

NEWS & OPINIONS

On Defining “Religion” in “Religious” vs. “Secular” Engagement

Robert Guy McKee

In this article, I start with an anecdote and two literature notes, I comment on each, then I explain what the article is about and proceed with its substance.¹

Actually, It's All *Religion!* (Seriously.)

The anecdote is about a remark made to me and a fellow student back when I was finishing my graduate work in anthropology at the University of Rochester.² I was with this student in the department lounge talking about a paper I had written for a theory seminar a couple or so years before. The paper was a Genesis prologue analysis; the analysis has prologue myth providing believers with an epistemological charter; the charter enjoins humankind to construct, to God's glory, knowledge of the creation, while respecting, again to God's glory, as his untouchable domain, knowledge of good and evil. Obeying the charter, believers act virtuously in the world based on revealed moral knowledge of the one living, righteous, eternal God, even as they fulfill its charge to develop subjective, changeable scientific knowledge of a changing creation.

The professor for whom I had written the paper happened to be in the lounge at the time, within easy earshot. At my mention of some of the paper's God-related material, she interjected dismissively (though not unkindly), “It's all politics.”³

Comment: Yes, there is a political dimension to our actions and a politics of meaning, including where interpreting biblical texts and defining words like “religion” and “secular” are concerned. But no, it is not *all* politics; *were* it so, “it's all politics” would itself be disqualified as mere politics. If anything, it's all *religion*, at least as I and some others define religion.

The first literature note concerns the diffusion research term “pro-innovation bias.” This is a term I have thought about each of the last several years as I have used Everett Rogers' *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (2003) in a culture change course that I teach. According to Rogers, “The *pro-innovation bias* is the implication in diffusion research that an innovation should be diffused and adopted by all members of a social system, that it should be diffused more rapidly, and that the innovation should be neither re-invented nor rejected.” Seldom stated plainly, just “assumed and implied,” Rogers calls this bias “one of the most

¹ Reprinted with permission from Robert Guy McKee's *Destination: Christian Anthropology*, <https://leanpub.com/destinationchristiananthropology>, 2022, ISBN 979-8-9862495-1-3, chapter 4; with a few minor copy edits, removal of the boxes around the two asides, and the addition of an explanatory sentence before the first such. Conference paper version read October 13, 2018, at the Evangelical Missiological Society's national conference at Dallas International University, Dallas, TX, USA.

² The university's administration announced at the end of 1994 that it was cutting anthropology from among its graduate programs; students already enrolled could complete their degrees. The university remains today with a vibrant undergraduate program.

³ To my professor's great credit, I would say, her personal take on my paper's analysis did not influence adversely the grade she gave me for the paper (A), even though I handed it in about two years late, from the middle of a second term with SIL International in northeastern Zaire, having been allowed an Incomplete (I) to finish it.

serious shortcomings of diffusion research” (2003, 106, italics in the original).

Ironically, Rogers himself appears guilty of this bias, in a part of the book where he apologizes half-heartedly for terming “laggard” the adopter category of social-system traditionalists. “Laggards” are either the last of a system’s members to adopt an innovation, or, worse yet, ones who never adopt. While Rogers acknowledges that “‘laggard’ might sound like a bad name,” and that it “carries an invidious distinction (in much the same way that ‘lower class’ is a negative nomenclature),” he yet protests⁴ that any other term would soon sound similarly negative, and he appears to suggest that something must be at fault for “laggards” being last to adopt or rejecting (ibid., 284-285). Also, while he does consider a number of ways by which pro-innovation bias might be overcome (ibid., 112-117), none approaches anything like a flipping of adopter-category labels such that “laggards” become “faithfuls” and “innovators” are rebranded “apostates.”

Comment (in question form): Does use of the term “laggard” in diffusion research remind anyone else of use of the term “religious” in “secular” vs. “religious” engagement in Western culture?

The second literature note I might have made about Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* (1980), published by Random House; I make it instead about Berenstain & Berenstain’s *The Bears’ Nature Guide* (1975), again by Random House. An image in the top-right corner of the book’s cover tells us that it is part of the Bear Facts Library series, for children ages 3 to 9; one of the book’s characters, Actual Factual Bear, appears to lend scientific authority to the book’s message. Largely, that message pretends to answer factually the question, “What is nature?”; a summary answer ten pages into the book reads, “Nature is every person, thing, and

place / here on Earth and out in space. // Nature’s the sun, the moon, the stars. / It’s faraway planets like Venus and Mars. // It’s the mountains, the valleys, the shore, the sea. / Nature is you! Nature is me! // It’s all that IS or WAS or EVER WILL BE! // And that’s a lot to talk about on just one nature walkabout” (1975, 10-11).

Comment (again in question form): Is this book’s exclamation concerning nature in fact/indeed factual, with authority of nonreligious science behind it, or is it, rather, naturalistic (not natural) science and philosophy for children ages 3 to 9?

What this article is about, cutting to the chase, is what “religion” is about—how best to define it; then, it is also about how this affects how we see “religious” vs. “secular” engagement as we continue doing mission and evangelism in a “secularizing” world. Regarding what religion is about, I think the key question is, Who is high king in the realm of value—King with a capital ‘k’? ⁵ Bertrand Russell saw humankind as high king/monarch—as “the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value” (1957, 55), with no God at all likely in the picture; the Christian bible, by the Genesis prologue’s dominion mandate,⁶ does have the one living God, the “ultimate Fact” (Lewis 1978, 95), setting humankind as “ruler over the works of [God’s] hands” (Psalm 8:6), but only as subordinate to himself as “Supreme Ruler” (Pearcey 2005, 47). How I have come to define religion, as part of my own still-developing Christian anthropology, I think I can best explain by looking at both viewpoints—Russell’s and the Christian-biblical. I define it, in any case, as created humankind’s exercise of its subordinate dominion in the realm of value, assuming the Christian-biblical God as high king.⁷ From there, still including attention to Russell’s view of value, I suggest it follows that “religious” vs. “secular”

⁴ It is indeed “protest” as I read Rogers, consistent with his admitting guilt of the bias.

⁵ This reminds me, in the outworking of a person’s life, of “the Dominant”—the dominant function of an utterance or text—of Prague School multifunctional linguistics. Whatever is the Dominant leads in structuring the utterance; other functions contribute in lesser ways, perhaps not at all. Where the present paper’s “King” in the realm of value is concerned, what is structured is the subordinate king’s/monarch’s life.

⁶ Also known as the cultural mandate (Pearcey 2005, 48-49, Waltke 2007, 220-221), the Adamic mandate, and by other terms—e.g., the first great commission (vis-à-vis the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20) and the primeval mandate or commission (Morris 1984, 41-46). I long preferred “cultural mandate,” probably given that I am a sociocultural anthropologist; as I have been writing the present paper, I have changed my preference to “dominion mandate,” given that it concerns dominion more broadly than it does culture, since I think our relationship with God-as-Supreme-Ruler is more fundamental than our cultures as products of the mandate.

⁷ See McKee (2012, 2014) for earlier statements of the same, contextualized differently than in the present paper; and yet earlier is McKee (1998), which was the initial conference presentation of what has remained the core of my Genesis prologue analysis.

engagement—a type, by the way, of which mission and evangelism in a secularizing world is a token—is normally most insightfully seen with “secular” recognized as with the sense, not of *nonreligious*, but rather of *otherwise religious*. Concluding, I suggest that, as we do mission and evangelism in an increasingly otherwise-religious world, we help ourselves by developing Christian anthropology as one of our means to understand it.

On Humankind as Monarchs in the Realm of Value

First, then, concerning humankind as monarchs in the realm of value: Having come to this view myself from study of the Genesis prologue and the dominion mandate, I happened on a variant of it in something by Bertrand Russell. Russell was a British aristocrat widely renowned as a humanist, logician, philosopher of mathematics, writer, and champion of unfettered science and freethinking against dogmatic religion.⁸ Although “best known for his work in mathematical logic and analytic philosophy,” he “made significant contributions to a broad range of other subjects, including ethics, politics, educational theory, the history of ideas and religious studies.”⁹ As if that were not enough, he was “involved, often passionately, in numerous social and political controversies of his time,” he was “a gadfly for improving the lives of men and women,”¹⁰ and he was awarded the 1950 Nobel Prize in Literature “in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought.”¹¹

Important to note is that Russell’s opposition to dogmatic religion was not, despite some appearance, to *all* religion. It was to *creedal* religion, definitely to “all the great religions of the world—Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Communism” (1957, v); it was *not* to what he called “the free man’s worship” of what he deemed the best ideals of humankind’s own creation. That free man’s worship, Russell’s own *noncreedal* religion, he described in an eponymously entitled essay chockful of undisguisedly religious language.¹² I quote just one passage in illustration:

When we have realized that power is largely bad, that man, with his knowledge of good and evil, is but a helpless atom in a world which has no such knowledge, the choice is again presented to us: Shall we worship force, or shall we worship goodness? Shall our God exist and be evil, or shall he be recognized as the creation of our own conscience? (1957, 109)

The problem of appearance that I mention—that Russell was opposed to *all* religion, which he certainly was not—concerns how Russell’s rationalism, agnosticism-cum-atheism,¹³ championing of science, renown as a logician, *together with* his outspoken opposition to *creedal* religion—has contributed to what I see as the naïve Western cultural impression that Russell was quintessentially secular in that word’s sense of strictly nonreligious—i.e., without *any* religion. (And I think the problem extends well beyond Russell, to include other such highly culturally-influential scholars as Richard Dawkins and the late Stephen Hawking, to mention just two.¹⁴)

⁸ See, among other sources consulted on Russell’s life, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertrand-Russell>, accessed March 7, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bertrand_Russell, accessed March 7, 2018, and Ronald W. Clark’s *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1976).

⁹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/russell/>, accessed March 7, 2018.

¹⁰ <https://users.drew.edu/jlenz/brs-about-br.html>, accessed March 7, 2018.

¹¹ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1950/, accessed September 24, 2020.

¹² See Russell’s “A Free Man’s Worship” (1957, 104-116).

¹³ For an instructive short piece on Russell the rationalist, philosophical agnostic, and practical atheist, see http://scepsis.net/eng/articles/id_6.php, accessed March 24, 2018.

¹⁴ See Dawkins (2008, 298-308) concerning this biologist’s idea of “the manifest phenomenon of *Zeitgeist* progression,” by which he thinks enlightened progressives like himself can discern ever-changing, naturalistic good and evil apart from religion, God, or scripture (“It is probably not a single force like gravity, but a complex interplay of disparate forces like the one that propels

A parenthesis, now (for interest's sake), along with a photo.

Finding Bertrand Russell on Value

I think it interesting, even providential, how I first wound up reading anything by Bertrand Russell. During my PhD program at Rochester, while proceeding many scores of times by the same elevator-assisted route into the bowels (or, less often, one of the upper floors) of Rush Rhees Library for research and/or study, it so happened that I first had to pass through some first-floor stacks that contained, on my left, a very long stretch of Russell's books. As I did so, I just kept thinking that he was such a well-known anti-Christian philosopher, I had to know something of what he had written. That led to my eventually buying a copy of his *Why I Am Not a Christian*, in which book's essays I found Russell on value, Russell on the "free" man's worship (my dismissive-of-the-idea quotes), Russell on other subjects.

Graven in blocks of the wall of Rush Rhees Library is a statement of progressive humanism that certainly fits better with the University of Rochester's motto *Meliora* "(Ever) better" than with Russell's view of physical value. What the basis is for the former's hopeful future in the Reality that includes at least the physical-material universe (Sagan's cosmos; the Bears' nature), the graven statement does not say.

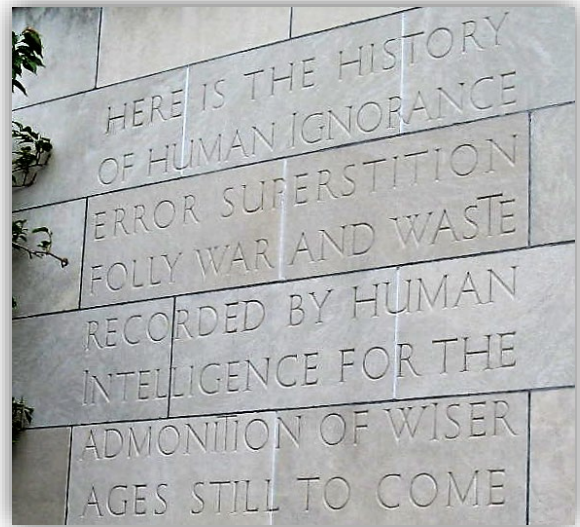


Photo 1

Statement of progressive humanism engraved on a section of wall of the University of Rochester's Rush Rhees Library, exemplifying the university's motto *Meliora* (Latin "(Ever) better").

To return to the main thread: In *Why I Am Not a Christian* (one of the last of Russell's over 70 books), in an essay entitled "What I Believe," Russell contrasted what he called the philosophies of nature and value. In the philosophy of nature, he said, "Undoubtedly we [humankind] are part of nature, which has produced our desires, our hopes and fears, in accordance with laws the physicist is beginning to discover"; "we are subordinated to nature, the outcome of natural laws, and their victims in the long run" (1957, 55). Thus, among the things he said we do not control are, that we all die, our bodies rot, and we, including our egos, are entirely annihilated.¹⁵ By

Moore's Law, describing the exponential increase in computer power"). See then also, without fail, Plantinga (2011, *passim*) for this philosopher's reasoned disdain of Dawkins' generally sophomoric philosophizing.

See, concerning Hawking, a later note.

Another interesting example besides Dawkins and Hawking: Philip Goff is a philosopher who, seemingly determined, like Dawkins, to ground rational morality on something other than God, espouses seriously, at a European university, what he calls agentive cosmopsychism (see <https://aeon.co/essays/cosmopsychism-explains-why-the-universe-is-fine-tuned-for-life>, accessed February 9, 2018).

¹⁵ Russell did not believe in either God or immortality, "the central dogmas of the Christian religion," for what he alleged their lack of any scientific support (1957, 50). It was the religious, the superstitious, who feared death; Russell, a person of science, though old as he was writing the essay concerned, and though loving life, "should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of

contrast, in the philosophy of value, Russell rather rejoiced at what he saw as an important difference, given that there were some “facts on or near the surface of the earth that we can, to some extent, mold to suit our desires”:

[I]n the philosophy of value the situation is reversed [from what it is in the philosophy of nature]. Nature is only a part of what we can imagine; everything, real or imagined, can be appraised by us, and there is no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value, and in the world of value nature is only a part. Thus in this world we are greater than nature. In the world of values, nature in itself is neutral, neither good nor bad, deserving of neither admiration nor censure. It is we who create value and our desires which confer value. In this realm we are kings, and we debase our kingship if we bow down to nature. It is for us to determine the good life, not for nature—not even for nature personified as God. (1957, 55-56)

As to Russell’s response to the question of who is high king/monarch in the realm of value, I think it remarkably transparent here. Whatever anything is or is not in nature, it is something that we, humankind, monarchs in the realm of value, can imagine and valorize however we individually¹⁶ desire, with nothing in the universe above or outside us to instruct us how rationally to do so. Thus, to take good and evil as an example (our feelings and beliefs on these, Russell wrote in another essay, “are, like everything else about us, natural facts, developed in the struggle for existence” [1957, 92]): We first understand or imagine good and evil as we would like, according to our desires; we then appraise good and evil, again according to our desires, with “no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong,” since “we are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of

value,” “we who create value and our desires which confer value,” since “in this realm we are kings.” In other words, summing up Russell’s thought here, what we do with the value of anything and everything, real or imagined, is entirely up to us. “It is for us to determine the good life,” not for anything or anyone else, period (1957, 55-56).

(Awkward pause. I think Russell’s thought in “What I Believe” particularly sad from this point, since he proceeds to try to persuade contrary-thinking monarchs in the realm of value—ones happy to honor racism and dishonor philanthropy, perhaps, according to *their* regal, natural desires—of *his* view of the good life, recognizing he cannot argue logically for it. Russell’s good life, by the way—“*one inspired by love and guided by knowledge*” [1957, 56, italics in the original]—interestingly resembles, albeit superficially, some of Christianity.)

Of obvious interest here is how Russell’s idea—that we, humankind, are *absolute* monarchs in the realm of value—compares with a similar, yet very different, Christian-biblical idea—viz., that we are *subordinate* monarchs in this realm, under the God who made us and to whom we are therefore responsible for our lives.¹⁷ This is part of the dominion mandate, according to which Genesis 1:28, in context,¹⁸ has God making humankind, created in his image and thus capable of dominion, ruler¹⁹ under him of the creation. By my own analysis, prologue acts of both *calling* (in the sense of *naming*) and *eating* symbolize exercise of dominion. God brings the animals to Adam for Adam to name as he would, and Adam names them (Genesis 2:19-20). This is rational science, quintessentially, and humankind’s domain. Thereby, humankind is to construct, to God’s glory, what is changeable, changing, susceptible-to-paradigm-shifts, subjective knowledge of the creation. This includes constructing our cultures. By contrast, it is God who calls the light “day” and the darkness “night” (Genesis 1:5). This concerns rational morality—objective knowledge of good and evil,

annihilation” (1957, 54). (Russell understood only the Catholics, no longer the Protestants, as with the doctrine of hell, as opposed to annihilation.)

¹⁶ Although I do not see Russell add “individually” to “we” anywhere that he writes in this vein, I do not think, had this not been his meaning, that he would have expended the effort he does in “What I Believe” trying to persuade others to share his view of the good life (1957:56-63, especially).

¹⁷ See, e.g., Psalm 100:3.

¹⁸ The context is Genesis 1-2, most nearly, but extends to include the whole of Scripture, and definitely Revelation 21-22.

¹⁹ Or master, lord, king, or yet another gloss, depending on the translation preferred.

grounded in the Creator God's eternal, righteous nature, and God's inviolable domain. And thus the prophet Isaiah says, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isaiah 5:20).²⁰ The same message is communicated with acts of eating, as God gives humankind created, seed-bearing plants to eat—"every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit"—while he forbids them only the fruit of the self-existent, *sui generis*, centrally-located tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When humankind ate of the forbidden fruit, they thereby rebelliously asserted moral autonomy, deciding to determine good and evil for themselves, thus presuming to be monarchs over God's domain in a self-idolatry that Wright (2006) identifies as at the root of all other idolatry.²¹



Photo 2

The center of Geneva's Reformation Wall, where it's all religion—including, e.g., memorializing four key Protestant reformers, and/or also vandalizing the monument (in which latter regard, see <https://evangelicalfocus.com/cities/4602/vandalism-against-the-wall-of-the-reformers-in-geneva>).

In sum, we humankind, biblically, are kings and queens in Narnia, so to speak, under Aslan as King/high king.²² We are mandated to exercise lordship over the creation that duly, worshipfully respects God's lordship over us. We are *not* Russell's "ultimate and irrefutable" kings/monarchs, in a realm of subjective value only, where we know good and evil no differently at base—by our naturally-produced desires—than we know anything else, yet where we can also somehow, according to Russell, recognize the best ideals of human creation and think it proper to worship them.

Before saying a bit more about my definition of religion, let me say that it can help me to think of Russell's philosophy of nature as that of *homo sapiens*—of natural, biological, strictly nonreligious humankind—and of his philosophy of value as that of *homo religiosus*—of inherently, inveterately religious humankind, the species rather than just however many (or few) creedally-religious members of it. Thus, given Russell's philosophy of value, I think he may have agreed with my definition's idea that what makes humankind religious, creedally or otherwise, is our exercise of either autonomous or subordinate kingship in the realm of value. In any case, given that both philosophies consist of logically related thoughts soon to be understood completely, by Russell's account, as the natural facts they are (1957, 48-50, 54-55), I do not find Russell on value persuasive at base. Any philosophy or science that has all thought, logical and scientific included, as determined natural fact—as just another part of "everything else about us" (1957, 92), with nature all there is, was, or ever will be, remember?—any such is not philosophy or science I can trust. Thoughts that are simply natural facts cannot argue rationally with other such thoughts; both simply are.²³

²⁰ The article's Scripture quotations are from the 1984 New International Version.

²¹ Wright (2006, 64). Wright is an Anglican theologian.

²² The reference is to Peter, Edmund, Susan, and Lucy Pevensie as "Kings and Queens in Narnia," in C. S. Lewis's *The Narnia Chronicles* (e.g., Lewis 1970:178-186).

²³ Hawking and his champions appear to be (or have been) blind to this problem with his thinking. Concerning his last book, published posthumously, an internationally-shared CNN article builds him up as a scientist ("the celebrated physicist Stephen Hawking," "considered one of the most brilliant scientists of his generation," "his family and colleagues finished [his last book] with the help of his vast personal archives"), reports his conclusion that there is no God—"that everything can be explained another way, by the laws of nature," and provides evidence of his value judgments on such diverse matters as going into the future blindly, "using advances in technology for the good of ordinary people," the global revolt against experts, scientists included, and things that divide us—e.g., Brexit and Donald Trump (see <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/there-is-no-god-says-stephen-hawking-in-final>).

More on My Definition of Religion

My definition of religion—again, I define it as created humanity’s exercise of its subordinate dominion in the realm of value—I now say just a bit more about, in three points. First, it is of the same “ontological commitment” or “ultimate concern” type as the definitions of non-anthropologists Fred Welbourn (religious studies), Paul Tillich (theology), and Herman Dooyeweerd (philosophy), as treated briefly in Hexham (2011, 21-24). The type says, in effect, that it’s all *religion* (not politics, economics, or whatever else)—that one’s religion “involves one’s entire way of life,” that it “should be viewed in terms of each person’s ontological commitments, what really motivates them in their day-to-day lives, rather than in terms of explicit religiosity.”²⁴ What Hexham says of the ontological understanding of religion, from Welbourn through Edward Bailey on “implicit religion” (which, interestingly enough, he first called “secular religion”), satisfies me that a person and a community’s ontological commitments can indeed be studied and discovered—and, to boot, that ethnographic research methods are eminently suited to the task.²⁵ This last I say in answer to criticism that definitions of the ontological-commitment type, vague as they are, are of no value to scholars (since, if it is

indeed all religion, how in the world do we even begin to study it?²⁶).

Second, I see my definition as complementing, not improving on, that which Henry Van Til gives in *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (1959). This definition reads as follows:

Religion is the inescapable covenantal relationship between God as Lord and his image-bearer, man. This relation follows from that other basic one of Creator and creature, and rests upon the faithfulness of God to the covenant which he ordained as constituting the religious relationship. This relationship extends to the whole of life; it is all-permeating; it radiates from its center in the heart out to every area on the periphery of man’s existence.²⁷

Van Til’s definition spells out the core of our relationship of subordinate dominion—that it is to God as Creator and Lord, that it therefore permeates our whole lives, that God’s faithfulness to the covenant that constitutes it means we cannot escape it. Understandably for its title, Van Til (1959) has a related definition of culture, according to which culture is mandate-grounded, expressive of religion (i.e., it does not see religion as a part of culture, but rather religion as what produces culture), and both activity and the result thereof (i.e., culture is both process and product).²⁸

[book-215410/](#), accessed October 17, 2018). Everything, then—all of Hawking’s scientific thinking and value judgments included—would be entirely explicable by laws of nature, just more natural facts, just something that eventually happened.

²⁴ Hexham (2011, 21, 22). The latter quote is Hexham expressing Welbourn’s view; the former, Hexham attributes to Welbourn and others.

²⁵ Hexham (2011, 21-26). E.g., in an explanation that reminds me of common ethnographic research practice, Hexham says,

By [“implicit religion,” Bailey (religious studies)] means the actual practices and beliefs of people as discovered by others through careful observation of their actions and not simply by taking their words at face value. Bailey argues that it is important to observe what people actually do, not simply analyze what they say. By observing their actions, the way they live, he claims, it is possible to get at the nature of people’s actual ontological commitments, that is, to detect their “implicit religion” (2011, 26).

²⁶ Hexham (2011, 22) I credit here for noting this criticism.

²⁷ Van Til (1959, 37). Henry Van Til, fifteen years part of the theology faculty of Calvin College, was a nephew of the better-known Westminster Seminary professor Cornelius Van Til.

²⁸ Eminently worth quoting in full, and stuck in the present note only for the read/presented paper’s required brevity, Van Til’s (1959) definition of culture reads,

[Culture is] that activity of man, the image-bearer of God, by which he fulfills the creation mandate to cultivate the earth, to have dominion over it and to subdue it. The term is also applied to the result of such activity, namely, the secondary environment which has been superimposed upon nature by man’s creative effort.

Third, one of my definition's entailments is that all normal²⁹ people are religious, whether creedally or otherwise; *none* is secular in this word's strictly nonreligious sense.³⁰ This is because all normal people exercise constantly their dominion in the realm of value, whether or not consciously, whether or not worshipfully toward any recognized god. To take just one example: All normal people are constantly making judgments of fair vs. unfair, right vs. wrong—we are all incurable moralizers.³¹ Thus, not even “freethinkers” like Russell are or could ever normally be without religion, even if they have judged that, in all probability, there is no God or anything else supernatural/mystical there, only products of our imagination.

Thus, given that all normal people are religious, I suggest that “religious” vs. “secular” engagement be recognized for what it most always is in fact—religious vs. *otherwise religious* engagement. On the one hand, this tears off the “secular” side's political mask, in what seems to be increasingly, in our day, heated, highly irrational, values-related *conflict* rather than calmer, more rational, values-related engagement. On the other hand, I think it also reveals the extent to which the “religious” vs. “secular” framing of the engagement, in today's First World certainly, has been guilty of secular bias, with “religious” pigeonholed and condemned as formal, institutional, creedal, illogical, anti-science, anti-freethinking, and superstitious—while “secular” is allowed to skate for the otherwise religious

it actually is, behind a mask of such dictionary senses as “not spiritual: of or relating to the *physical* world and *not* the spiritual world” (italics added), “not religious,” and “not concerned with religion or the church.”³² To recognize here is that the two sides, “religious” and “otherwise religious,” are definitely *equally* religious, since their members (together equaling all normal people) are both monarchs in the realm of value. Clearly there are other ways to call the two sides of the engagement—e.g., subordinate vs. autonomous religion, religion vs. self-idolatry, true vs. apostate religion; but to maintain that secular religion is somehow *less* religious, or *scientifically* religious, or *more rationally* religious, is so much political poppycock.

Conclusion

Concluding now, let me suggest what is for me a further implication of my definition of religion—viz., that it makes sense for Christian anthropologists to push ahead with the development of Christian anthropology, for the help I think this promises toward understanding the “otherwise religious” of today's secularizing world. Judging from the title of a recent edited volume in the anthropology of religion, *Secularisms in a Postsecular Age? Religiosities and*

Culture, then, is not a peripheral concern, but of the very essence of life. It is an expression of man's essential being as created in the image of God, and since man is essentially a religious being, it is expressive of his relationship to God, that is, of his religion (1959, 7).

The result/product part of Van Til's definition strikes me as intentionally close to some of those of the section of Kroeber & Kluckhohn's (1963) definitions that emphasize culture as a product or artifact (1963, 125-130)—e.g., on page 128, Kluckhohn's own definition from his *Mirror for Man* (1949): “[C]ulture may be regarded as that part of the environment that is the creation of man” (1949, 20). Van Til (1959) later provides another, more-mandate-focused definition of culture: “Culture, then, is any and all human effort and labor expended upon the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God” (1959, 29-30).

²⁹ I think necessary, in this regard, the assumption of a certain normal, this in the sense of physically, healthily, developmentally normal, having normal brain capacity and function, etc. While this definition of “normal” may not be as exact as some would like, I think it adequate to my purpose here.

³⁰ The word “secular” has other, more recent dictionary senses in English than “not religious,” with each deriving from a stage in its etymology (see, e.g., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular>, accessed February 22, 2018; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/what-do-secular-atheist-agnostic-mean>, accessed February 22, 2018).

³¹ See, in this regard, Lewis (1960:15-39).

³² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secular>, accessed February 22, 2018, with the first two senses from a definition for English language learners and the third from one for kids/students; and see again, also, among many others with similar data, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/what-do-secular-atheist-agnostic-mean>, accessed February 22, 2018.

Subjectivities in Comparative Perspective (2017),³³ there is a plurality of differing “otherwise religious” to be understood. We can leave these to non-Christian anthropologists to study for us; we can study them ourselves using non-Christian anthropologies, among them Christian-perspective anthropology as described in Howell & Paris (2011, 243); or, we can trust that Christian anthropology, beginning as it does from a Christian-biblical theoretical base, promises the greatest return on the investment concerned. While I cannot develop an argument for this here, I do venture four remarks:

First, the challenges of mission and evangelism in a secularizing world may relate more to “seculars” who deny they are religious³⁴ than to ones who aptly recognize themselves as less formally, non-creedally religious. In either case, my sense is that, in missional engagement with educated “seculars,” solidly, avowedly Christian-anthropological reasoning will be seen as the most honest approach for Christians to take, and also prove the most powerful.

Second, we have some courageous, trailblazing colleagues at Eastern University, in their MA in Theological and Cultural Anthropology, to whom I think we owe support in this regard.

Third, having thought about this some as I have taught introductory-level cultural anthropology using first a secular, then a Christian-perspective text, I can hardly wait to see the structure and contents of the first intro-level *Christian anthropology* text, in which humankind’s religious constructs continue to be treated as part of culture, even in one or two of the book’s later chapters, but in which religion as defined by such as Van Til and myself appears up front as responsible for all of culture. If I ever write such a text, another of its differences from a normal/run-of-the-mill secular text will be a chapter entitled “Marriage and Kinship” (rather than “Kinship and Marriage”), with marriage as instituted by God in prologue myth, not natural descent, recognized as the primary social relationship.

Finally, fourth, I think, for some reason, I will be even more excited to see gifted Christian anthropologists using Christian theory study and write about postsecular religiosities and subjectivities, than I

am to see even a Tanya Luhmann, Joel Robbins, or Ruy Blanes study and write about Christianities.

With that I rest.

Postscript

I repeat here my own Scripture-based definition of “religion,” integral to my own Christian anthropology; I also relate a second anecdote, as a thankful nod to someone else working in the field.

religion: created humankind’s exercise of its subordinate dominion in the realm of value.



Photo 3

Thom Wolf talking about worldview/lens, worldvoice/luminary, and worldvenue/lifestyle during his plenary address at the 2018 national EMS conference.

At the October 2018 Evangelical Missiological Society’s national conference, after I had presented my paper and the question-&-discussion time had yielded to coffee break, there were still a few people wanting to ask questions or make comments before I could politely get free to join in the break. The person clearly satisfied to be last among this number was Thom Wolf, of New Delhi’s University Institute and one of the conference’s plenary speakers—and we are still

³³ José Mapril, Ruy Blanes, Emerson Giumbelli & Erin K. Wilson (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Not relevant to anything here in the current paper, I met and enjoyed greatly relating to Blanes, an atheist (at least at that time), at a 2006 IUAES intercongress at Cape Town, South Africa.

³⁴ Whether or not disingenuously, with disingenuousness always a political possibility.

talking. Destination? I have no doubt that it will be, at base, for me at least, more/further Christian anthropology.



Photo 4

Thom Wolf (center) in informal question-&-discussion with conference attendees after his 2018 national EMS plenary address.

References

- Berenstain, Stan and Jan Berenstain. 1975. *The Bears' Nature Guide*. Random House.
- Clark, Ronald W. 1976. *The Life of Bertrand Russell*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Dawkins, Richard. 2008. *The God Delusion*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Hexham, Irving. 2011. *Understanding World Religions: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Zondervan.
- Howell, Brian and Jenell Paris. 2011. *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. Baker Academic.
- Kluckhohn, Clyde. 1960 (1949). *Mirror for Man*. Fawcett.
- Kroeber, Alfred and Clyde Kluckhohn. 1963 (1952). *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Vintage.
- Lewis, C. S. 1960 (1943). *Mere Christianity*. Revised and enlarged ed. Macmillan.
- . 1970 (1950). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Book 1 of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Macmillan.
- . 1978 (1947). *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. Macmillan.
- Mapril, José, Ruy Blanes, Emerson Giumbelli and Erin K. Wilson, eds. 2017. *Secularisms in a Postsecular Age? Religiosities and Subjectivities in Comparative Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- McKee, Robert Guy. 1998. "Genesis Prologue Myth as Epistemological Charter." Paper delivered at the 14th International Conference of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences at Williamsburg, VA, July 29.
- . 2012. "Missiology, the Witch, and the Idol: 'Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength,' or, The Garden Limit on Humanity's Creative License." http://www.diu.edu/images/gialens/vol6-2/McKee_Missiology-1.pdf. Accessed 6/12/2026.
- . 2014. *Destination: Christian Anthropology*. Paper presented at the 74th Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology at Albuquerque, NM, March 20.
- . 2022. *Destination: Christian Anthropology*. <https://leanpub.com/destinationchristiananthropology>. Accessed 6/13/2026.
- Morris, Henry. 1984. *The Biblical Basis for Modern Science*. Baker Book House.
- Pearcey, Nancy. 2005. *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*. Study guide ed. Crossway.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2011. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Rogers, Everett. 2003. *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. Free Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1957. *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*. George Allen & Unwin.
- Sagan, Carl. 1980. *Cosmos*. Random House.
- Van Til, Henry. 1959. *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*. Presbyterian & Reformed.
- Waltke, Bruce. 2007. *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*. With Charles Yu. Zondervan.

Wright, Christopher. 2006. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. IVP Academic.



Rob McKee is currently Senior Faculty at Dallas International University. He came to DIU in 2010 as Assistant Professor, when the school was still the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics. He has an AB (1975) in Social Relations from Harvard, an MA (1985) and PhD (1995) in Anthropology from the University of Rochester (NY, USA). Before coming to DIU, he and his family were nineteen years in Africa with SIL Global. His main current topics of professional interest are Meegye-Mangbetu (northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo) studies, Christian anthropology, and lynchings both in Kenya and globally.

Author email: rob_mckee@diu.edu
