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Defining Religion and Non-Religion in a Plural Society

Stem Cells & Policy: Values & Religion Module

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There is a scene in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* that captures the complexity of religious dialogue in America. It is 1986, and Prior Walter, a gay man in New York City, has been diagnosed with AIDS. In 1986 there were few effective ways to manage this illness. His partner has abandoned him. Prior contracts pneumonia, collapses, and is rushed to the hospital by Hannah, a woman he barely knows. He tells her that he has seen an angel. He believes that he is going insane and that her son is partially to blame for his insanity. Her son has become romantically involved with Prior's ex-lover. And to make matters more complicated, both Hannah and her son are Mormons.

Hannah: You had a vision.

Prior: A vision. Thank you, Maria Ouspenskaya. I'm not so far gone that I can be assuaged by pity and lies.

Hannah: I don't have pity. It's just not something I have. *(Little pause)* One hundred and seventy years ago, which is recent, an angel of God appeared to Joseph Smith in upstate New York, not far from here. People have visions.

Prior: But that's preposterous, that's...

Hannah: It's not polite to call other people's beliefs preposterous. He had a great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made a prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.

Prior: I don't. And I'm sorry but it's repellent to me. So much of what you believe.

Hannah: What do I believe?

Prior: I'm a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what you...

Hannah: No you can't. Imagine. The things in my head. You don't make assumptions about me, mister, I won't make assumptions about you.

Prior: *(A beat; he looks at her, then)*: Fair enough.

Prior's response that he finds Hannah's beliefs "ridiculous" and "repellent" might very well turn the conversation into a screaming match, or bring it to a screeching halt. If his behavior is offensive, it is also understandable – given that her church officially condemns homosexuality, Prior expects Hannah to view him with the same kind of repulsion that he feels for her beliefs. Hannah's appeal to "politeness" might seem like a nice way to respond to all religious difference, but in the end, Prior would still be hostile even were he to keep his mouth politely shut. It is only when Hannah points out that, just because Prior knows that she is a Mormon, he does know what she thinks or believes, that a real conversation between the two of them becomes possible. Not that Prior attains perfect understanding of Hannah's views. "I wish you would be more true to your demographic profile. Life is confusing enough," he eventually complains. But in the end, the two of them find a way to be friends despite their differences.¹

¹ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Part Two: Perestroika*, Act 4, Scene 6, in *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasy on American Themes*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003, p. 235.

Readers might object to using a work of fiction like *Angels in America* as a representation of religious difference in modern America. They might reasonably ask whether any flesh-and-blood Mormons would recognize their own faith in Hannah's words concerning the angel that appeared to Joseph Smith. Even if someone like Hannah did exist, what would other Mormons make of her? Readers could go even further and ask about Prior's apparent lack of religious faith. Do all gay men share his visceral dislike of Mormon beliefs? Could an openly gay man actually embrace Mormonism?² If so, how would other Mormons react to him? For that matter, what would non-Mormon gay men make of a gay Mormon?

Ultimately, this essay is not about Mormons or gay men and will make no attempt to answer these particular questions. It only poses them to make clear the complexities and risks involved in imagining what other individuals believe. Demographic surveys and familiarity with the official statements of a religious community are important parts of the academic study of religion. But Kushner's play reminds us that demographics and official pronouncements only speak of aggregates and approximations. They do not describe the way official doctrines are integrated into the daily lives of believers – what Robert Orsi and other scholars call “lived religion.”

This is not to say that religious belief is simply a personal matter. Individuals are members of larger communities. Solidarity with those communities – or dissent from them – carries real-life consequences, sometimes serious. But this is true of all communities – professional groups, political parties, and American civil society are no less concerned with standards of conformity and deviance, of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, than religious communities. Since most individuals belong to more than one of these communities, they face the very real possibility of making choices in the face of conflicting claims and demands. It goes without saying that human embryonic stem cell research (hESCR) has already aroused considerable controversy and many individuals find themselves caught between duties to personal conscience, religious community, professional life, and civic responsibility.

The history of hESCR in the U.S. presents numerous instances of the potential for conflict between the demands of religious duty, professional integrity, and public life. One example is the interpretation of the Dickey-Wicker Appropriations Rider, which prohibits appropriation of federal funds for the creation and/or destruction of embryos for research purposes. Because there are no laws regarding the use of surplus or “dead” embryos generated via in vitro fertilization (IVF), each presidential administration has been able to interpret that rider based on their personal values and those of their party constituents. In 1996, Harriet Raab, Health and Human Services general counsel for the Clinton administration, interpreted this to mean that federal funds could be used to study hESC lines derived from embryos that were not used for reproductive purposes and terminated in the private IVF sector. When G. W. Bush became president, he found himself torn between his religious beliefs that the potential lives of IVF embryos should be protected and the economic benefits of investing in hESCR. When he took office, he interpreted the Dickey-Wicker rider to uphold pro-life values, yet understood that the hESC lines already generated could hold important value for biomedical research. On August 9, 2001, shortly after a National Academy of Sciences public hearing on human cloning, President Bush issued an executive order that attempted to balance these conflicting values by splitting the difference, declaring that federal funds could be used for research on hESC lines derived before August 9, 2001, but not for cell lines created after that date.

² On this point, the reader might wish to check out the website for Affirmation, an organization of LGBT Mormons – <http://www.affirmation.org/>.

During his presidency, Bush held firm to this position, and twice vetoed a bipartisan congressional bill that would have allowed federal funds to be used for the derivation of hESC lines using surplus embryos created for reproductive purposes in the IVF sector (Schrager, 2010). Support for this bill emerged from research studies that investigated whether living cells exist in “dead embryos”, or those that have stopped developing (Gavrilov, 2009). For Bush, and a very vocal pro-life constituency, destroying embryos to create stem cell lines was not something worthy of federal funding. Instead, he supported the adoption of these excess embryos. To highlight this point, children adopted through the Snowflake Adoption Agency were present at the press conference where the President revealed his policy on hESCR (Rosary Films, 2009). His speech relied on the idea of human dignity, arguing that, “these children are not spare parts.”

Not incidentally, this speech highlights the role that language plays in shaping beliefs and arguments. The expression “spare parts” might in turn also evoke the notion of commodification of the body, though some bioethicists have criticized the term “commodification” as ill-defined.³ A similar debate concerning language concerned the phrase “human cloning.” There were those who felt the terminology was a gross misinterpretation of the biotechnology involved in generating hESC lines, while others felt that it was accurate and that to create new language such as “therapeutic cloning” was dangerous as it masked the technological process and contributed to the hype of finding “cures” for diseases and disabilities. (Vogelstein, 2002; O’Mathuna, 2002; Hafer & Lahl, 2009) These sorts of debates were not limited to the U.S. In August of 2000, Britain’s Chief Medical Officer chaired an advisory committee that issued the “The Donaldson Report” that sanctioned the creation of human cloned embryos for research. The publication of the report drew a stinging rebuke from the Council of Europe. Citing the 1998 Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine: Additional Protocol on the Prohibition of Cloning Humans, the Council claimed that, “the UK has now left the European community in terms of moral values”. In 2005, the United Nations (UN) attempted to pass an international ban on all types of human cloning, but opposition from the United States and its allies resulted in the passing of a non-binding declaration to ban human cloning, and the subsequent repositioning by the UN in 2007 to promote a ban on “reproductive human cloning” leaving “therapeutic cloning” up for continued debate (O’Mathuna, 2000).

Conflicts between the demands of different communities did not cease with the arrival of the Obama administration. When President Obama took office he pushed back on this federal funding restriction by issuing an executive order that removed the August 9, 2001 time limit, and thus, increased the number of stem cell lines available for licensing and research in the NIH Human Embryonic Stem Cell Registry (Anonymous, 2009). But being a man of faith, he continued to sign the Dickey-Wicker Appropriations rider, thereby leaving the issue of surplus IVF embryos for research to Congress to deliberate (Barr, 2011; Schrager, 2010). The appointment of Francis Collins as director of the National Institutes of Health drew objections from well-known writer Sam Harris, who argued that Collins’ open embrace of evangelical Christianity should have disqualified him from such an important role in a publically-funded scientific institution. (Harris, 2009). The issue of Collins’ religion was raised as *Sherley v. Sebelius* made its way through the courts. The plaintiffs in this court case were initially “embryos” and adult stem cell researchers who argued that the Obama administration was unjustly appropriating monies for hESCR at the expense of adult stem cell research. During the trial, *The New Yorker* published a feature article titled “The Covenant” that detailed Collins’ career trajectory as well as his conversion from what he now describes as “fundamentalist” atheism to evangelical Christianity. At best, the article is ambivalent about his religious beliefs, and some readers might see more than a hint of mockery in its account of an experience while hiking that proved critical in the process of Collins’ religious transformation. Yet Collins also supports hESCR. As for *Sherley v. Sebelius*, while the case was determined on the basis of legal

³ *EMBO Reports* (Caulfield & Ogbogu, 2012).

precedent pertaining to equity, it can nevertheless be used to understand how personal and social values play a role in science policy (Boyer, 2010; Barr, 2011)

In the U.S., the problem of balancing religious belief, loyalty to a faith community, and professional and public trust is largely shaped by the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, which promises that, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." On the one hand, to insist that citizens participating in public life should put aside all thought of their religious beliefs comes close to denying them religious freedom, allowing them private beliefs only so long as they act like non-believers in the public sphere.⁴ At the same time, citizens who insist that others adhere to the standards of any given religious or cultural system run the risk of establishing a religion. These problems are particularly acute for public officials who hold special powers and responsibilities. And underlying all these issues is an even bigger problem. Anyone interested in understanding potential conflicts between the duties of civic, professional, and religious life needs to define what these terms mean. But "religion" is a particularly difficult term. In its primer on ethics, the Northwest Association for Biomedical Research (NWABR) offers the following definition of religion:

"The service and worship of God or the supernatural, commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance, a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices, a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith."⁵

The NWABR makes explicit that it has derived this definition from an on-line Merriam-Webster dictionary. But a quick comparison with that source shows that the NWABR primer has made some very significant adjustments to that definition.

1a : the state of a [religious](#) <a nun in her 20th year of *religion*>

b (1) : the service and worship of God or the supernatural (2) : commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance

2 : a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices

3: *archaic* : scrupulous conformity : [conscientiousness](#)

4 : a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith⁶

The first thing readers will notice is that the NWABR has omitted the numbering in the Merriam-Webster definition. This is not insignificant. The numbers of a dictionary definition remind readers that the meaning of a word can vary depending on the context and the intentions of the speaker. Not all the possible meanings of the word "religion" will be important every time the word is uttered. As if to prove this point, the NWABR has omitted definitions 1a and 3 from their restatement of the definition of "religion." Apparently the profession of a nun or monk, and "scrupulous conformity" can be of no importance in bioethics.

⁴ To make another connection to the opening of this article, the situation might be compared to the experience of many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who have heard others say, "I don't mind your sexuality, so long as you act 'straight' in public."

⁵ Jeanne Ting Chowning, Paula Fraser, et al, An Ethics Primer: Lesson ideas and ethics background, NWABR, 2007, p. 7.

⁶ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religion> (Accessed August 13, 2013)

The advantage of starting with a dictionary definition is that it is supposed to represent the meanings of a word most familiar to non-specialists. That is also its chief disadvantage. Study and reflection upon any subject – be it biology, philosophy, or religion – is likely to change our understanding of it.⁷ Scholars in the various disciplines that comprise religious studies can offer a number of objections to the sort of definition of “religion” offered by Merriam-Webster and NWABR. For our purposes, the most important one is that these sources understand the word in terms of its supposed content – religion concerns “God” and the “supernatural.” It might be natural for English-speakers to assume that this is the essential quality of religion, since the major religious traditions of Europe emphasize the notion of one or more divine beings, and many (though not all), understand the divine as somehow superior to “nature” (hence “supernatural”). However, as Émile Durkheim pointed out a century ago, there are religious traditions that are indifferent to these concepts, or at the very least define them in ways that would be completely unfamiliar to most English-speakers.⁸ It might seem simpler to say that these traditions are not really religions, were it not that they enjoin the kinds of behavior, avoidances, and disciplines that are usually associated with the religions of Europe.

To extend the word “religion” to describe these other traditions is to move away from a *content*-based definition of the word to one that is *function*-based⁹. Function-based definitions of religion solve a problem that European anthropologists and social-thinkers confronted as they studied the seemingly limitless variety of ritual, belief, injunction, prohibition, and philosophy beyond the confines of their own continent. (The varied responses of non-European thinkers to their encounters with the European notions of “religion” constitute an important topic that exceeds the limited space of this introduction.¹⁰) As Daniel Pals notes in his book, *Eight Theories of Religion*, an important breakthrough came when thinkers like Durkheim moved away from the question, “what is religion?” and asked instead “what does religion *do*?” Durkheim, for example, emphasized the social function of religion. He argued that religion makes society possible by providing groups of people with a common set of symbols and values that allowed them to see themselves as a community capable of collective action.

Functional approaches have the potential to broaden the understanding of religion in surprising ways. This becomes apparent in the definition of religion proposed by the anthropologist Cliff Geertz in his influential essay, “Religion as a Cultural System.”¹¹

⁷ This section of the primer owes a debt to David Pals’ useful introduction to the history and development of religious studies *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 2006.

⁸ “In the first place, there are great religions from which the idea of gods and spirits is absent, or at least, where it plays on a secondary or minor role. This is the case with Buddhism.” (Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Joseph Ward Swain, The Free Press: New York, 1965, p. 45). It would, of course, be interesting to ask practicing Buddhists as to whether or not they agree with Durkheim’s appraisal.

⁹ Pals, pp. 12-15. Note however that I use the notion of “function” here in a way slightly different from that of Pals, who describes Geertz’s approach to religion as “interpretive” as opposed to “functional.”

¹⁰ For a self-confessed limited overview of postcolonial theories of religion, see Pals, pp. 299-300.

¹¹ Clifford Geertz, “Religion As a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 90.

“...a religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

Unlike Merriam-Webster, which singles out “God” and the “supernatural” as the essential content of religion, Geertz describes that content in the broadest terms possible – “conceptions of the general order of existence.” Rather than speaking of “faith,” Geertz talks about “an aura of factuality” and the seemingly “uniquely realistic.” Instead of “ardor,” he speaks of “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations.” As Pals notes, for Geertz religion is not something that needs to be explained, but rather, much like a language, it is something to be learned and interpreted.¹² Pals describes Geertz’s approach to religion “interpretative” rather than “functional” -- that is, it emphasizes the ways in which religion create meaning. While this is an important observation, particularly in religiously plural environments, it still seems useful to emphasize the functionality of Geertz’s definition. Thus Geertz resembles Durkheim in that, for him, religion can never be simply a private matter. It must be learned from and shared with others. Indeed, “religion,” at least in Geertz’ sense of the word, might be necessary for individuals to understand each other.

It’s the breadth of Geertz’s definition that is its most provocative feature. In teaching this essay, both students and colleagues have objected that there seems to be little room in Geertz’s definition for any kind of statement, belief, or practice that will not ultimately be subsumed into “religion.” Geertz does attempt to distinguish “religion” from other cultural systems like “common-sense,” “science,” and “aesthetics.” (Geertz, 111) By common sense, Geertz means “a simple acceptance of the world, its objects, and its processes as being just what they seem to be,” an acceptance coupled with “the pragmatic motive” of shaping them to accommodate our needs, or to shape ourselves to live within the limits they impose.¹³ Opposed to common-sense is “science,” which critiques the unquestioned appearance of things with “deliberate doubt and systematic inquiry.” The “aesthetic attitude,” according to Geertz, dwells upon appearances and sensory impressions without concern for their reality, creating objects that are dissociated “from the solid world of common sense,” and “take on the special sort of eloquence only sheer appearance can achieve.” It might be objected however that these other cultural systems – particularly common-sense and science – seem to formulate “*conceptions of a general order of existence*,” clothing them with “*such an aura of factuality*” that they “*seem uniquely realistic*.” It is also clear that all three engender *powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations*, if only in so far as they privilege and encourage further aesthetic, scientific, and pragmatic endeavors. Thus, there is considerable overlap among the various cultural systems described by Geertz, suggesting that we would do well to avoid simplistic binary oppositions like “religion vs. common-sense,” “religion vs. art/aesthetics,” and especially “religion vs. science.” Religious systems are neither closed nor static, and as we shall see Section III, the same information newly produced by modern science can find its way into a variety of different “religious” opinions on hESCR.

¹² The analogy between religion and language is made explicit in a citation that serves as the preface to “Religion as a Cultural System,” taken from *Reason in Religion* by the philosopher George Santayana: “Any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular.... Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and in another world to live in – whether we expect over to pass wholly over into it or not – is what we mean by having a religion.”

¹³ Though Geertz is careful to note that the world understood by common-sense is not necessarily the “real” world. “The world of everyday life, itself, of course, a cultural product, for it is framed in terms of the symbolic conceptions of ‘stubborn fact’ handed down from generation to generation, is the established scene and given object of our actions.” (Geertz, 111)

It might be useful to turn the problem of defining religion around and ask instead why it is that individuals wish to exclude some symbols, utterances, and activities from "religion." In effect, why do people insist that there is, or should be, a category of beliefs and behaviors that can be called "nonreligious"? This question might be motivated by the self-understanding of the individual who asks it. People who consider themselves "religious" might feel that the definition we have been outlining above reduces religion to a purely cultural phenomenon, something produced by humans alone. It does not address the very real differences they might see between a copy of the Koran, for example, and a graphic novel, or a church, on the one hand, and a theatre on the other. But a function-based definition of religion only addresses observable phenomena. It takes note of the fact that some individuals handle copies of the Koran in a way that is very different from the way they handle copies of graphic novels, or that their behavior in a church differs from that in a theatre. It takes seriously the reasons they give for these differences in behavior. But it offers no comment on the truth-value of these explanations, unless they are also comments about something that can be observed directly. Indeed, to comment on the truth-value of a religious system is to cease being an observer and to become instead an active participant in religious discourse, to move out of the area of religious studies and to engage in theology or philosophy. Many individuals do engage in both kinds of activity, but they need to understand the difference between them.

Some people might also object that Geertz's definition seems to force them to admit participating in religion even if they do not wish to. These people might reject or simply profess no interest in "religion." They might see no important difference between a copy of the Koran and a graphic novel, or a church and a theatre. Further, it might seem to them that there are no distinctions analogous to these in their own life. Ironically, their objections closely resemble those of the "religious" person described above. Both sets of objections are grounded in a *content*-based definition of religion like the one found in the NWABR and Merriam-Webster. Such individuals recognize that canonical scriptures, like the Koran, or places of worship, like a church, have symbolic values and emotional valence for some individuals that they do not hold for them. But even if we exclude things like scriptures and places of worship, the statement "religion exists, but I do not participate in it," makes implicit claims about the order of existence -- "there is/are a thing/s called 'religion/s,' there are people who do not participate in it/them, and I am one of these." These claims are expressed in the symbolic system that we call language. Can the distinction these people make be maintained without engendering *powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations* that lead them to behave in certain ways because they accept these conceptions as *uniquely realistic*? And can any of this exist independent of a cultural context in which they have learned these distinctions and recognize others who share their beliefs? The recognition that there are "religions" defined by their content in which they do not participate almost forces them to engage in a functional religion, even if they do not have a name for the particular system that informs their beliefs and actions.

It seems likely that some readers will not be convinced by this argument and will actively resist it. This resistance is welcomed. If the rest of this essay continues to use the word "religion" as defined by Geertz, it is precisely because of the effects that are produced by coming so close to identifying "religion" as an unavoidable product of "culture." On the one hand, if religion is understood as a cultural phenomenon, it makes it difficult simply to privilege "religious" arguments as divinely inspired truths that trump arguments rooted in other kinds of cultural activity, such as philosophy, political theory, economics, or science. On the other hand, it also becomes difficult simply to label an argument as "religious" and therefore dismiss it as such, since the standards by which that argument are judged and found wanting are also likely to be grounded in a "religion," at least in a Geertzian sense. By challenging common-sense notions of religion, Geertz's definition forces all participants in the discussion to reconsider and to articulate for themselves the historical and cultural forces and resources that shape their beliefs about the use of human embryonic stem cells. If they do not wish to describe their positions as "religion," "culture," or "values," they need be prepared to explain why they find these words objectionable and to respond to others for whom they do not present problems. Ideally, when individuals have a clearer understanding of the grounds of their beliefs, they will be in a better position to

understand and engage with those who do not share them. This is important since the questions posed by human embryonic stem cell research – the moral status of the embryo, obligations and respect for those that live with disability and disease, the just allocation of public resources, and the possibility of legally restricting and even banning such research – all require collective action. And collective action, in the thinking of Durkheim and Geertz, implies something that looks very much like religion.

The articulation of an individual's understanding of her beliefs and practices is at the heart of the "lived religions" approach to the study of religion. This approach stands in contrast to the "comparative religions" approach familiar to many American undergraduates. At its simplest, the "comparative religions" approach sets out to describe religions as discrete systems of belief and practice that can be comprehended and effectively contrasted with each other. The obvious attraction of such an approach is that it seems to offer a relatively easy way of organizing diverse religious perspectives. There are some good studies of religious responses to hESCR that employ the comparative approach,¹⁴ but the authors of such work inevitably admit that the few brief paragraphs they can dedicate to any single point of view will necessarily be inadequate. The first problem is that, by presenting religions as abstract systems of belief and practice, the comparative approach tends to under-represent the diversity that exists in any group of religious believers or practitioners, as seen in the assumptions made about Mormons and homosexuality mentioned above. Function-based definitions of religion, like that of Geertz, might further object that the comparative approach will tend to overlook cultural systems that might not fit the sort of content-based definition offered by Webster's Dictionary, but nevertheless deserve the sort of representation, cultural examination, and potential critique that are given to "recognized" religious traditions.

These problems are particularly important in the American context, in which scholars must deal with the *plurality* of religions – that is the variety of religious *self-understandings* that affords the members of no single religious community or system a commanding majority. Self-understanding is a critical element of the "lived religions" approach to the study of religion. Rather than starting with an abstract system of doctrines, this approach begins at the level of the individual, living in his or her own community, and asks how these individuals conceive and live out their religious identities. One of the most respected of these efforts is the American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS), conducted by researchers at the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSC) at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. For over twenty years, ARIS has attempted to track trends in religion in the United States. It has conducted three surveys in the lower 48 states (1990, 2001, and 2008). As its name suggests, ARIS focuses on individual identity, asking informants the open-ended question, "What is your religion, if any?" Interviewers conducting the survey are careful not to offer suggestions as to the possible answer to that question, and the researchers who compile and analyze the data do not take into consideration what they call "objective standards" of religious identity." In other words, they do not ask whether any individual respondent's claim to belong to a given religion would be recognized by others who claim the same religious identity. Nevertheless, in order to make the sheer variety of responses usable, the researchers at ARIS aggregate them into thirteen main categories, with data on a further eighteen subcategories – a process which they freely admit is "controversial."

¹⁴ A particularly good example of this approach can be found in Leroy Walter's "Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research: An Intercultural Perspective," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 14 (1): 3-38. See also "Religious Perspectives on Embryonic Stem Cell Research," written by Mahtab Jafari, Fanny Elahi, Saba Ozyurt, and Ted Wrigley, in *Fundamentals of the Stem Cell Debate: The Scientific, Religious, Ethical, and Political Issues*, ed. by Kristen Renwick Monroe, Ronald B. Miller, and Jerome S. Tobis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 79-92.

ARIS's religious categories – including those who answer “No Religion” and “Don't Know” to the key question—might provide a useful template for surveying positions on hESCR but more important to students and instructors is their careful attention to the self-understanding of the individual. Any attempt to express or to generalize about a religious position on hESC needs to be balanced with the awareness that we never encounter an entire religion. All we can ever have before us are statements made by one or more individuals in a specific cultural and historical context.¹⁵ There are at least three questions we should ask whenever an individual makes a statement about the moral, ethical, and religious issues surrounding hESCR.

A Heuristic for Reading Religion and Non-Religion in Discussions of hESC

The following three questions constitute a heuristic device. That is, they provide a step-by-step process for analyzing and thinking through the religious and cultural implications of statements made by writers on the topic of hESCR. But they are no less useful when considering the classroom contributions of other students, and even your own contributions to classroom discussion. Remember that others might ask the same questions about your own statements. Being aware of the answers can help you discuss your own opinions with greater clarity and confidence.

1. Who is the intended audience of the statement, and what sorts of religious and/or cultural background do they share? It might seem odd to start the analysis with the audience rather than with the speaker. It might seem even odder in the new media era, where it sometimes feels as if all statements are accessible to “everyone,” or at least should be. In practice, however, audiences are created by affinities of thought and culture, and tend to read and listen to what confirms their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Speakers and writers must adopt strategies and styles of speech suitable for those audiences. The common religious or cultural background of an audience determines what sorts of premises, assumptions, and language the speaker can rely on when addressing them. This does not necessarily mean that the audience needs to be homogenous, that it is composed exclusively of people of the same “religion” -- and by religion in this case, we are using a *content-based* definition similar to one in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. For example, we might not be dealing with an audience that is exclusively Jewish, or Catholic, or Muslim, etc. But even an audience that is religiously-mixed in this sense is likely to share other common traits and beliefs that might serve as a *functional*-religion. Thus, while a U.S. audience might be made up of individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds, including those with “no religion,” it would still share an understanding that the Constitution is the foundational document that establishes and describes the powers and limitations of the branches of government and that the Bill of Rights describes the basic protections of individuals in this country -- even if the members of that audience might disagree about the proper interpretation of these documents. A speaker could then craft arguments with reference to those documents hoping that, even if the audience is not perfectly familiar with the Constitution, they would still respect its authority and take the argument seriously. While the intended audience might be explicitly named, as often as not it can only be inferred from the sorts of premises, assumptions, and arguments made in the statement itself.

2. Does the statement come from someone who claims to speak from within a specific religious or cultural system? If so, is it a system that the audience shares? The speaker's claims might be explicit or they might be implicit in the premises and assumptions that underlie their statements. If the speaker explicitly claims to speak from a specific tradition, it does not necessarily mean that the audience shares that tradition, nor does it necessarily mean that the speaker is trying to persuade the audience to adopt that religion's position on hESCR, assuming that there is only “one” position within the tradition. Instead, the speaker might be

¹⁵ This is true even in the case of canonical texts and official statements of religious communities. A common mistake is to pick up a copy of a key text (for example, the Jewish scripture, the New Testament, or the Koran) and draw conclusions about the religion that honors the text. Persons who do this inevitably adduce their own interpretation of the text, which might be at considerable remove from the way believers understand it.

attempting to find common ground, a set of assumptions that the audience already shares with the speaker's tradition, in order to arrive at a position consistent with the opinions of the audience as well as those of the speaker. That this sort of thing is even possible should remind us that any definition, whether content-based or functional, needs to account for the openness and fluidity of "religion." While it might seem closed and static to outsiders, and even to those who participate in it, a religious system that truly shares nothing in common with those who do not participate in it, or one that simply cannot adapt to changing circumstances, will not exist for any period of time. One thing to be aware of is the tendency of speakers and audiences to find common ground by differentiating themselves from one or more third parties -- the Other. While disagreement and criticism are normal and necessary parts of public deliberation, there is a danger of excluding individuals from full participation in public debate and of misrepresenting their views and activities, particularly if no one from those traditions is present in the audience to challenge inaccurate and prejudicial statements.

3. Would others who claim to participate in the religious or cultural system of the speaker recognize the statements as being consistent with the beliefs and practices of the group? The speaker might claim to have a certain expertise or authority within a religious or cultural system, but this does not mean that their statements are representative of the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of other people who claim to participate within that system. Even religious and cultural communities with highly centralized systems of authority are capable of accommodating a certain amount of internal disagreement and outright dissent on given points of belief and practice. In other words, believers might recognize that a given position is possible within a religious system, even if they do not agree with it. Such internal disagreements might pose a particular challenge for someone who does not share the religious/cultural background of the speaker and has little experience with that particular cultural system. Participants in a common religious or cultural system can rely on a body of shared premises, understandings, and assumptions without fully articulating them. This can be confusing and even alienating to someone without access to that common knowledge. But it is important not to simply dismiss these discussions as irrelevant or arcane. They are often the most revealing aspect of religious systems, which can sometimes be described, half-seriously, as agreements about what things are important enough to argue over. It should also be stressed that it is not your task to decide which view is correct or which one represents the "authentic" position of the religious system -- unless you wish to participate in the religious system. For the purposes of this essay, it is more important to understand that someone who speaks from within a religious or cultural community might not be able to fully represent the views of that community, and that the sort of scientific, technical, and social innovations posed by hESCR prompt deliberation and change within religious systems as well as in pluralistic societies.

Decisions will be made on hESCR, hopefully by an informed and active public, but coming to any decision, we need to have a clearer sense of the issues that our fellow citizens raise. One of the advantages of studying closely the positions of others is that we learn to suspend our own judgment and to give ourselves the opportunity to entertain all the possibilities. It is even possible that we might be persuaded to modify or completely change our way of thinking. At the very least, we can learn the lesson the Prior Walter learns in *Angels in America* -- to rely less on our imaginations and more on what others say and do when trying to understand their inner lives and their public acts.

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