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TOWARD OPEN DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION

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A. Definitions

Augustine's famous observation about time applies with equal force to religion; if not asked, we know what it is; if asked, we do not know. In the case of religion, the problem does not lie in its alleged ineffability, as if it were something beyond the capacity of language to describe. The fact is that we manage to say many significant things about religion, some of which may even happen to be true. What eludes us is a definition of the crucial term characterizing our discourse. But if we cannot say with authority what religion is, how can we be sure that we know what we are talking about?

There is no want of proposals as to how religion might be defined. It has been described as the sense of the sacred; as ultimate concern; as loyalty to the Good, the love of Man, allegiance to the Gods. It has been said that it is what we do in our solitude; but also what we do to maintain society; that it is about limit-situations; but also about everyday life. It has been called resignation, but also hope; release from this world, but also a way of living in this world more effectively. Some claim it is an encounter with the Wholly Other; others that it is the crucial meeting with one's own Self. The list of possibilities seems endless; yet scholars in the field of religion cannot reach even tentative agreement as to the candidate that might provide an authoritative definition of the term that names their field.

Is this a scandal? Does it indicate that religious studies may be a pseudo-discipline possessing neither definition, method, nor subject matter distinctive enough to warrant inclusion in the curriculum of a modern university? The suggestion has been made. However, if apodictic certainty about definitions is required to ensure the viability of an area of study, there is no discipline in the university that will not be found wanting. The dilemmas involved in defining time and religion pertain

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