

## What is Religion?

The question, *What is Religion?* is at the same time an easy thing to respond to and a rather difficult matter to define. Definitions are useful in order to lay out a specific subject matter for an investigation. But, what constitutes an adequate definition. Kessler, on page 17, says that if a definition is to be analytically useful, it must be useful for the purposes at hand, be as precise as possible without being too narrow in scope, and be as free from bias as possible.

Kessler, further, identifies a number of criteria for evaluating definitions. Let's look at each of these in turn.

**Usefulness:** to the student of philosophy, Kessler's claim that definitions are not true or false, but more or less useful may seem surprising. What Kessler means by this is that definitions tell us how to use the words effectively depending on the situation and what we are trying to communicate. In Logic, these types of definitions are what we call stipulative definitions. Which is the reason why Kessler makes the further claim that definitions are heuristic devices to aid and stimulate further investigation. What I think we can take away from this criterion is that there may be different definitions that are more or less useful to our investigation of the subject matter of religion, but we should not get hanged up about them. Which isn't to say that we should not be precise in our usage of terms, but that we should not allow this to hamstring our efforts.

**Precision:** the purpose of a definition is to draw boundaries on meaning in order to facilitate understanding and communication. In other words, we need to be cautious in our formulation of a definition because the purpose here is to establish a domain of discourse in which the proper members of a set may be correctly identified. A definition should neither be too narrow nor too broad. By too narrow, I mean that the definition excludes members that should be and are obviously members of a set. By too broad, I mean that the boundaries of the definition include things in the set that should be and are obviously not members of a set. For example: if I define a rectangle as a closed, two dimensional, four sided object whose sides are all of equal length, this definition is too narrow. It excludes all four sided objects that are not squares. On the other hand, if I defined a rectangle as a closed, two dimensional object, this definition is too broad, because it would include many objects that are not rectangles.

Kessler's discussion of essential definitions and functional definitions is similar to logicians discussion of theoretical and precising definitions. The essential or theoretical definitions are the types philosophers tend to use. Aristotle is the champion of such definitions. Kessler is correct when he says that an essential definition should identify the genus and differentia of the species in question. For those of us who haven't studied Aristotle, here is an example of what he has in mind.

Species = Differentia: Genus  
man is a political animal

Of the various kinds of animals (which is the genus) human beings are one species of such varmints. What distinguishes human beings from other animals is the fact that we are political animals (the differentia).

These distinctions may or may not be useful for us at this point. However, essential or

theoretical definitions are powerful tools philosophers use in order to define subject matters in investigations.

Bias: this is something that should be avoided in definitions or, for that matter, in our discussions or investigations. There are various forms of bias. They range from something as straight forward as a prejudice to something far more subtle as having a western or a gender bias. These latter types of biases are something that we should elaborate on. Earlier this semester, I mentioned that traditionally philosophers have called studies like the one we are commencing theology . Later, philosophers changed the designation from theology to philosophy of religion . This was intended to address a bias many have that theology entails an insider s perspective or contains the bias that one must be religiously committed to the religion in question prior to investigating it. In other words, theology became the vehicle for the maintenance of specific religious doctrine and other forms of religious training. So as to distinguish that activity from the philosophical investigation of the phenomenon of religion, philosophers started using another term. All definitions are in part theory-laden, meaning that in order to know the content of the terms being used in the definitions, this requires a theory in order to understand their proper use. This is not a bad thing. It is an unavoidable thing. Hence, what we need to be attentive to is the theory-laden nature of definitions, and be aware that some theories will express some bias. The upshot here is that if we are attentive to biases, we can avoid, as far as possible, falling into the trap of continuing them.