversies about defining religion because I am interested not in finding the correct way to think about religion but in pursuing the most useful tools for global cultural analysis. At this still-embryonic stage of global analysis, it would be premature to rely exclusively on one definition.

(3) Does it really matter how we define religion? As I indicate below, definitions do not matter because they only play a subordinate role in theories, but they also do matter insofar as they structure research agendas. Minimally, then, advocating pluralism in definitions implies the pragmatic judgment that, at this point, the competitive pursuit of distinct agendas will help to maximize our collective cognitive gains. Singling out one particular definition as exclusively valid or useful would once again prematurely limit our vision of problems worth pursuing.

**FOR PLURALISM**

Staal and Saler are right: religion is no universal category, it has no universal core. Defining religion, in any conventional sense, would therefore seem to be fruitless. Is it? Staal presumably would answer yes: better to focus on universal categories that can by studied “by themselves” than to persist in misapplying a modern prejudice. Others might reply that there is, after all, a type of human enterprise that uniquely features the “inclusion of culturally postulated superhuman agents” (Lawson & McCauley, 1990, p. 5). Saler advocates a third approach: to avoid drawing sharp lines that distort, a cross-culturally useful concept of religion should be based on resemblances in a family of related phenomena, which can vary in their degree of “religiousness” along several dimensions. All three responses make sense: the skeptical rejection of religion as universal leads us to view it as part of a larger whole, proponents of substantive definitions lead us to pursue systematically the implications of one powerful definition, and the family resemblance approach leads us to think of religion in terms of variable dimensions. Each suggests a distinct agenda.

My own response incorporates elements of these three, but takes a different direction. If I were interested mainly in pursuing old-fashioned secularization theory, I would side wholeheartedly with the substantivists. If I were interested in

---

*a flexible tool for old-fashioned cross-cultural analysis, Saler might fit my needs. But my main problem is different. Instead of starting with religion, if I may put it this way, I start with global change. I am interested in understanding “cultural” contributions and responses to globalization.* I therefore propose to turn the predicament to sociological advantage by making a case for pluralism in defining religion. I argue, in a pragmatic vein, that no single conception of religion can do justice to a variety of “religion-like” phenomena involved in globalization, and that multiple versions of “religion” can produce fruitful agendas in the study of globalization. Like Staal, therefore, I am not interested in defining religion as a thing to be studied in itself; I want to understand the various ways in which people contribute to and make sense of globalization. Like the substantivists, I believe that a conception of religion rooted in Western culture is a powerful organizing principle for transcultural study, and so I hedge my pluralism, but I recognize that the research agenda that follows from such a view would be too restrictive by itself. Like Saler, I want to capture various forms of “religiousness,” as expressed in responses to globalization, but in the global age we need more than one family of religious objects, more than one type of cross-cultural understanding. In fact, globalization calls the meaning of “crossing cultures” into question.

Some philosophical reasons support this pragmatic effort to sidestep struggles over definitions. Strictly speaking, definitions don’t matter: theories do. In the classic Popperian model, theories address problems. Definitions are mere instruments in the development of theories. Judging a definition by itself, without considering the theory of which it is a part, makes little sense. The validity of theories does not turn on any feature of their definitions in any case. Of course, some definitions serve the purpose of their theories better than others, for example by being clear and by directing the attention of scholars to critical issues to be resolved. But this simply means that definitions can be more or less useful, not that we should spend a great deal of energy on getting them “right.”

At the same time, definitions do matter, for reasons that do not contradict the point I just made but in fact support my pragmatic argument. Definitions can embody prothotheories. That is, setting the boundaries of a phenomenon or defining its “essential” features often serves to make some claims about an area of human experience. For example, so-called functional definitions of religion, which define it as sacred beliefs and practices that unify a collectivity, contain claims about the content and role of group culture. Definitions may also produce interesting questions. For example, so-called substantive definitions of religion, which define it as beliefs and practices confirming the existence of a transcendent reality, lead scholars to question whether all societies contain such religion and, if so, whether
If definitions operate within theories and may actually contain prototheories, then scholars with different theoretical agendas can legitimately use different definitions. Dissensus on definitions, familiar to students of religion, reflects contrasting scholarly interests, assumptions, and theories. Even one scholar’s interests can vary from one context to another. For example, in my own work a somewhat unfriendly critic might detect three definitions of religion – substantive, functional, and constructivist. In my work on secularization, I rely on a substantive definition to analyze the declining social significance of religion in this sense. When studying fundamentalism, I in effect employed a functional definition, since my interest was in the use of beliefs and symbols considered sacred by certain groups to unify those groups and a larger society. In papers on globalization, I mainly followed the practice of others, notably Roland Robertson, to examine religion as the term and issues associated with it are construed by people and groups themselves – or, in the terms of this volume, as a “category of discourse.” But if, to generalize, different agendas legitimately use different definitions, and if there is no single vantage point from which to favor one agenda over all others, then the reasonable position to adopt is pluralism. Exclusive adherence to one definition would prematurely limit our vision.

This is not to say that all definitions “go” equally well. On the whole, substantive definitions are better than functional ones. To be sure, in view of the points just made, no one can be an unreconstructed substantivist. I also do not mean to imply that the functional-substantive opposition is the only important one. Nevertheless, the point holds because functional definitions tend to incorporate false prototheories and gloss over significant questions whereas substantive definitions reflect plausible prototheories that also raise interesting questions. The implicit functional claims that all collectivities produce “the sacred” and that the sacred is critical to social unity are false. Functional definitions tend to frame religious change as transformation in always-present, always-important symbols and practices: the more things change, the more they stay the same; and this is also false. Scholars favoring substantive definitions plausibly assert that what is unique to religion as a human enterprise is the “inclusion of culturally postulated superhuman agents,” a point already cited. They further claim that this distinctive content has distinctive consequences for how people act and think, though transcendence has no necessary function. As noted, they imply that this enterprise may not be present in all groups or societies and they raise the question whether the role of religion in this sense may change. In the global age this agenda remains important.

One argument against substantive definitions is that they rely on core features of the Christian religious tradition and thus ignore or distort important features of other traditions. This lies behind Staal and Saler’s critique of the category of “religion” as such. But substantive definitions are not exclusively Christian. Weber was right to treat Christianity as one member of a set of similar phenomena, i.e. salvation religions centered on some view of superhuman reality. Even if a definition were Christian-inspired, it could still be fruitful, since the Christian way of “doing” religion has spread and the de-Christianization of many western countries raises important questions about religious change generally. A definition need not be “universal” to be globally relevant.

Whatever the benefits of a sound substantive definition, in modern world society there is no one legitimate and binding view of religion. In most places, for most social intents and purposes, religion has become mere culture, to be used and interpreted as individuals and groups see fit. Like definitions of secular phenomena, definitions of religion are practically contested. It is not even clear that defining religion should focus on drawing a boundary between sacred and secular, if I may mix Durkheimian and Weberian terms. Searching for the “correct” definition reflects a desire for boundaries and certitude that modern cultures subvert. If modern cultures, especially modern world culture, have no single sacred core, no one guiding view of the supernatural, no one family of approved religiosities, then pluralism may be one way to do justice to the complexity of actually existing societies. Starting with a substantive definition enables us to get the distinctive features of our current condition clearly in view.

Of course, a pluralistic approach to defining religion should recognize the plurality of cultural contexts in which religiosities appear. If it is true that collective practices organized around a shared conception of the supernatural were most common in one long period that is coming to an end and that in modern societies many groups and individuals need not follow the precepts and practices of the world religions as they make sense of their lives in ways that resemble, but also deviate from, the historically familiar religious forms – if that is true, then squeezing the investigation of new cultures, of world culture in particular, into the straitjacket of conventional definitions of religion is not necessary. Cultural problems need not be “religious” to be worthy of serious study. The sociology of “religion” need not, indeed cannot, encompass all of human culture.

What does my pluralism mean in practice? To move from general argument to specific illustration, I now turn to the way in which different theoretical approaches to globalization construe and interpret religion.

**ANALYZING RELIGION IN GLOBALIZATION**

How is religion involved in globalization? From South Asia to North Africa to the United States, fundamentalists opposed to the “new world order” attempt to
change their societies, drawing global attention (Marty & Appleby, 1991–1995). Relying on new communication technology, American Christians export the Gospel, with considerable success in Latin America and Africa (Brouwer et al., 1996). Reviving its universal ambitions, the Catholic Church pursues a new global strategy, diversifying in the process (Casanova, 1997). At the same time, the homelands of Western Christianity experience “gatherings in Diaspora” (Warner & Wittner, 1998), creating new local cultures while forging transnational bonds. On behalf of Tibetan Buddhists, the Dalai Lama (1989) urges the world to appreciate human commonalities and to cultivate a universal responsibility for the planet. Some religious movements experience significant international growth (Stark & Iannaccone, 1997). These examples would provoke little dispute: they refer to global activities by representatives of established “world religions.” The fact that they seem uncontroversial suggests that in some sense “religion” has become a global, if not a universal, category: “we” know what “we” mean when “we” talk about religion. But these examples certainly do not exhaust the possible range of involvements one can reasonably consider “religious.” Cases in point are environmentalists defending the earth as a sacred place, the struggle by the Church of Scientology to be considered a “proper” religion outside the U.S., or the increased global importance of preserving “indigenous” cultures.

As these examples only begin to indicate, there is no one connection between religion and globalization. Religion is, and has been, involved in globalization in various ways. This is true analytically because, as several definitions enable us to recognize, one can distinguish different modes of involvement: “religion” can be source, component, or affected party. Religion has been a source of globalization by creating transnational or inter-state relations, by stimulating and endorsing the expansion of such relations, and by articulating a distinctive awareness of the world as a whole. Religion has been a component of globalization insofar as religions themselves have spread globally, built global institutions, and aspired to being global actors. Religion has been affected by globalization since worldwide social and cultural changes have changed the conditions for its flourishing, relativized the identities of religious groups, and involved religion in addressing the problems of the world as such. Thus, we can view religion as moving force, key dimension, and prime interpreter in globalization.

More importantly for my argument, the connection between religion and globalization is variable in a more basic, logical sense: how one thinks of religion in relation to globalization, and what one looks for as relevant evidence, depends on one’s view of globalization (cf. also Simpson, 1991). Table 1 briefly summarizes how different views of globalization lead to different ways of conceptualizing religion.

### Table 1. Framing Globalization and Religion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Globalization =</th>
<th>Extension of capitalist world economy, division of labor, and multi-state system to world as a whole (Sklair, 1995; Wallerstein, 1974, 1992)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then religion =</td>
<td>Legitimating/delegitimating ideology; potentially antisystemic force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Globalization =</td>
<td>Rise of world polity enacted by societies and organizations worldwide (Meyer et al., 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then religion =</td>
<td>One source of organizing myths; institution enacting or deviating from world polity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Globalization =</td>
<td>Awareness of one world of relativized units (Robertson, 1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then religion =</td>
<td>Source of reflexivity about world-as-whole; site of dialectical construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Globalization =</td>
<td>One world society of differentiated social systems (Boyer, 1994; Luhmann, 1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then religion =</td>
<td>Potentially differentiated system with own function related to residual problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Globalization =</td>
<td>Rise of transnational civil society independent of state system (Lipschutz, 1992; Rudolph &amp; Piscatori, 1997; Smith et al., 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then religion =</td>
<td>Instance/creator of civil society; potential source of concepts, models and networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then religion =</td>
<td>One form/flow among others; site of hybridization/creolization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If globalization stands for the worldwide extension of a capitalist world economy supported by a multiple-state system, then religion's primary mode of involvement (whether as source or response) will be ideological legitimation or delegitimation. If globalization describes one world society of differentiated social systems, then religion is involved as attempting to form a functionally distinct system that addresses residual problems. If globalization captures humanity achieving a new awareness of global coherence among relativized units, then religion's role lies in its contribution to that consciousness and problematic coherence. Of course, none of these definitional frames prevents anyone from taking an interest in the findings of fellow scholars, but each reflects a theory or perspective that has a distinct and selective "logic."

Table 2 illustrates their implications for the three dimensions distinguished above. Once again different agendas, relying on different definitions, have different implications.

Thus, for example, a world-systemic approach to global analysis that is essentially agnostic when it comes to defining religion, is unlikely, on materialist grounds, to search for "religion" as a source of globalization. A Luhmannian view of religion as a distinct global social system depends in part, to use its jargon, on the way such a system is structured by communication processes world...
society; what counts as "real" religion is not simply up to the defining observer. One implication of the "creolized hybrid" view of global change is that while "religion" will not be submerged in more powerful "secular" flows, it is likely to become attached to other symbols and ideas in a particular "form of life" (Hannerz, 1991). In the sections below on the variable involvement of religion in globalization, I spell out some other implications briefly summarized in the table.

None of the global theories asserts a necessary connection between religion and globalization. For any of the frameworks I outlined, the role of religion is essentially contingent: an historical phenomenon that could have been otherwise, not something intrinsic to the process. Insofar as religion was/is involved, so we can phrase the reasoning in each case, it must compete with other sources of meaning and legitimacy. Insofar as religion is a global institution, carrier of world principles, its involvement in globalization is not simply up to the defining observer. In any of the frameworks I outlined, the role of religion is essentially contingent: an historical phenomenon that could have been otherwise, not something intrinsic to the process. Insofar as religion was/is involved, so we can phrase the reasoning in each case, it took/takes this form. That does not mean religion must be unimportant. For example, if globalization raises a question of ultimate meaning, as we may infer from Robertson (1992), then historic providers of answers to such questions are likely to play strong roles. Yet even Robertson's focus is on culture as the site of contention, without presuming that religion is the soul of culture. That few scholars take a strong formal-theoretical stance on religion's involvement in globalization is not surprising. Globalization refers to

Table 2. Analyzing Religion in Globalization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Globe as Source</th>
<th>Religion as Component</th>
<th>Religion as Respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World-system</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Legitimizing ideology in core; civilizing mission; displays contradictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World polity</td>
<td>Christendom as source of myths and organizational forms</td>
<td>Potential global institution, carrier of world principles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexive dialectic</td>
<td>Christianity as source of images, rationales</td>
<td>Site of universal-particular dialectic; relativized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated world society</td>
<td>In west, aided breakdown of stratified differentiation</td>
<td>Potentially differentiated global system of converging religions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil society</td>
<td>Creates anastate networks</td>
<td>Viable transnational structure(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>No claim</td>
<td>Relatively autonomous form and flow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Religion as Source Religion as Religion as

Defining Religion

RELIGION AS SOURCE OF GLOBALIZATION

The extent to which religion has served as source of globalization is also mainly an historical question. Those who have addressed it actually tend to rely on a fairly conventional substantive definition of religion, which, conveniently, fits the Christian case particularly well. In the European Middle Ages, some would argue (cf. Garrett, 1991), Christendom constituted a world (though not a global) civilization. The organizational resources of the Church and its missionary ambition contributed to European expansion. The Reformation schism further divided Europe politically and contributed to competition that became a key feature of the capitalist world system (Chirot, 1985). The civilization that spread from Europe also had distinctively Christian characteristics, not least its rationalizing and individualistic thrust. In a more basic way, Europeans' ultimately religious orientation to worldly mastery provided a powerful stimulus for their actual technical and social domination. The contrasting argument (implicit in Wallerstein, 1974) suggests that religion followed the juggernaut of political-economic expansion. Churches provided the civilizational veneer for a capitalist project, missionaries pacified natives, and so on. Religion, in short, became the useful superstructure of the world-system. From one point of view, then, world society is partly of Christian design; from another, the world would have looked the same without Christianity or any other form of religion. I think the evidence slightly favors the pro-religion view: but for the influence of the traditions of Western Christianity, much about the emerging global system would have been different, including the way the core pursued riches and dominion, the form of the state, the relationship between individual and society or between self and other. Due to the form and content of the Western Christian churches, the world system also became a world civilization of a particular kind.

Does this traditional debate have any contemporary relevance? Weber's comment on the fate of the Protestant ethic applies here: a set of motivating forces may recede once the new habits and institutions acquire a momentum of their own. From a substantive standpoint, there is nothing intrinsically religious about any global practices or institutions. Insofar as religion is a global "player" at all, it must compete with other sources of meaning and legitimacy in shaping global society. No current global institutions depend on religious legitimation. This is not to say that religion has no role left in creating global relations or awareness beyond
“its” specialized purview. Insofar as globalization involves a new awareness of global unity, the “total” perspective of many religious traditions remains a key component. Views of the good world society, articulated by religious leaders, are themselves factors in the direction it takes, as I will argue below. Religions build transnational practices and institutions; they may incubate others. Religion may thus serve as model and stimulus for building components of world society. Religion, then, can still be an important source of globalization, its relative significance varying over time. Measured against the scale and scope of global media, business, states, science, NGO’s, professional networks, and so on, that significance now is relatively low, and the make-up of global society militates against any totalizing religion gaining great influence in non-religious spheres. But like secularization theory of old, globalization theory rules out reversals at its peril.

RELIGION AS COMPONENT OF GLOBALIZATION

As I indicated, many of the globally recognized religions are involved in transnational activity—some dramatically so. Under John-Paul II, the Catholic Church has renewed worldwide missionary vigor. Evangelicals have expanded successfully in Africa and Latin America. Islamists aim to change the world, by uniting the ummah and defeating its opponents. Of course, the “world” religions already ranged across large spaces. Since the 16th century, however, the Christian expansionary thrust has been much more deliberate than before (cf. Muldoon, 1991). Since the 19th century, relations between religious groups and bodies have increased as well. In the last century or so, several new religions, from the Baha’is (McMullen, 2000) to the Unification Church, have sprung up with explicit ambitions to unite religions, if not the world at large. Several arguments make sense of such developments and identify them as a coherent bundle of events.

Religion has (religions have) distinct advantages in creating civil society. As Rudolph (1997) has suggested, in many parts of the globe it has transnational experience. Its transcendent dimension provides a measure of autonomy, strengthened by Western-influenced ideas of separating state and church. Religion has resources and reasons to create transnational links independent of state (or economic) structures. As civil society grows in the interstices of a fragile state system, religion is bound to be a globalizing force. As state capacities diminish and competition for allegiance increases, religion can flourish. It builds world society.

Religion can play a special role at the intersection of social and cultural flows. Globalization, Nedsvereen Pieterse (1995) and Hamnerz (1991) suggest, mixes organizational forms and cultural repertoires, both globally and locally. At the intersection of many cultural flows and institutional pressures, each society, group or individual must define a new global identity. In a hybridized world, such identities are creolized. As source of meaning and identity—models, religion is bound to play a key role in the mix. Some globally-oriented new religious movements are cases in point (Coney, 1995). They will synthesize global and local elements, appeal to different audiences, reinterpret heritages while using modern communication tools, and portray themselves as resolving worldwide problems. Religion thus displays key features of globalization.

A contrasting line of argument restricts the possible independent role of religion. Faced with established institutional systems, Beyer (1994) holds, religious institutions are forced to form a distinct structure focused on "residual" problems. This does not prevent religion from forming a global system of its own, insofar as religions conform to one model of religion (Beyer, 1998). Indeed, around their own binary coding religions are likely to form a system that resembles those formed in secular spheres, for example by establishing national linkages and developing organizational capacities. Religion, on this view, becomes a global system. There is indeed evidence that some traditions and organizations are more globally recognized as properly "religious" and that borrowing across boundaries is common. But this does not yet add up to the convergence needed to fix religion as a "sphere" in its own right. There are still many ways to distinguish between the religious and the non-religious or between the mundane and the transcendent. There are still many ways to be religious. No global authority supports one mode to the exclusion of others. Rather than as system, we could describe global religion as a "sphere," a set of activities structured around similar problems and symbols, but internally diverse and competitive. That sphere has maintained some independence from others, and thus has room for further experimentation, a hybrid among hybrids. It may not crystallize as a full-fledged system.

A final reading of current developments would portray religion as potential carrier of world-cultural principles. Though not an institutional element of the world polity, in the sense of Meyer et al. (1997), religion nevertheless will experience pressure to organize itself as a rational institution like others and support a universalistic, individualistic global script. If religion is to be a global institution, and institutionalists would see no a priori reason why it cannot be, then it will be subject to the same world polity constraints as any other world-level institution. Religion, as NGO writ large, will have to enact, or present itself as enacting, certain global principles. The extent of the convergence expected by this institutionalist argument remains to be investigated. Certainly it is possible that different traditions will reorganize as humanistic, voluntaristic, and progressive (cf. Boli & Thomas, 1997). Some observers might view convergence along these lines less charitably as the Americanization of world religion. However, there is ample reason to believe
that precisely religions can resist such normative pressures and, more generally, can resist the consensual view of world-cultural principles as sacred in themselves.

Religion as diffuse civil society already clearly exists; through religion, people worldwide already recreate identities. On the other hand, religion as global system and carrier of world culture is at best in statu nascendi. Religion as a component of globalization thus appears vital but, in some respects, constrained. The likely vitality ultimately depends on the direction of overall globalization. I suggest that its thrust is economic liberalization, political democratization, social integration, and cultural pluralization. Increasing market competition, decreasing state control, increasing transnational resources, and an open world culture once again present opportunities to religion(s). In pursuing them, however, religion will be subject to the ground rules of all transnational institutions. Whether this will make religion a system like any other, a normal carrier of world-cultural principles remains to be seen. For reasons of doctrine and organization, religion(s) may resist pressure to specialize according to one binary code or pressure to gain legitimacy through isomorphism. Thus far, at least, there does not seem to be the convergence across the religious spectrum required by either differentiation or world polity theory.

RELIGION AS INTERPRETER OF GLOBALIZATION

Globalization affects everyone and everything in many different ways. No group, society, or tradition “responds” to a necessarily complex experience in any unequivocal way. To treat religion as “interpreter” of globalization, then, is to single out one set of responses by one type of affected party. The premise is that globalization presents one universal problem, namely the problem of globality (Albrow, 1996; Robertson, 1992). How can “we” make global life meaningful and coherent? What does the desirable global society look like? How should its constituent parts relate to one another? What Robertson has said about societies applies to traditions and their representative institutions as well: they must identify themselves, position themselves in relation to the globe-as-such. In the process, so observers occupying different vantage points expect, they will formulate “explicitly globally-oriented theologies” (Coleman, 1993, p. 355). To a large extent, I suggest, such religious responses to the problem of globality take the form of new rejections of the world. The world-as-is must be transcended in the interest of a higher principle. In this way, most globally active religion(s), which encompasses more than the established world religions, interprets globalization critically. To many Christians, that critical mode may be nothing new; as a near-global phenomenon, it is.

From a world-system point of view, religion as antisystemic movement challenges the autonomy of the economic sphere, undermines universal rationality, and opposes liberal individualism. Religion as relativized, synoptic spirituality may issue “holistic and global perspectives transcending the privatized self and the individual state” (Beckford, 1990, p. 9). Religion as a domain of culture particularly exposed to the relativization of actors and identities, in Robertson’s sense, will most intensely work through the tension between universal and particular, national and transnational, individual and humanity. Each way of framing religion’s responses, as Table 2 already indicated, thus allows for a strong role.

But how significant are they? Do religious rejections of the world matter? They do, but according to the accounts examined here they are diverse and secondary. There is no one type of religious rejection and such rejection is often embedded in secular critique. Adapting Robertson’s (1992) typology, I suggest that there are four ideal-typical ways to formulate images of world order, each with its own distinctive premises and critical thrust, its own diagnosis of key problems and conflicts, its own central values and aspirations. Many groups and movements, intellectuals and activists are involved in advocating each one. Within the groups that espouse such images, any recognizably “religious” voice is only one among many.

That voice is strongest in what I call “Jihad,” following Barber’s (1996) usage. Conceiving of the world as a congeries of distinct, embattled traditions (global Gemeinschaft I, in Robertson’s terms), Jihad proponents mobilize against the undermining of one such tradition in the interest of achieving its rightful supremacy. The commands of ultimate truth must pervade the world as such and all its institutions. Individuals “can only live satisfactory lives in clearly bounded societal communities” (Robertson, 1992, p. 78). The thrust of Jihad, in short, is fundamentalist, and Islamic fundamentalist groups indeed fit this type (cf. Lechner, 1993). “Anti-McWorld” is the label I give to groups and activists interested in preserving the autonomy and distinctive identity of nation-states as vehicles for achieving democracy and social justice. Conceiving of the world as a system of unequal states subject to economic forces beyond their control, but in need of protective organization at the global level (thus approximating Robertson’s global Gemeinschaft II), Anti-McWorldists aim to foster community through self-governance in a world of equal partners. Some Catholic criticism of capitalist materialism and exploitation, and the accompanying defense of labor rights in a just state, may fit into this type. The “New World Order” refers to a position perhaps least critical of actually occurring globalization. Using George Bush’s infamous phrase, it stands for the liberal critique of arbitrary constraints on economic and cultural activity. New world order proponents wish to let freedom reign, within and outside societies. Conceiving of the world as potentially open societies engaged in free exchange (global Gemeinschaft I, in Robertson’s terms), they see the central
thrust of globalization as liberating. American evangelical Protestants and their converts elsewhere have at least an affinity with this approach to globality insofar as it is compatible with the competitive pursuit of individual conversion, even if they do not endorse all its implications. Finally, One-Worldists put the globe first. Conceiving of the world as one society to which all humanity belongs in principle (Robertson's global Gemeinschaft II), they reject destructive competition or imperial control. Instead, they pursue unification under common principles leading to responsible planetary governance. This position receives support from the global religious left, such as the World Council of Churches in expressing the common concerns of humankind. . .

Religious themes and symbolism, renovated by bricolage and movements, can be coopted by activists addressing problems under any umbrella. Globalization intensifies renewed influence possible. Of course that influence can turn from mere response, satisfying adherents but irrelevant to the larger world, into source, serving as prelude to the reconstitution of world society itself. How and why that can happen remains an item on our collective research agenda. Much depends on the global force of interpretations of the global condition in general. Clearly, they are more than passive reflections. Multiple responses contribute to cultural pluralization. Responses as critique help to maintain the relative autonomy of spheres. Responses as ways of working out the relativization of global units serve to guide global action. Responses have a logic of their own and thus, depending on social support they receive, constrain possible courses of legitimate action. Of course, responses as global discourse are significant in their own right. Yet, I suggest, there is no one way in which responses shape globalization, no one type of structure-culture dialectic. The role of culture-as-agency will vary by context and over time.

CONCLUSION

This paper started with the realization that there is no single accepted definition of religion as a distinct category with a universal core. I proposed to turn this predicament into a virtue by advocating pluralism: the competitive pursuit of alternative definitions, all serving potentially fruitful agendas, could maximize our cognitive gains. Specifically, pluralism fits the demands of global cultural analysis. At a time when different lines of research examine a variety of responses to globalization, a needlessly exclusive definition would hamper progress. In practice, we have seen, these different approaches lead to different questions about and interpretations of the role of “religion” in globalization. The more detailed sketch of that role, drawing on the actually existing pluralism in global analysis, leads to conclusions compatible with different agendas: A liberalized world offers a chance of renewed vitality even for groups and traditions opposed to that liberalization. Religion, however defined, may no longer serve as a prime source of globalization, yet it still builds global structures and displays the dynamics of globalization. Over time, religion may become more integral to the world polity as a fully constituted global system. There is no one religious response to globalization, but religion does contribute to, and is itself an object of, the critical discourse of globalization. That discourse, sociologists of religion naturally expect, is bound to make a difference to the future of the world itself.

NOTES

1. I will suggest later that religion is becoming a universal, in the sense of a globally meaningful and applicable category.

2. I put “cultural” in quotes for two reasons: the definition of culture is as contested as the definition of religion, and implying that religious responses are a subset of cultural ones presupposes a view of both that I cannot defend in this context.

3. This pluralism extends to the contrast discussed by the editors of this volume namely that between “naturalistic” and “discursive” approaches to religion. Like the editors, I recognize the drawbacks of conventional naturalistic views. I also agree that a discursive approach can lead to new insights. But I would suggest that various approaches each have their utility, so that no final choice is required. What is required is reflexivity about the consequences of particular definitional choices, of the kind this book and my own pluralistic argument intend to stimulate. Pluralism also promises to assist in one task the editors’ position entails, insofar as it enables scholars collectively to capture the widest possible range of discursive constructions of “religion.”

4. I do not mean to subvert pluralism by favoring one approach over all others. One alternative is Saler’s multidimensional approach, based on his insight that characteristics of a religious tradition vary over time. Following Wittgenstein, he suggests that, since sharp lines distort, concepts should only identify resemblances in a family of related objects. One way to do so is to distinguish between three dimensions of “religiousness” — community, definition of essence, and ritual. Individuals and groups can be more or less, and differently, religious on any dimension. On this view, some phenomena may be considered more prototypically “religious,” but there is no essentially stable “religion.” This approach has pragmatic advantages, but it cannot serve to evade essentialism altogether, short of suspending use of the term or leaving definitions up to research subjects.
REFERENCES