

Partitioning “Religion” and its Prehistories Reflections on Categories, Narratives, and the Practice of Religious Studies

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Perhaps nothing has more unified the discipline of Religious Studies in the past fifty years than the practice of historicizing, interrogating, de-bunking, de-naturalizing, relativizing, and otherwise unsettling its very subject. Since the appearance of W. C. Smith’s *Meaning and End of Religion* in 1962, the anachronism of the concept and category of “religion” has been revealed and re-revealed repeatedly.¹ In the 1990s alone, its contingent and culturally-bound “origins” were critically exposed in influential works by Talal Asad, Daniel Debusson, Russell McCutcheon, and J. Z. Smith.² Nor have these celebrated, much-cited, and prominent acts of unveiling sufficed to abate the trend. Recent examples include Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, published in 2013, and Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin’s co-authored *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*, which appeared just last year.³

Each scholar, of course, adds his/her own points of insight, not least because these and other studies on the topic bear different points of emphasis. Some appeal foremost to etymology and genealogy to unmask “religion” as an anachronistic term for periods prior to the Protestant Reformation and European colonialism (e.g., W.C. Smith). Others focus more on contextualizing, historicizing, or analyzing the determinative modern settings of its “invention” and institutionalization (e.g., Asad). Still others focus on the task of countering the still-common recourse to its conventionalized usage as if a timeless or natural notion (e.g., Debusson), especially for the study of antiquity (e.g., Nongbri; Barton and Boyarin).

* Earlier forms of this essay were presented at Bowdoin College and Indiana University Bloomington.

¹ W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). The repetition that marks this discourse is similarly noted in A.W. Hughes, “Haven’t we been here before? Rehabilitating ‘religion’ in light of Dubuisson’s critique,” *Religion* 36 (2006): 127-31 at 128-29. For other examples see also R.T. McCutcheon, “The Category ‘Religion’ in Recent Publications: Twenty Years Later,” *Numen* 62 (2015): 119–41.

² W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); R. T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); J. Z. Smith, “Religion, religions, religious,” in M. C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 269–84; D. Dubuisson, *L’Occident et la religion: Mythes, science et idéologie* (Bruxelles: Editiones Complexe, 1998).

³ B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A history of a modern concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); C. Barton & D. Boyarin, *Imagine no religion: How modern abstractions hide ancient realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). To be sure, both of these books explicitly acknowledge these and other predecessors.

Yet the repetition remains notable nonetheless—seemingly akin, at times, to an act of necromancy, whereby the much-vanquished assumption of a neutral, natural, or universal notion of “religion” becomes a specter raised again and again, in part for the sake of being slain again. In this exploratory essay, I take this repetition as an invitation to look more closely at what studies assume and occlude. I am not concerned here with the accuracy or even efficacy of such arguments, nor even with the questions of where the explanatory power of the second-order category “religion” ends and when scholars should turn instead to “native terminology.”⁴ My concern, rather, is with “religion” as a particularly potent example of what categories *do*.

Precisely because of the highly reiterative character of the scholarly debate, the category of “religion” may provide an especially apt focus for reflecting on the power and limits of categorization as a scholarly *practice*. Notwithstanding the iconoclastic rhetoric of demystification that marks many of the books proclaiming the anachronism of “religion,” after all, this very questioning is almost as old as the discipline of Religious Studies itself (at least in the forms that it is currently institutionalized in North America).⁵ Furthermore, the practice of critiquing the category is now quite central to the disciplinary boundary-marking that distinguishes Religious Studies. That “religion” is *not* a neutral, natural, essential, or universal classificatory rubric is one rare point of consensus connecting specialists from otherwise far-flung subfields and corners of Religious Studies.⁶ And this contention also serves as one of the clearest markers distinguishing those scholars trained in Religious Studies from those scholars trained in Theology, Classics, History, South Asian Studies, Jewish Studies, and so on. No less than the past creation of a taxonomy

⁴ On “native terminology” and its limits see J. Z. Smith, “Manna, Mana Everywhere, and /+/,,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. 134. For some interesting examples in practice, however, see also R. F. Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *History of Religions* 42 (2003): 287–319; A.H. Becker, “Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian Empire,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2.2 (2009): 300–36.

⁵ When answering Dubuisson, for instance, Aaron Hughes observes that that “the theoretical study of religion at least as it has existed within certain quarters in the North American Academy over the past ten to fifteen years... is highly, one could almost say obsessively, self-critical. Every term or category that our predecessors held dear—for example, ritual and sacred—has undergone interrogation at the most fundamental of levels... It is precisely this questioning of the tropes, terms, metaphors and genealogies that the discipline has bequeathed to us that is at the heart of the contemporary study of religion. This questioning has been responsible for the shift in the history of religions from the global to the local. One no longer sees monographs devoted to ‘patterns’ of religion. Instead, one frequently finds studies of a particular text, a set of texts or a particular community, including certain conclusions that may be of use to others working with different data but with similar problematics. The result is that we are slowly calling into question the autonomy of ‘religion’; “Haven’t we been here,” 129.

⁶ This is most readily seen in the parallel practice of resisting, relativizing, and/or historicizing the constraint of various non-Christian traditions into the rubric of “religions”; see, e.g., L.M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); R. King, “Orientalism and the Modern Myth of Hinduism,” *Numen* 46 (1999): 146–86; N. J. Girardot, “Finding the Way: James Legge and the Victorian Invention of Taoism,” *Religion* 29 (1999): 107–21; D. Boyarin, “The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion,” *Representations* 85 (2004): 21–57; L. Batnitzky, *How Judaism became a Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); J.A. Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

of “world religions,”⁷ the current critical discourse surrounding “religion” points to the power of the practice of categorization—as constituted, in this case, *both* by the use of abstractions to order and organize knowledge (and the resultant construction of experts and expertise) *and* by the localized and particularistic contestation of such abstractions (and the resultant construction of experts and expertise).

The recent books by Nongbri, Barton, and Boyarin exemplify the specific role that scholars of the ancient Mediterranean world have taken up within this broader discipline-uniting discourse—that is, the task of culling Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman pasts for hints of the *prehistory* of the modern “invention” of “religion(s).” As with the broader discussion, this task has been pursued largely through a focus on words and their histories, with special attention to the first-known attestations of Greek and Latin terms corresponding to familiar English term for “religion” and religions. Scholars of antiquity have debated possible precedents for the category and concept of “religion,” and they have also debated the precise moments in history when such terms came to mean something akin to what we now call “religion(s).”⁸ And so too with identity-labels now commonly understood as denoting specific *religious* identities, such as “Jew,” “Christian,” “pagan,” and so forth.⁹

These debates have been highly productive. In the process of bringing the specialized study of ancient Judaism and Christianity further into conversation with the rest of the discipline of Religious Studies, they have helped to shed new light on the changes wrought in and by the Christianization of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity—as Boyarin, Jeremy Schott, and others have so richly shown.¹⁰ In what follows, however, I would like to approach the issue from a different direction. Rather than looking to specific *words* that may or may not serve as precedents for the category of “religion” as we now know it in the West today, I would like to reflect on the power and limits of the *practice* of categorization in relation to *other* modern and premodern practices of ordering knowledge.

⁷ T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005).

⁸ D. Boyarin, *Border Lines* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁹ The latter has been pursued most intensely for the words “Jew” and “Judaism” (esp. Greek *Ioudaios*, *Ioudaismos*)—see e.g., Boyarin, *Judaism*; S. Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 457–512; C.M. Baker, *Jew* (Key Words in Jewish Studies; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); cf. S. Schwartz, “How Many Judaisms Were There?” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 2 (2011): 208–38. See also the 2014 Marginalia forum on *Jew and Judean: A Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts*. On “paganism” and “Christianity,” see also Douglas Boin, “Hellenistic ‘Judaism’ and the Social Origins of the ‘Pagan-Christian’ Debate,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 22 (2014): 167–96 and sources cited there, as well as G. Anidjar, “Christianity, Christianities, Christian,” *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 1 (2015): 39–46; A.Y. Reed, “Parting Ways over Blood and Water? Beyond ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ in the Roman Near East,” in S. C. Mimouni and B. Pouderon, eds., *La croisée des chemins revisitée* (Paris: Cerf, 2012), 227–59.

¹⁰ Esp. D. Boyarin, “Semantic Differences; Or, ‘Judaism/Christianity,’” in A.H. Becker & A.Y. Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted* (TSAJ 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 65–85; J. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); J.B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), esp. 1–53, 202–10. Note, however, Boyarin’s revision of his influential position now in *Judaism* (Key Words in Jewish Studies; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, forthcoming)

In attending to the practice of creating and contesting categories *as practice*, my interest is ultimately in opening the way for exploring what is “before religion” from a somewhat less teleological perspective. Accordingly, the first part of this essay will reflect on the creation and contestation of “religion” in relation to the power and limits of practices of categorization, and the second part will then turn to consider these same issues through the lens of two specific premodern examples of other practices for organizing those varied types of knowledge that we now study in terms of “*religious* identity,” “*religious* change,” and “*religious* difference”; for the latter, I shall focus in particular on the practice of creating narratives that remap synchronic diversity onto chronological time, thinking with the contrast between the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and Epiphanius’ *Panarion*. Even as I look to specific examples that speak to “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “Jewish-Christianity,” my broader aim will be to draw attention to the current overdependence on word-studies and to signal some of the problems in pursuing such studies in atomized isolation,¹¹ including but not limited to a myopic focus on those words and approaches that seem most to presage our own understanding of “religion” and the dominant practices in scholarship on it. It may be tempting to look to the past to answer the question of *when* notions familiar to us today came to arise and become prominent; to do so, however, may skew our understanding of past and present alike.¹² Although this essay is preliminary and experimental, I hope at the very least to make a case for attending to the diversity of premodern modes of theorizing, not least as a reminder of the limits of words and practices of categorization to produce “religion(s).”

To the degree that these reflections shall have some practical horizon, it shall be especially in relation to the question of what we can or should *do* when we encounter data that does not fit into our taxonomies of “religion” and definitions of “religions”—such as those materials that fall between the cracks of disciplines because they resist tidy sorting along a bifurcated line of “religion” and “science, for instance, or those tropes or texts that have inspired seemingly endless scholarly debates about their “Jewish” or “Christian” points of origination or influence, or those materials that scholars have shoehorned into clumsily hyphenated “hybrids” like “Jewish-Christianity.” Due to the constraints of space, I shall focus here especially on the last. But my suggestion—meant more broadly—is that sometimes the problem

¹¹ David Lambert makes a parallel point for word-studies in general within Biblical Studies. Following James Barr in noting the degree to which word-studies can smuggle in theological and ideological presumptions under the guise of neutral philology, Lambert extends Sheldon Pollack’s call that for “a double historicization... that of the philologist—and we philologists historicize ourselves as rarely as physicians heal themselves—no less than that of the text,” positing the need for “a dialogic engagement that acknowledges current frameworks, while still holding out the possibility for finding meaningful difference (i.e., alternatives to dominant conceptions) in and through ancient texts”; “Refreshing Philology: James Barr, Supersessionism, and the State of Biblical Words,” *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016): 332–56. My suspicion is that the traditional model of word-studies in Biblical Studies has invisibly exerted some influence on the current discussion of “religion” as well, not least in naturalizing a largely Protestant approach to history that places the modern scholar in the position of using knowledge of words in ancient languages to unmask error in the present and/or to reveal an authentic or original past.

¹² I discuss this problem in more detail in my Epilogue to *Jewish-Christianity and the History of Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

may not be either with the material, or even with the anachronism of the category, but rather with the expectations that *we* as scholars habitually bring to the very *practice* of categorization.

When our data do not fit the taxonomies of our current concepts of “religion(s),” the usual scholarly habit has been to dismiss them as idiosyncratic or marginal, either omitting them from our narratives about the developments of “a religion” or relegating them to footnotes therein. But what happens when we take such cases, instead, as a warning against our scholarly habit of overestimating the power of classification to explain? And what if we also take such cases as an invitation to look to the past with an eye to a broader range of strategies for explaining difference and mapping continuity?

Categorization and the “invention” of “religion”

Recent studies of “religion” largely concur that the task of the expert in Religious Studies is in part—in Nongbri’s words—to unsettle the popular “assumption that religion is a universal human experience, a part of the ‘natural’ human experience that is essentially the same across cultures and throughout histories.”¹³ For him, as for Smith and others before him, the interrogation of the prehistory and history of the *word* “religion” is central to this task of conceptual correction, foremost because of the problem of its anachronism: it is “common to see even scholars using the word ‘religion’ as if it were a universal concept native to all human cultures,” even though “no ancient language has a term that really corresponds to what modern people mean when they say ‘religion.’”¹⁴ Accordingly, the proposed antidote is the illustration “that ‘religion’ [i.e., as a word and concept] does indeed have a *history*.”¹⁵ Just as Nongbri’s telling of this history is largely synthetic, so his inquiry is characteristic in its intended result—namely, “the distinction between ancient worlds (in which the notions of religion and being religious did not exist) and modern worlds (in which the ideas of religion produced from the sixteenth to nineteenth century have come to structure everyday life in many parts of the world).”¹⁶ Nongbri’s book is thus characteristic of the broader scholarly discourse noted above, wherein—beginning already with Smith—the problems in universalizing the concept and category of “religion” are articulated through the tracing of the development of the meaning of the *word* as we know it today and the identification of those periods *before which* no such corresponding word existed.¹⁷

¹³ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 1.

¹⁴ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 7, 13. By this modern sense, Nongbri also means its treatment as if a self-evidentially discrete, timeless, and universal “sphere of life ideally separated from politics, economics, and science” (p. 7). And this separation too is here framed—again, characteristically—in terms of a development in time: “the act of distinguishing between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ is a *recent* development” (pp. 2-3).

¹⁵ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 7, 154.

¹⁶ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 154. I should stress that my aim is not to single out this particular study for any critique, but rather to treat it as characteristic of the broader discourse that it so brilliantly summarizes and synthesizes.

¹⁷ Notably, Nongbri leaves open the possibility that the term “religion” can be used in study of ancient periods but just stresses that it must be done with self-consciousness that such analysis is

In their new book, Barton and Boyarin make some of the same points. Yet their choice of foci also serves to unsettle one of the main assumptions of the earlier scholarly discourse—that is, the notion that specialists in antiquity contribute to the broader disciplinary discussion of “religion(s)” by using their knowledge of ancient languages and cultures [1] to identify those periods in which the concept was *not yet* present and/or [2] to pinpoint those moments (e.g., Babylonian Exile; Maccabean Revolt; origins of Christianity; Christianization of the Roman Empire) at which changes took place that would eventually lead to the notion of “religion” as we now know it. What Barton and Boyarin show, however, is that even those Greek and Latin terms that most seem to serve as ancient precedents for our modern notion of “religion”—such as Greek *thrēskeia* and *eusebeia*, and Latin *religio*—elude such interpretation when considered fully within the contexts of the specific corpora in which they occur. Accordingly, their study shifts the discussion so as to reframe the problem of the anachronism of the word “religion” for the study of antiquity, less as an ontological problem (i.e., what is and is not “out there”) and more as an opportunity for a perspectival shift—that is, as a push for us, as scholars, to ask “what is possible to *see* when we cease to *look*” for what we expect of “religion(s)” from the common modern notions thereof.¹⁸

What Barton and Boyarin thus resist, in the process, is the temptation to atomize ancient sources in which related words occur and to plot them as a series of points in the line of what is thereby constructed as the story of the development of the concept and category of “religion” as we know it today. And, significantly for our purposes, they do so with an explicit sense of self-consciousness about particularity of the modern scholarly proclivity for categories:

...while *all* language relies on categories and abstractions, in certain complex cultures, particular prestige and faith is put not only in language over direct experience of the world, but particularly in the reification of deductively drawn abstracts even over generalizations derived from observation of particulars.¹⁹

Our own trust in the explanatory power of categorization reflects something of our own culture’s concepts of what constitutes knowledge, explanation, and the exercise of expertise. Such concerns may not be universal, but neither are they peculiar to modernity. Rather, one finds something similar—as Barton and Boyarin remind us—also for some elites in the Roman Empire. Accordingly, it is important take seriously these and other past practices and products of categorization on their own terms, resisting the temptation to read them merely as precedents for our own categories or

redescriptive rather than descriptive for those periods prior the development of the word and concept “religion”; *Before Religion*, 15-24.

¹⁸ Barton & Boyarin, *Imagine*. Nongbri also moves in this direction, especially at the end of his chapter on “Some (Premature) Births of Religion” (*Before Religion*, 64) and in the book’s concluding comments calling for “descriptive accounts to “what we have been called ‘ancient religions’... to be disaggregated and rearranged in ways that correspond better to ancient peoples’ own organizational schemes” (p. 159). See also now Boyarin, *Judaism*.

¹⁹ Barton & Boyarin, *Imagine*. So too with other elites in other settings, even if this proclivity cannot be presumed to be universal *per se*. For this point for China, for instance, see Campany, “On the Very Idea.”

to plot them as if simply nodes in some univalently teleological trajectory to our present.

Whether or not Jews, Christians, and/or “pagans” in the Roman Empire had any word or concept akin to our notion of “religion,” it remains that some of them did share an interest in creating abstract categories and/or totalizing systems of taxonomic distinction to organize and explain their encounters with differences in beliefs about the divine and cultic rites, sites, and structures.²⁰ In the field of Classics, the intensification of elite Roman practices of classification has been much discussed in relation to imperial power,²¹ and among scholars of Patristics and Late Antiquity, their Christian appropriation has also been richly analyzed, especially in relation to the development of heresiology.²² In the process, such studies have helped to highlight some of the cultural work that categories and categorization can *do*, making visible what the *longue durée* success of some efforts (at the expense of others) has rendered invisible.²³

This point perhaps proves particularly pressing for specialists in ancient Judaism and Christianity, for whom the task of categorizing and contesting categories is often taken for granted as if an act of necessary if not sufficient explanation. No end of articles, for instance, have been written about whether this or that text can be labeled with this or that term (“Jewish,” “Christian,” “apocalyptic,” “sapiential,” and so on). And no end of articles have been written also debating the anachronism of these very labels—typically with no explicit explanation of what is at stake *either* in labeling texts *or* in the rejection of certain labels.

In a recent *MTSR* article on “Categorization, Collection, and the Construction of Continuity,” I thus attempted to experiment with exploring some alternative approaches. There, I looked to the outsized place of abstract categories like “Apocalypticism” and “Mysticism” in scholarly debates about the continuities between Second Temple Judaism, early Christianity, and late antique Judaism.²⁴ Scholars often note the problem with these categories in relation to the degree to which abstractions and/or anachronisms can shape and narrow our modern

²⁰ The potential value of shifting our attention away from the category of “religion” to the very practice of categorization is suggested from parallel moves in the scholarly discourse surrounding other categories common across Religious Studies. The late twentieth-century critique of the category of “heresy,” for instance, has enabled the emergence in recent years of a new concern for heresiology; see now T. Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). My suggestion here is that “religion” might be ripe for some similar reorientations.

²¹ T. Murphy, *Pliny the Elder’s Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); G. Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell 2011); J. König & T. Whitmarsh, eds., *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²² Berzon, *Classifying Christians*; J. Schott, “Heresiology as Universal History in Epiphanius’s *Panarion*,” *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 10 (2007) 546–63.

²³ See further E. Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)—there stressing that “when we draw lines and make distinctions, we do so not only as human beings or as individuals, but also as social beings” (p. 67).

²⁴ A. Y. Reed, “Categorization, Collection, and the Construction of Continuity,” *MTSR* 29.3 (2017): 268–311.

perspectives on the past. But something may be missed—I there suggested—when we redress the scholarly habit of categorizing ancient materials into modern categories only by critiquing specific modern categories, tracing their ancient prehistories, pinpointing the moments of their “invention,” etc. Instead, we might do well to step back and reflect on what we expect categories to *do*—not just for the analysis of this-or-that ancient text but also for us as scholars. In the case of “Apocalyptic(ism)” and “Mysticism” at least, much of their function has been to naturalize and emphasize some connections and trajectories within and between “religions,” and to downplay or efface others. Accordingly, I there asked what might be gained by experimenting instead with alternate analytical foci that highlight different elements of premodern and modern continuity-construction. In particular, I pointed to the practice of anthologizing as one alternate analytical focus, which can serve to redirect our attention to the rich data attesting the many different ways in which continuity and connections have been drawn and re-drawn around what we now labeled as “apocalyptic” and “mystical” texts, between and beyond “religions,” in shifting configurations from Late Antiquity to the present. Whereas the imposition of modern categories like “Apocalyptic(ism)” and “Mysticism” highlights some dynamics and naturalizes some connections between texts, a consideration of ancient, medieval, and modern acts of anthologizing shows how these connections are only *some* of the ways in which continuities were constructed around these same texts during their long histories of transmission. Some of these ways may correspond to what we might expect, looking back from a presentist purview; others, however, frustrate the division of “Judaism” and “Christianity” in what we now take for granted as the distinction between “religions,” and in some cases precisely because they also jar with current expectations concerning the distinctions between “religion,” “science,” and “magic.”

In what follows, I would like to extend this experiment with an eye to the consequences for the power and limits of categorizing “religion(s).” To do so, I shall experiment with yet another alternate analytical focus, which highlights yet another type of continuity-constructing and knowledge-ordering practice—namely, what we might call narrativization, or the practice of ordering knowledge along the axis of time and articulating claims of continuity through the organizational principle of chronology. Like categorization, this is a practice that is common *both* in the ancient materials that we now study as “religions” *and* in how we as scholars now study “religion.” As such, it might be an interesting point of juxtaposition, helping to bring our expectations of categories and categorizations into further relief, while also enabling us to reflect more fully on our own practices in relation to a fuller sense of the past.

If Nongbri is correct that the “universality of religion” still remains “a basic assumption of most work in the Humanities,”²⁵ it is perhaps in part because of the very category has come to be naturalized (at least in North America) by conventionalized rhetoric and common reading habits, but also in part because the very practice of categorizing “religions” has informed the construction of expertise within certain disciplinary domains and institutional structures, especially but not only in academe. In this sense, it stands as a “parade example” of the practices studied

²⁵ Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 13.

by sociologists of knowledge such as Eviatar Zerubavel, whereby such acts of “actively ‘sculpting’ islands of meaning” come to be perceived as if acts of “simply identifying already-existing natural ones.”²⁶ To assess the current scholarly discourse about “religion(s),” thus, it may be useful to move beyond assessing the word, the classificatory practices surrounding it, and the presumptions thereby smuggled into scholarly analysis. At this point, it may be useful further to ask what is achieved and elided by the very scholarly acts of repeatedly recounting the word’s “origins” and recurrently debating the precise moment of its “invention”—or, in other words, by our own acts of creating narratives to try to neutralize and naturalize the particularly of our own scholarly practices.

As noted above, studies from Smith to Nongbri have considered “religion” in part to distinguish a premodern past “*before* religion” from a modern situation in which it is presumed that the term can be applied accurately and descriptively. Whether or not we are persuaded by this or that argument about the precise moment of this “invention,” the debate provides another interesting example of the continuity-constructing and knowledge-ordering practices that now naturalize “religion”—akin, in this case, to what Zerubavel describes as the “social partitioning of the past” through periodization, selective retelling of events, and the bracketing off of “prehistory.”²⁷ As in the case of anthologizing, I would suggest that the awareness of our own practices should not serve simply as an end in itself, nor as a self-critique in service of maintaining some mirage of scholarly practice as disembodied or de-historicized objectivity. Perhaps more productive, in my view, is to take such insights instead as an invitation for further analysis of the past and present alike.

As with the practice and products of categorization, the practice and products of narrativization are often taken for granted in relation to what they naturalize about “religion(s).” Something might be learned when we set aside the task of exploring the prehistory and genealogy of “religion” by searching antiquity for the first known attestations of words that so happen to resemble our sense of “religion,” and investigate some examples of premodern practices of narrating prehistory and genealogy—including those that dovetail with our modern narratives about the “origins” of “religions” or the “invention” of “religion,” but also those that do not.

Narrativization and the partitioning of prehistories of “religions”

Much of my own reflection on problems of “religion” and categorization has been spurred by my work on the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*—one of the late antique texts that most infamously resists categorization into any taxonomy of distinct “religions” with mutually-exclusive identities and separate lines of historical development. This fourth-century Greek novel, written in Syria in the name of Clement of Rome, claims to preserve teachings of the apostle Peter.²⁸ The apostle is

²⁶ Zerubavel, *Social Mindscales*, 67.

²⁷ Zerubavel, *Social Mindscales*, 85.

²⁸ The Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* are commonly dated ca. 300–320 CE; this work is extant in the original Greek and probably of Syrian provenance. There is also a second major version of the Pseudo-Clementine romance of recognitions, the *Recognitions*, which is commonly dated ca. 360–380 CE; this version was also originally written in Greek, but now extant in full only in Rufinus’ Latin

here made directly to counter many of those contentions that scholars commonly adduce as marking the differentiation of “Christianity” from “Judaism.”²⁹ Here, for instance, Gentiles are not exempt from observing Torah laws such as menstrual separation, ritual purification after intercourse, restrictions on meat-eating, and so on.³⁰ And, far from arguing that the Gentile Church has supplanted the chosenness of the Jewish people, the Jewish apostle Peter is here used to reveal that the coming of Jesus opened a path for the salvation for Gentiles that is already and still open by Moses and the Torah for the Jews. Those “pagans” who heed what Peter here preaches, thus, are not presented as those who “convert” between “religions” as much as impure people who are purified and return to primordial piety. And, significantly for our purposes, they are never here called “Christians,” but rather mostly “God-fearers” and sometimes “Jews.”³¹

The Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* thus blur or resist what are typically treated as the major distinctions between “Judaism” and “Christianity” as drawn through identity-labels and ritual practices in those Christian writings most often used by scholars to define what does and does not count as sources for “the history of Christianity” and as opposed to sources for “the history of Judaism.”³² And so too with history as represented within the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* itself, wherein claims of commonality and continuity are positively drawn, not just from Jesus to Peter to bishops, but also from and between them to Moses, Pharisees, and other Jews.³³

In modern times, the challenges of categorizing the Pseudo-Clementines has been answered mostly through the construction of a clumsy hybrid category, “Jewish-

translation (ca. 407 CE). See further now F. Stanley Jones, *Pseudoclementina Elchasaiticaque inter Judaeochristiana: Collected Studies* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012); Reed, *Jewish Christianity and the History of Judaism*.

²⁹ See further A.Y. Reed, “Jewish-Christianity after the Parting of the Ways,” in Becker & Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted*.

³⁰ E.g., Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 7.8.1–3: “And this is the service he (i.e., God) has appointed: to worship Him only; and to trust only in the Prophet of Truth (i.e., Moses and/or Jesus); and to be baptized for the remission of sins and thus by this pure baptism to be born again unto God by saving water; not to partake of the table of demons—that is, from food offered to idols, dead carcasses, strangled (animals), those caught by wild beasts, blood; not to live impurely; to wash after intercourse with women; for them also to keep menstrual purity; for all, to be sober-minded; to act well; not to do injustice, looking for eternal life from the all-powerful God and asking with prayer and continual supplication that they may win it.” See also 11.28–30; 13.4, 9, 19.

³¹ Clement of Rome, for instance, is here described not as a “pagan” convert to Christianity but rather as one “seduced by a certain barbarian called Peter to speak and act after the manner of the Jews” (*Hom.* 4.7.2)—an assessment with which then agrees, proclaiming the wickedness of the ancestral customs that he chose to abandon (4.8.1, 3, 6; cf. 4.11.1–2) and asserting that “the doctrine of the ‘barbarian Jews,’ as you call them, is most pious, introducing One as the Father and Creator of all this world, by nature good and just” (4.13.3).

³² For the contrast with John Chrysostom see D. Côté, “Le problème de l’identité religieuse dans la Syrie du IV^e siècle: Le cas des Pseudo-Clémentines et de l’*Adversus Judaeos* de S. Jean Chrysostome,” in *La croisée des chemins revisitée: Quand l’Église et la Synagogue se sont-elles distinguées?*, ed. Simon Claude Mimouni and Bernard Pouderon (Paris: Cerf, 2012), 339–70; for the contrast with Eusebius, see Reed, “Jewish-Christianity as Counter-History.”

³³ See further Reed, “Jewish-Christianity as Counter-History.”

Christianity”—the contents of which are commonly treated as marginal to the histories of both “Christianity” and “Judaism” (i.e., at best a curious late survival of Christianity’s originary Jewishness but almost always also an exception to the rule of the development of both “religions” along paths of increasing distinction).³⁴ It was, in fact, partly to account for this very text that the category of “Jewish-Christianity” was even invented. Not only did the first printing of one of its Greek manuscripts help to catalyze the initial conceptualization of “Jewish-Christianity” by the Deist controversialist John Toland in the eighteenth century,³⁵ but the rediscovery and critical edition of a second manuscript in the mid-nineteenth century spurred the subfield of modern scholarship on “Jewish-Christianity,” as cultivated in the crucible of the Tübingen school. And, at least since F. C. Baur,³⁶ the Pseudo-Clementines have been the main source with which this subfield has grappled, when seeking to defuse the seeming paradox of its combination of these two purportedly conflicting “religious identities.” Significantly, for our purposes, scholars have largely done so through a historiographical slight-of-hand enabled by the rational magic of source-criticism—speculating about hypothetical sources so as to project these late antique texts back into the dialectically Jewish “origins” of Christianity—back into the undifferentiated prehistory, as it were, of “Christianity” as “religion,” back when “all Christians were Jewish-Christians.” However the valuation of this connection to prehistory was configured, moreover, the function was the same, namely, to bracket these sources as irrelevant for the study of the very period from which they actually derive.³⁷

And this pattern continues even today. In the last decade or so, the Pseudo-Clementines have been increasingly re-read in their own fourth-century contexts. Nevertheless, as in the past, these sources remain bracketed off, as if fossils or relics, rendered irrelevant by developments in what are deemed the defining historical developments in Late Antiquity. This defining narrative is no longer one about triumph of “orthodoxy,” but rather the story of the fourth century as a seminal moment in the prehistory of the modern “invention” of “religion,” as well as *the* decisive era for the separation of “Judaism” and “Christianity” as “religions.” Yet the narrative remains told from the same sources, omitting or bracketing the same other sources, with the labeling of some sources as “Jewish-Christian” especially enabling such omission.

The problem with scholarly patterns of selectivity with respect to “Judaism” and “Christianity” is an issue that I have elsewhere discussed in some detail. My interest,

³⁴ J. Carleton Paget, “Jewish Christianity,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 3: *The Early Roman Period*, ed. William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 733–42.

³⁵ See further F.S. Jones, ed., *The Rediscovery of Jewish Christianity: From Toland to Baur* (History of Biblical Studies 5; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

³⁶ Ferdinand Christian Baur, “Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des petrinischen and paulischen Christentums in der alten Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom,” *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 4 (1831) 61–206.

³⁷ I make this argument in more detail in Reed, “Jewish-Christianity after the Parting of the Ways.” On the dominance of source-criticism see also F. Stanley Jones, “The Pseudo-Clementines: A History of Research,” *Second Century* 2 (1982): 14–33.

here, is in the work done by *prehistory*—both in the current scholarly debate about the category of “religion” (wherein punctilinear narratives of modern “invention” produce a sense of “*before*” “religion”) and in the premodern sources that have and have not been used to study it.

Whereas debates about the category, definition, and heuristic of “Jewish-Christianity” have run in circles for decades upon decades now without any sense of resolution, a focus on the representation of prehistory, and the narrativization of ritual and doctrinal difference, might be useful as a fresh entry-point into the Pseudo-Clementines as well as serving as an interesting focus for reflecting self-consciously on how critiqued categories can still shape analyses in practice. As is common in a number of late antique sources, the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* evoke the image of an undifferentiated past, which is defined as the primordial unity prior to historical time, but also as the common *telos* of all individuals thereafter. In a narrative framed as a series of public sermons to crowds of “pagans” in Tripolis in particular (*Hom.* 8–11), the apostle Peter seeks to persuade his listeners to reject their polytheism, idolatry, and animal sacrifice by appealing to this undifferentiated past and by describing the progression of historical time, by contrast, as a process of ritual and doctrinal differentiation, leading to the multiplicity that now seem so natural to them.

The account includes a number of features common in ancient and late antique narratives about the origins of civilization. For our purposes, the parallels with the references to prehistory in Epiphanius’ *Panarion* prove most useful.³⁸ Both the Pseudo-Clementines and Epiphanius evoke the beginning of human history as an era before any error, and both trace the beginning of improper commerce with the otherworldly and the resultant spread of sin to the period right before the Flood. And, in both cases, the corruption of differentiation awaits the period after the Flood and especially after the death of Noah. The figure variously called Nebrod and Nimrod, whom both equate with Zoroaster, is central to the development of differences in the ways that humankind worshipped in both as well: for Epiphanius, his reign marks the spread of “every transgression,” and the idolatry central to “Hellenism” in particular is here traced to Serug. The Pseudo-Clementines make the same point but in more specific terms, explaining that Zoroaster was killed by lightning, which led his people to build a temple in his memory and to worship the fire sparked by lightning—whereby, in turn, Persian fire rituals spread also to other peoples, inspiring the development of sacrifice among Babylonians and Egyptians. In the Pseudo-Clementines, moreover, the example of Zoroaster is further presented as exemplary of the lived cycles of memory and forgetting that led, with the passing of time, to the multiplication of deities: here and elsewhere, great men who died are said to be memorialized, only to have the meanings of their monuments forgotten, and their memorialization drifting over time into the forgetting of the men themselves and their worship as gods—not least because of the exploitation of such moments of weakness and forgetting by self-interested idol-makers and magicians.

For our purposes, these parallels prove interesting for multiple reasons. First, they help to highlight the shared ideas and practices that shaped the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and Epiphanius’ *Panarion*—two late antique texts that consolidate a similar

³⁸ These parallels are summarized in a chart below.

set of earlier traditions about the prehistory of what we might call the “history of religion(s).” Both outline a genealogical narrative charting out different stages and processes of differentiation whereby the ritual and doctrinal differences in their present are presented as having emerged from a primordial unity of piety and proper practice, which each then presents as the ideal to which to strive to return, even as they explain how the diversity known to their readers came to be. In sum, points of what we might call “religious difference” are thus mapped along an axis of historical time, such that similarities and differences between the practices of Persians, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Greeks become part of one story, with distinctions plotted out and explained through pinning their points of differentiation from and along the same line. In some senses, then, the practice of narrativizing their similarities and differences might be likened to some of the practices that what we now call “the history of religion(s)” as well.

The two are not alone in this, of course. But what makes this particular pairing especially poignant, for our purposes, are contrasts with respect to categorization. For Epiphanius, the task of categorizing difference is primary and these moments in the development of early human worship are cited in the process of sorting and labeling different deviating Christian groups and with explicit taxonomic concern for organizing knowledge into abstract categories even for pre-Christian phenomena (“Barbarism,” “Hellenism,” and so on). The narrative of chronology, in other words, is subordinated to an ultimately synchronic, largely atemporal, and totalizing task of classification. The Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, by contrast, outlines its parallel account as a narrative put in the mouth of Peter as an explanation for the present condition of “pagans,” grounding his call for their baptism, purification, and embrace of the One God of Israel. Much the same knowledge is here organized, but categorization is notably absent—and may even be actively resisted.

The parallels in content between the Pseudo-Clementines and Epiphanius also prove notable in light of their contrasting modern reception, which has been marked by habits of scholarly selectivity whereby the highly classificatory work of Epiphanius has been used as if a neutral frame to categorize, sort, and analyze texts like the Pseudo-Clementines (and, as a result, to subordinate the first-hand witness of these particular texts themselves to his second-hand reports about the “Ebionites” in particular; *Pan.* 30). When we dismiss this somewhat counterintuitive scholarly habit, however, their parallels also enable comparisons that bring the differences between the two into sharper relief, perhaps also with respect to the limits of those late antique practices of categorization exemplified by Epiphanius.

The mid-fourth-century date of the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* puts it well after the “invention” of the category of “Christianity” by Ignatius (esp. *Magn.* 10.1–3), for instance, and well after Tertullian’s rereading of “Judaism” as if a commensurate “religion-like” category—and also well into the process of what might otherwise seem to be a dominant sense of “Jewish” and “Christian” as mutual exclusive if not conflicting labels of identity. Yet the Pseudo-Clementines does not describe those Gentile converts made by Peter as “Christian,” and no reference is made to “Christianity”; Peter himself self-identifies here as a “Jew,” and Clement similarly self-describes as a Gentile who has come to embrace the “law and God of the Jews.” The only time that a possible distinction is raised that is akin to what we might

separate as “Judaism” and “Christianity,” in fact, it is only to reveal the true unity behind the appearance of difference: the teachings of Moses and the teachings of Jesus are here revealed to be actually the same, and the secret of their soteriological equality is explained to be unknown to some only because of a divine act of occlusion.³⁹ Rather than producing expertise and claiming authority by claiming knowledge of the taxonomic systems of order that make sense of differences among human beliefs, practices, and so on, the Pseudo-Clementines does the converse: producing expertise and claiming authority by deconstructing divisions to reveal the true unity behind them.

Even here, however, the emphasis falls less on categories *per se* and more on claimed continuities extending along the axis of time. What appears to be different, but is shown to be the same, is the lineage of learning and practice connecting Moses with the Pharisees and the lineage of learning and practice connecting Jesus with his Jewish apostles and their Gentile followers. And, in the process, what we might call “Jewish” and “Christian” difference is left out of its narrativization of differentiation, gathered together instead into the primordial unity of truth.

The Pseudo-Clementines thus resists *our* “religion”-based taxonomies both in its content and in its own theorization of difference. The latter, however, is perhaps no less telling for its departures from those heresiological modes of classification exemplified by Epiphanius and often heralded as precursors to the modern making of “religion.” Both within and beyond the Pseudo-Clementine’s narratives about the prehistory, history, and present state of human worship, what is emphasized instead is a set of overlapping binaries. These binaries, in turn, resonate with *other* modes and examples of categorization before and beyond “religions”—which are perhaps no less widespread, even if not as teleologically tethered to our particular moment in modernity. In the Pseudo-Clementines, for instance, “Jew” and “Greek” remains a defining contrast, albeit redefined so that all those who observe the Law given to them are in some sense “Jews.” And this division corresponds to that between ritual purity and ritual impurity, on the one hand, and Israel and the nations, on the other—the former in ways that draw on the levitical laws of the Torah, and the latter in ways that recall what Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir have recently posited as an early Rabbinic development in the construction of a unified singular sense of “*goyim*.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Esp. Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 8.6–7: “...Jesus is concealed from the Hebrews who have taken Moses as their teacher and Moses is hidden from those who have believed Jesus. For, since there is a single teaching by both, God accepts one who has believed either of these. To believe a teacher is for the sake of doing the things spoken by God. And our lord himself says that this is so: ‘I thank you, Father of heaven and earth, because you have concealed these things from the wise and prudent, and you have revealed them to sucking babes’ (Mt 11:25/Lk 10:21). Thus God Himself has concealed a teacher from some (i.e., Jews), who foreknew what they should do, and He has revealed [him] to others (i.e., Gentiles), who are ignorant about what they should do. Neither, therefore, are the Hebrews condemned on account of their ignorance of Jesus, by reason of Him who has concealed him, if, doing the things commanded by Moses, they do not hate him whom they do not know. Neither are those from among the Gentiles condemned, who know not Moses on account of Him who hath concealed him, provided that these also, doing the things spoken by Jesus, do not hate him whom they do not know.”

⁴⁰ I. Rosen-Zvi & A. Ophir, “Goy: Toward a Genealogy,” *Dine Israel* 28 (2011) 69-11; Rosen-Zvi & Ophir, “Paul and the Invention of the Gentiles,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 105 (2015) 1-41;

That the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* theorizes the various received binaries that it synthesizes is explicit in its model of true and false prophecy, and especially in the resultant revelation of the common origins of all these contrast—that is, in the contrast of demonic and divine, whereby demons are the inspiration of false prophets, the inventors of Greek *paideia*, and those who are the source of all the ritual and doctrinal error that has proliferated upon the earth since the descent of the fallen angels and the birth of their monstrous sons, whose spirits still enter all those “pagan” bodies who consume of those sacrifices offered to idols in particular. And, for this too, there is ample precedent. Justin Martyr, for instance, similarly tells a genealogy of error in terms of the contrast of demonic and divine knowledge.⁴¹ And so too with Tatian, in that case mapping the demonic similarly onto Greekness as well (*Oratio ad Graecos* 31, 35, 42).

Seen from one perspective, then, the omission of the Pseudo-Clementines from our narratives about the history of “Judaism,” the history of “Christianity,” and the prehistory of “religion” serves as a reminder of our habits of privileging those sources that most resemble our own modern scholarly practices. This pattern has often been noted for the longstanding scholarly habit of using Hellenistic-style histories, such as those of Josephus and Eusebius, to create the structuring narratives into which other sources are slotted. And it has similarly been noted for the tendency to downplay those sources that explain the workings of history and the cosmos with primary appeal to demons.⁴² To these patterns, we might also wish to add our scholarly habit of using those particular sources that fit best with the categories, concerns, and reading practice naturalized by the modern notions of “religion” and “religions.”

Before and beyond “religion(s)”?

Much attention has been granted, especially recently, to those sources most concerned with categorization between “Jew” and “Christian,” and among “Christians,” and these are often used as the basis from which to label, sort, and analyze other sources which are either less explicitly classificatory in character or which are classificatory in ways that just do not so happen to map so neatly onto our own desire to find evidence of premodern peoples sorting themselves and others into distinct “religious” identities (i.e., such as in the case of the Mishnah and other early Rabbinic literature, which richly abounds in many modes of classification but not in a manner that marks “Christians,” for instance, as distinct).⁴³ In this sense, it is perhaps telling that the

Rosen-Zvi, “What if We Got Rid of the Goy? Rereading Ancient Jewish Distinctions,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 47 (2016) 1-34.

⁴¹ A.Y. Reed, “The Trickery of the Fallen Angels and the Demonic Mimesis of the Divine,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004) 141-71.

⁴² Bruce Lincoln (*Gods and Demons*, 31) nicely makes the point for demonology: “it was—and remains—a major part of many religions and cultures... [but] the topic has received less scholarly attention than one might expect. The bases of demonological discourse having been discredited during the Enlightenment, it would seem the topic has been drained of all save antiquarian interest. With few exceptions, most studies are condescending in tone and superficial in their engagement, as if reflecting residual anxiety that such foolishness might be contagious or—a less magical construction of the same dynamic—that evincing too much interest can damage one's reputation.”

⁴³ For this point on Rabbinic literature, see further Reed, “Parting Ways over Blood and Water.”

same decades that have seen increased concern for questioning categories and subcategories of “religion” have also seen a growth of new interest in heresiology, in general, and especially in those heresiologists, like Epiphanius, who theorize and organize difference through categories, taxonomies, and totalizing attempts at classification.⁴⁴ Much has been learned in the process, but it might be worth attending to what texts, trends, and practices are thereby further marginalized.

To attend in the past with an eye to a broader range of knowledge-ordering practices, beyond categories and classification, may perhaps also prove useful for rethinking our own current conversations about the category of “religion”—here too: by looking to what they privilege and by what they efface. Like other narratives that plot difference along the axis of time, our scholarly narratives about the modern “invention” of “religion” create their own sense of an undifferentiated domain of prehistory. In the process, they naturalize our privileging of *some* sources, *some* continuities, and *some* trajectories over others.

Seen from this perspective, when we reflect on what is “before religion” with Nongbri, the term that is perhaps most in need of more interrogating may actually not be “religion” at all, but rather “*before*.” Together with the rhetoric of anachronism, this sense of “before” distracts from the fact that one need not build a time machine to encounter cultures in which this demarcation of “religions” is not primary or meaningful. One need only buy a plane ticket. The narrative, in other words, unintentionally reinscribes a sense of time that is not just problematically linear, but massively and myopically Eurocentric. And this problem too may be one for which we might benefit by relativizing of our own practices of organizing knowledge, not just with an eye to the past but also to the present as well.

⁴⁴ Esp. Berzon, *Classifying Christians*; Young Kim, *Epiphanius of Cyprus: Imagining an Orthodox World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Andrew Jacobs, *Epiphanius of Cyprus: A Cultural Biography of Late Antiquity*, Christianity in Late Antiquity Series (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). Notably, as Matthew Chalmers has noted, Epiphanius has attracted much attention recently, even to the neglect of those writers like Origen who loom so large in earlier studies of heresiology like A. Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque IIe–IIIe siècles* (2 vols.; Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985)