

History of Early Civilizations

What is Religion?



Jason Suárez
History Department
El Camino College



Two objectives for today

To approach the origin of religions from an **academic perspective**

- Not a devotional or normative study of religion – *what to believe and how to live*
- Not trying to determine what is *true or false*
- Not trying to determine what is *right or wrong*
- Not to be *trained* in them

Understand religious traditions within their **historical context**

- To understand what religion *was/is*
- To understand *historical origins* of religion



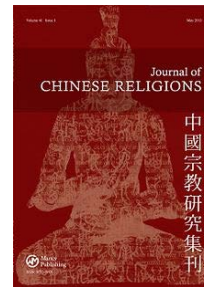
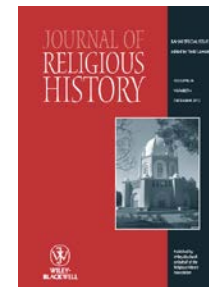
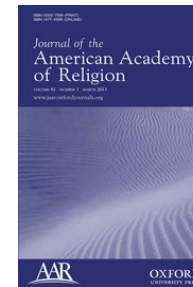
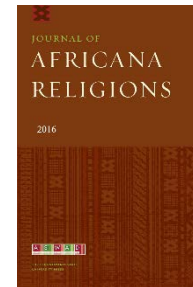
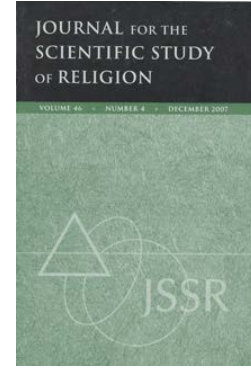
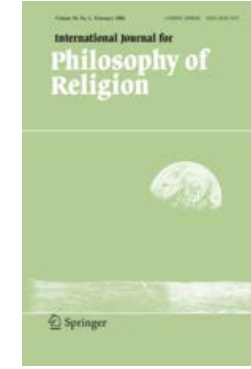
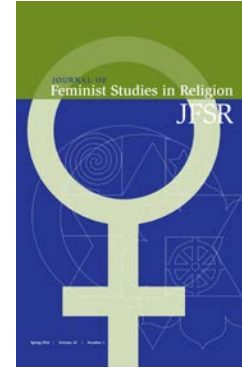
The study of world religions

A recent development connected with **European expansion**

- Begins around the late 19th century and is influenced by colonialism and Western domination – *comparative*
- Initially reflected a *Christian bias* as other religions are compared to Christianity to promote *European universalism*

Is it a **discipline** or **field** in academics today?

- It is a discipline because it possesses a *unique way of approaching its subject*
- It is a field that must be *studied using multiple academic lenses or methods*
- To study a religion, students need to *examine its history, beliefs and cultural context*



Theology

- *Theos* (God) and *logos* (word or discourse)
- Theology is thus a **discourse** about God - there is a God
- Practitioner trying to understand their religion

Philosophy of Religion

- Asks fundamental questions about religion that theology takes to be true
- Explores the **meaning** and nature of religion
- Does God exist? Is it possible to know if God exists?

Psychology of Religion

- Research methods and interpretive frameworks applied to religion
- Explores nature of why people **embrace** religion
- Religion satisfies all of the basic desires that humans share

How do historians approach religion?

Adopting a **historical-critical** approach - to understand *the meaning* of the text in its historical context

- Try to understand what the original authors *intended*
- Try to understand what original readers likely *understood*
- Try to understand **historical causation**

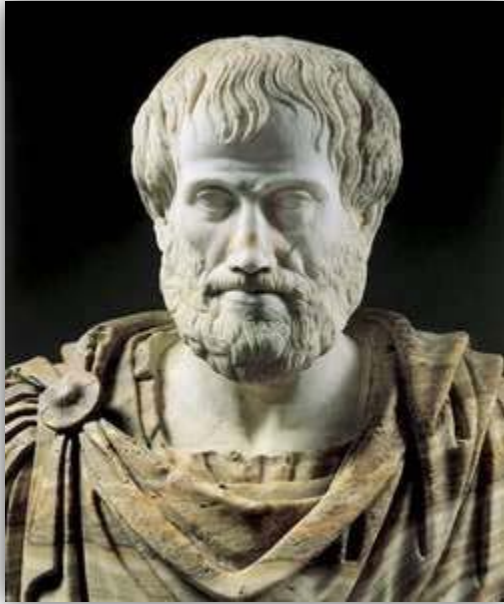
Approaching religious texts as **historical documents**

- Course approaches religious texts not as *scripture*
- They are a collection of historical documents to be *analyzed* using the historian's methods

The challenge of studying world religions is that **we are still trying to understand what religion is even today.**



*Historical Causation



Aristotle
Philosopher, Natural Philosopher
c. 384-322 B.C.E.



St. Thomas Aquinas
Theologian, Philosopher, Priest, Saint
c. 1225-1274



Martin Luther
Theologian, Monk, Reformer
c. 1483-1546

*Historical Causation and Religion

Martin Luther

An Open Letter to the German Nobility (1520)

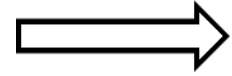
In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *On the Soul*, *Ethics*, which have hitherto been thought his best books, should be altogether discarded, together with all the rest of his books which boast of treating the things of nature, although nothing can be learned from the either of the things of nature or the things of the Spirit. Moreover no one has so far understood his meaning, and many souls have been burdened with profitless labor and study, at the cost of much precious time. I venture to say that any potter has more knowledge of nature than is written in these books. It grieves me to the heart that this damned, conceited, rascally heathen has with his false words deluded and made fools of so many of the best Christians. God has sent him as a plague upon us for our sins.



Thomas Aquinas

Summa Contra Gentiles (1264)

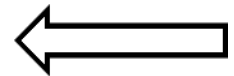
Everything that is in motion is put and kept in motion by some other thing. It is evident to sense that there are beings in motion. A thing is in motion because something else puts and keeps it in motion. That mover therefore either is itself in motion or not. If it is not in motion, our point is gained which we proposed to prove, namely, that we must posit something which moves other things without being itself in motion, and this we call God. But if the mover is itself in motion, then it is moved by some other mover.



Aristotle

Physics (c. 4th B.C.E.)

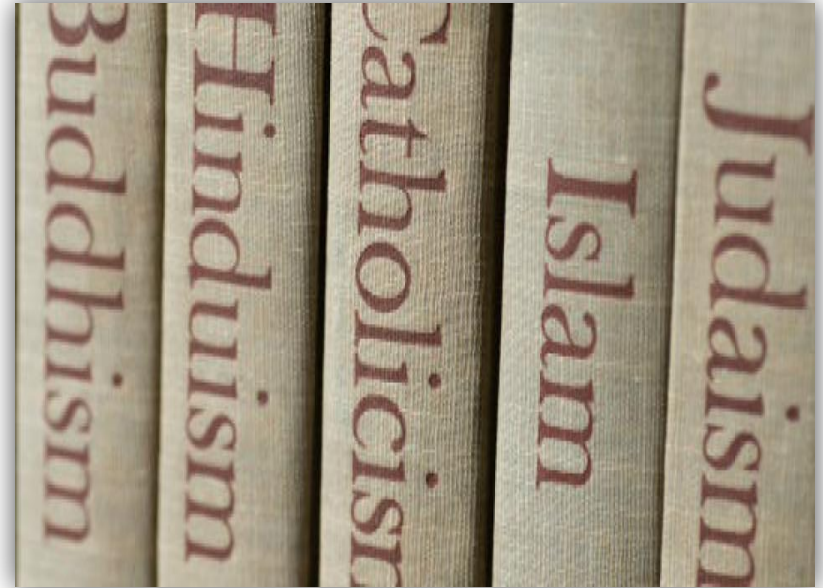
Since there must always be motion without intermission, there must necessarily be something, one thing or it may be a plurality, that first imparts motion, and this first movement must be unmoved.

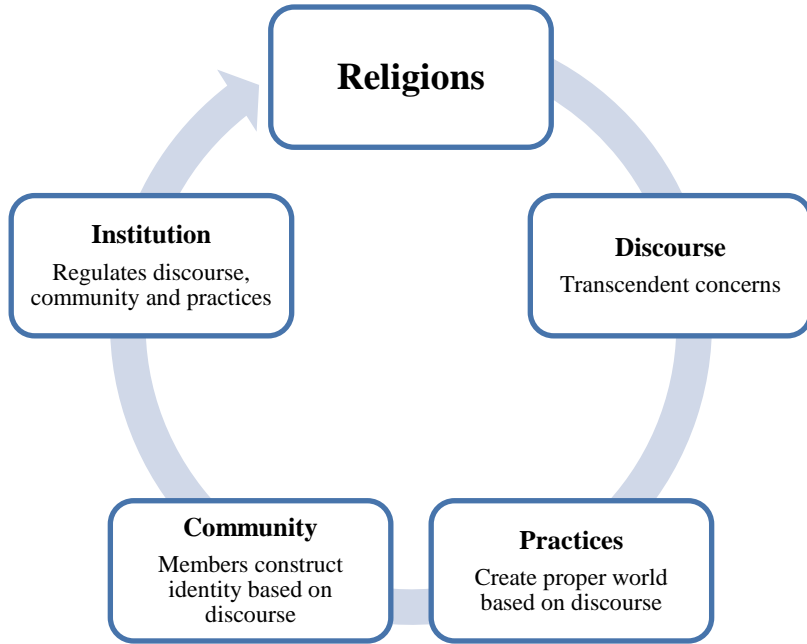


How do we define religion?

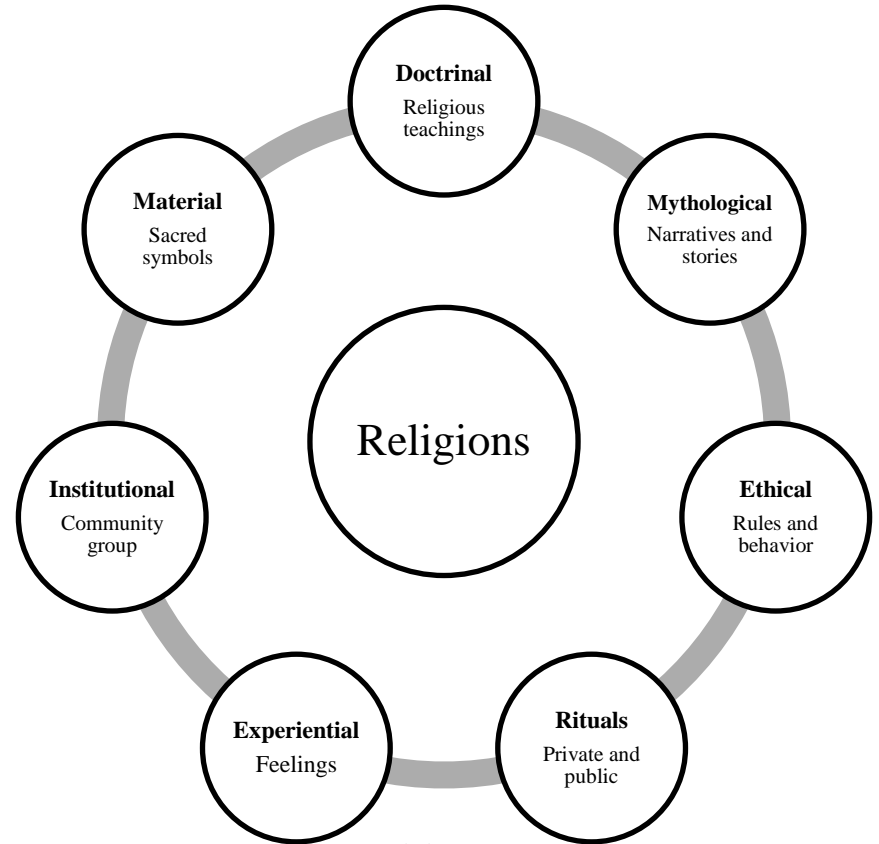
“Most people have a clear idea of what they mean by religion and can usually identify religious behavior when they see it. Nevertheless, when we have to define religion, we soon discover that the task is quite difficult, because religion is manifested in many different ways in our world.” - *Irving Hexham*

“Because of the pervasive use of the word religion in the cultures of the modern Western world, we already intuitively know what religion is before we even try to define it: religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity. Most of the debates about whether this or that *-ism* is really a religion boil down to the question of whether or not they are sufficiently similar to modern Protestant Christianity.” - *Brent Nongbri*





Bruce Lincoln



Ninian Smart

Additional complications – religion then and now

“What is modern about the ideas of religions and being religious is the isolation and **naming of some things as religious and others as not religious.**”

“An especially popular way of viewing religion is as a kind of inner disposition and concern for salvation conceived in **opposition to politics and other secular areas of life.**”

“If we want to go on talking about ancient Mesopotamian religion, ancient Greek religion, or any other ancient religion, we should always bear in mind that we are talking about something modern when we do so. We are not naming something any ancient person would recognize. In our current context, we organize our contemporary world using the concepts of **religious and secular.**”

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



[Standing male worshiper](#)

Period: Early Dynastic I-II **Date:** ca. 2900–2600 B.C.

Geography: Mesopotamia, Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar) **Culture:** Sumerian

Why world religions?

Collective Learning

It is an adaptive mechanism acquired with human language.

What each individual learns is stored within the entire community.

Adaptation

Humans constantly develop new ways of extracting resources from environments.

Facilitated by collective learning.

Extensification

Dominant form of change in the Paleolithic that allowed for human migration.

Facilitated by collective learning and adaptation.



World
Religions

Problem

- No persuasive general theory of religion exists.
- Recent efforts have been made at establishing a general theory.
- Wishful thinking
- Symbolist
- Cognitive

Author's Method

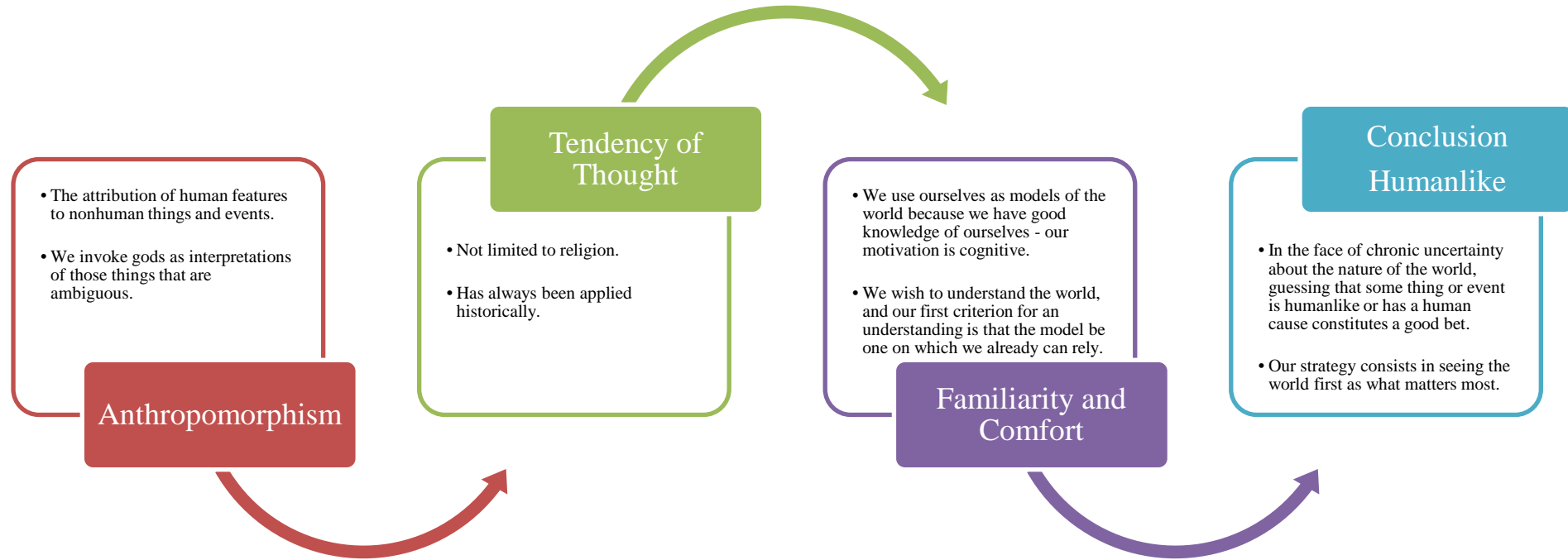
- He has a cognitive theory - mental processes of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning
- Religion is a form of anthropomorphism

Conclusion

- We see the world as more humanlike than it is.
- Anthropomorphism stems from a necessary perceptual strategy.
- Religions are systems of thought and action building in large measure upon this powerful, pervasive, and involuntary tendency.

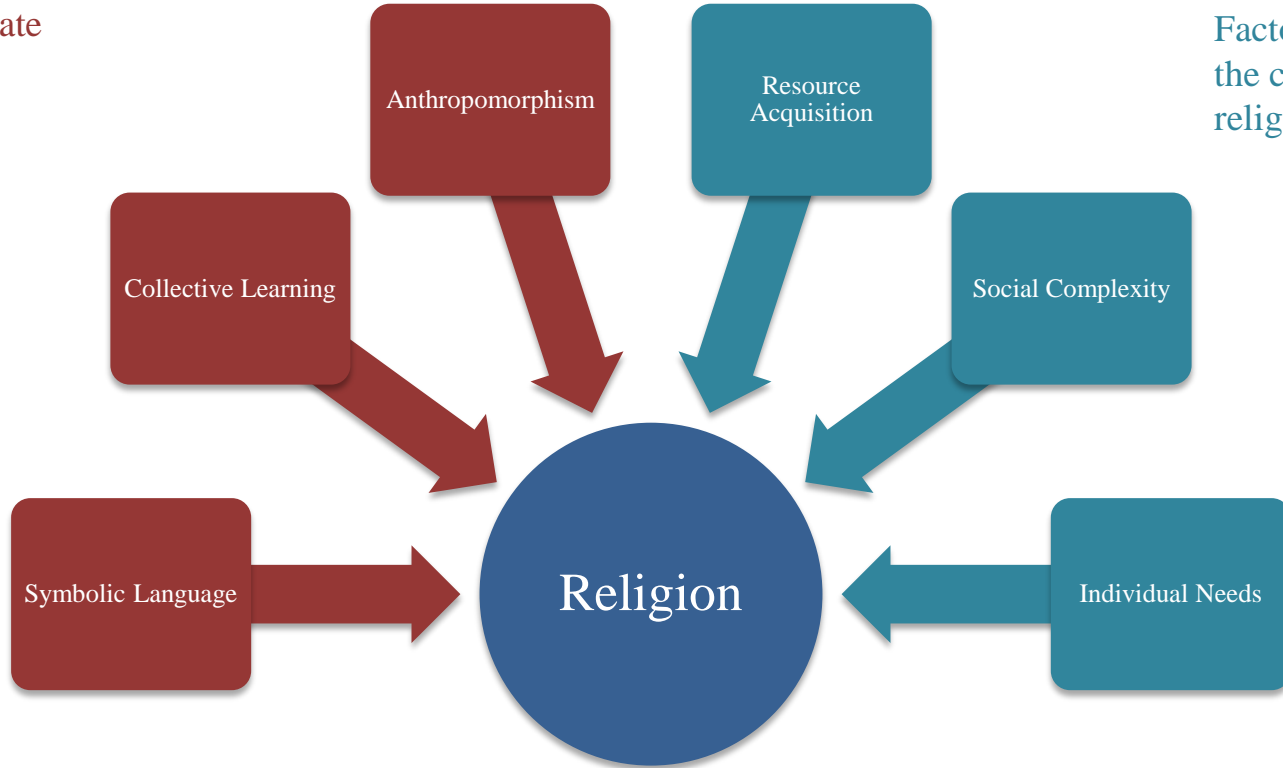
Varying Approaches to the Question of Religion

Wishful Thinking	Symbolism	Cognitive
<p>Humans have religious beliefs because these are comforting.</p> <p>Gods “exist as hopes in the human consciousness.” They make up for the real rewards we want but cannot get.</p> <p>Religion constitutes "systems of general compensators based on supernatural assumptions"</p>	<p>Religion concerns not the world as a whole but only human society.</p> <p>Religious ideas and symbols are covert means of pursuing varying social purposes, specially social cohesion and order.</p>	<p>The leading motivation for religious thought and action is to interpret or explain the world on one hand and to influence or control it on the other.</p>



What facilitates and stimulates the creation of religion!

Factors that facilitate
the creation of a
religion.



Factors that stimulate
the creation of a
religion.

Socioeconomic, political and cultural variants produce religious variants.