

Religion understood in relation to the human nature

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Abstract

The study of the phenomenon of religion is a field that has many challenges regarding what its object of study is and how to observe and interpret the different religious phenomenon in a way that reflects both its origin and how its practiced. The study is carried out through a philosophical approach. In this essay Lua Nazerian intends to address the four different theoretical perspectives: Critical Religion Theory, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism. The two former ones are well established theoretical frameworks in the study of religion, while the two latter ones are lend from the field of psychology and philosophy to test whether they could be used as analytical tools in the study of religion. Moreover the perspectives different view on the human nature in particular are further examined through the lens of the subcategories: Materialism, Conceptualism and Realism. Furthermore, by adding the two subcategories of 1) a virtuous life 2) transcendence, the essay examines whether the perspectives touches on these topics which seems to be central concepts in the majority of religious doctrine. Finally, some possible conclusions of the perspectives inherent premises impacting the understanding of religion are carefully examined and presented. Suggested further studies to be done cross-disciplines, such as religious studies, positive psychology and philosophy. Also by a combination of descriptive and prescriptive approach within religious studies.

Keywords: Religion, Philosophy, Virtue, Virtuous, Transcendent, Human nature, Platonic Idealism, Socrates, Positive Psychology, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Critical Religion Theory, Realism, Materialism, Conceptualism.

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Introduction

The current form of comparative religious studies, with its broad and undefined definition of religion, has in many ways through sociological and anthropological theories contributed to the observation and generalization of religion as a phenomenon. Arguably some theories in the study of comparative religion, as it is, are generating an ever advancing westernized understanding of the phenomenon, religion. With some current understanding driven from western and Christian origins, there tend to be some challenges in regards to separating religion from cultural connotations (Schilbrack 2014: 86). The question however remains how religion is understood from some underlying assumptions within certain theories in the field and if other postulates can be lent from other disciplines and what consequences it has on the understanding of religion.

Needless to say, in religions such as in politics, sciences and other human endeavors lay a deep complexity of the interplay of multiple variables and dimensions that make up the whole. Naturally as human beings we are part of this magnificent interplay, which also makes it hard, if not impossible, to separate the fish from its water. In order to study and understand a phenomenon's nature and purpose, I argue therefore that we need to aim at its whole by including as many diverse analytical tools as possible.

Perhaps, religion as the object of a study, could be understood by its very complex nature and diverse elements of purpose. One such inevitable element, which is unique to religion is its multidimensional arena that extends from the physical reality of things to the transcendental and abstract realm. In other words, religion, more specifically its followers, cannot simply be understood solely by its fractions but rather by the symbiosis of its immanent and transcendental nature.

The prerequisite for such a study of the phenomena of religion depends undoubtedly on its upholders, so to say, the scholars in the field. The idea that religion could be understood coherently by isolating its separate parts needs perhaps to be rethought. Dissecting this idea is not an easy task at hand and has to be done by first identifying the different underlying assumptions of the human nature which becomes imposed as the norm on some understandings of religion.

Through a philosophical and theoretical method, I intend to discuss and analyze the underlying assumptions of the human nature, which underpin some predominant understandings of religion in the study of comparative religion. This will be carried out through a thorough examination of the *Critical Religion Theory* and *Cognitive Sciences of Religion*. Moreover, two additional perspectives will be lent from the field of psychology and the philosophy on metaphysics: *Positive Psychology* and *Platonic idealism*, respectively.

By analyzing some of these perspective's outcomes on the understanding of the concept of religion, based on the different assumptions of the human nature, it would be of particular interest to examine the underlying postulates in the four perspectives through a comparative analyses and their outcomes if used as tools to understand religion.

My deepest intend is, as a first initiative, to broaden the discourse on the study of religion, so that it includes new postulates that may eventually lead to a paradigm shift. It is a call for a deeper understanding of not only religion itself, but also its followers and our fellow human beings.

As Gavin Flood so profoundly said:

If religion is restricted to an object of science - as implied by the 'science of religion' - then a deeper understanding of it in terms of mystery and invisibility is out of reach. (2012: 16)

Aim and research objective

As previously mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this study will be to uncover and discuss some of the premises in four fundamentally different theoretical perspectives. The two first perspectives are: *Critical Religion Theory* and *Cognitive Sciences of religion* used in the current form of comparative religion as tools to study religion. For an outsider perspective on the field of religious studies, the two latter perspectives are lent from the field of psychology and the philosophy on metaphysics: *Positive psychology* and *Platonic idealism*.

My intent is to hopefully expand the ontological and theoretical way to study the phenomenon of religion, to include one that is perhaps more cohesive to the dual nature of religion, the stated transcendental realm and the physical reality. I argue that it is necessary to do, not solely by a theological point of view but also from the study of religion, if we ought to understand the different starting points of religion instead of just neglecting them or being unaware of their underlying assumptions.

Since the essay will be a philosophical one, the demarcations will be to discuss how religion is understood by examining these four perspectives different take on the human nature. Moreover, this essay could be seen as a further critical deepening on my previous minor essay written similarly on some underlying assumptions within the psychoanalytical, national economic and fundamental theology perspectives/theories at the university of Södertörn.

By addressing the following questions in a chronological order, the first question will act as the guiding framework and thus offer a demarcation for the examination. By the examination of the perspectives different view on the human nature from the analytical subcategories: *Materialism, Conceptualism and Realism*. Moreover, I have added the analytical sub-questions under the first question, of *A Virtuous Life* and *Transcendence*, as to get a more detailed outlook on these two specific dimensions, which I think are philosophical phenomena's that are common across religions. Thereafter, come conclusions will be made on the theoretical perspectives each postulates in regards to how they understanding the concept of religion. The framework is as follows:

1. What, in the context of each theoretical perspective: Critical Religion Theory, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism, is the underlying assumptions in regards to the view on human nature?
 - i. How can a virtuous life be understood from these perspectives?
 - ii. How is transcendence explained from these perspectives?
2. What are some conclusions that could be made, on the basis of these theoretical perspectives (incl. the perspective on human nature), when applied to the concept of religion?

Background

Historical background of the field itself

The prerequisite for any academic study is to consider the fundamental questions of why, how and what. Through these essential questions we can examine the motive of the study, the definition of the object itself and the relevant material to consider (Sharpe 2014: 3).

In order to analyze some of the postulates within and outside of the current forms of religious studies we first need to understand its academic birth. By going back in the history of the study and its theories/perspectives, I ask the following question: When and how did the systematization of these (why, how, what) questions lead to the academic study of religion? A question, I have come to understand, that it is almost impossible to trace the full answer to. As Sharpe (2014: 4) said that the search for the origin of any other phenomena is an impossible task to accomplish. The process of the study of religion must in some way have started even before the academic discipline was formed. The ideas of religious truth, traditions, practices and the metaphysics of the proof of Gods existence are all ideas that can be traced back to ancient philosophy and theology (Sharpe 2014: 5). If not even further back, when the curiosity of the human mind gave rise to simply: Asking questions.

Between 1801 and 1901 was the period for a great intellectual shift in the western world. The fruits of the enlightenment: The Age of Reason had come to the crossroad where reason and the rational was criticized by the romantic movement which had another great impact on psychology, literature, poetry and on the study of religion according to Sharpe (2014: 5). Yet even before that, in the sixteenth century, both religious and non-religious scholars began to study religion because of the big fundamental and unsolved questions concerning the very nature of the phenomenon religion.

Perhaps one of the earliest figures, from the late sixteenth century, with a secular academic approach to questions concerning the difference of religions was the professor and renaissance humanist, Jean Bodin. He suggested that religions ought to be studied as part of everyday life and also should be compared to one another (Strenski 2006: 10-18). These could be seen as some of the first fruits of what is so called comparative study of religion.

Herbert Cherbury, David Hume and Jean Bodin were some of the first to bring religion into the discipline of human knowledge and humanities. That's also when religion could be studied through scientific approaches. One of the first approaches was the art of interpretation of religious documents and scriptures, *the hermeneutic approach*. Another field that arose in the same time was *The Critical Study of the Bible*. (Strenski 2006: 33-35)

If we ought to start the tracing from one later point in history, it would be the first foundational documents written by Friedrich Max Muller in 1873 with the title *Introduction to the science of religion*. In it he explains that the study of religion is "based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important religions of mankind" (1873:32).

Another important point of reference is the religious and political crises that led to the enlightenment, where church and state were separated in the West. At that period the idea of understanding religion and its sacred nature and truth from a philosophical or naturalistic reasoning was considered as blasphemously and inappropriate. This was also the time for the critique of religion that coincided with the critique of the Bible. (Strenski 2006: 33-35)

Some of the classic nineteenth-century figures such as Friedrich Max Muller, Edward Burnett Tylor and James Frazer had built an understanding of religion based on the following assumptions. The first assumption was that religion is not a complex phenomenon but rather a simple thing and could therefore be explained simply too. Hence religion was simple it was therefore rather an easy task to explain what religion was. The third assumption was that religion could be best understood from a chronological historical order and no other questions were as important. (Strenski 2006: 163-164)

As a reaction to the *Evolutionism* approach the early classical theory of *Phenomenology* was born, with its foremost focus on the religious experience itself (the viewpoint of the people) rather than explaining and interpreting what religion is or isn't. The phenomenological approach is strongly linked to Hegel's philosophical work *Phenomenology of spirit* and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. (Strenski 2006: 166-167)

Two other classical perspectives significant to the early study of religion are *The Psychoanalytical perspective* with the famous Sigmund Freud at its heart. His most influential

work is called *The Future of an Illusion* where Freud argues that religion is wishful illusions (Freud 2014: 127-129). The second is Max Weber's famous sociological work on religion which can be found in his work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). In it he lays a new political and sociological theory in regard to social strata and the twentieth century bureaucracy (Weber 2014: 101-102).

Another religious tradition has been to study religion from philosophical perspectives and viewpoints. Just to mention a few early figures within the shared field of theology and philosophy, we have the most known ones: Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. According to Schilbrack the traditional way of the philosophy of religion focuses on the theism and rationality of religion. Its starting point is to ask the question whether a benevolent God exists or not and what kind of consequences its believes/non-believes brings (2014: 3-5).

Previous research

Needless to say, when studying religion, there are many different takes and understanding of what it is, its multifaceted meanings, purpose, structure and diverse expressions. Some scholars like to explain what religion is or isn't while others are not particularly interested in defining religion but to identify and categorize different religious expressions in order to study them. In this chapter I will present two researchers' different underlying assumptions of the concept/category of religion and understanding of theory development in religious studies.

One scholar who has attempted to understand religion from a philosophical point of view is Kevin Schilbrack. In his book *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*, he argues that in the heart of every developed theory lays a philosophy. This is because all human beings thoughts and actions are affected according to some metaphysical presumptions. Which also effects the scholars' way of thinking about knowledge (epistemology and ontology). In his understanding it should be every philosopher's undertaking to understand and bring forward the different assumptions that act as motivation for scholars' way of being and doing. He claims that "In order to study religions, one must at least implicitly have answered certain questions about what one takes to be real and not real, knowable and not knowable, and good and not good." (Schilbrack 2005: 44)

Another previous research regarding the definition and understanding of religion and its effects as a concept/category has been made by the scholar Gavin Flood. In his book, *The Importance of Religion: Meaning and Action in Our Strange World*, he argues that religion ought to be a vague concept so that it has an even broader application for different scholars. He also criticizes the understanding that religion only exist as a western concept and that there would be no religion in for example Africa or Asia. Flood claims that this is a fundamental misinterpretation of what category naming and formation of vagueness in language can look like. (Flood 2012: 14)

Furthermore Flood claims that religion could also be understood not solely as culture but also outside of culture. This he explains in the following words:

But while religions only exist within cultures – within particular social systems, kinship structures, ways of speaking, ways of acting, cultural memories, kinds of art, and so on – it is also arguable that religions show us something about or point to a world outside of culture. There is a reality that human beings encounter which shows itself to us through religion. (Flood 2012: 15)

According to Flood religions are not primarily culture, abstract systems or functions but they are realities that expressed in man's subjectivity, in a community, in the body and simply in the human life (2012: 15). In other words Flood defines the concept of religion as

Religions give us a sense of identity, a path to walk, and a place in the world from where to act. Religions are ways of life, ways of living in the body, which encounter and respond to the raw fact of being, to the human condition, concerned with the formation of transcendent or sublime meanings that offer explanations of, and sometimes solutions to, suffering and death (2012: 15-16).

Methodological and theoretical design

I. Some preconceptions concerning religious studies as a method

Needless to say, the preconceptions for the study of religion are many, I will here mention a few that the religious scholar Hillary P. Rodrigues from the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada presents. One is that it is an academic discipline which seeks to convey collective and observable understanding of religion and differs from the main task of theology's: to deepen one's personal religious believes (Rodrigues 2014: 38- 41). Another premise is that scholars ought to understand religion by the inclusion and exclusion of different assumptions of religion from both an insider and outsider perspective in order to conclude certain aspects of the phenomena of religion. Rodrigues writes:

The construction of religious worldviews often requires the erection of boundaries that exclude as well as include. Thus, examining materials, listening to voices, etc., at the periphery, where demarcations occur between what is inside and what is outside, may reveal much about a religions identity formation, its appeal to would-be-converts, its methods of persuasion, its promises and powers, as well as the permeability of its borders. (2014:40)

However, scholars should be aware of the driving worldviews in the study of religion, by the very nature of sifting, and ought to apply a critical approach towards these orientations in order to advance the study so that some inherent obscurities are made visible. (Rodrigues 2014: 42)

Rodrigues explains the importance of this process as:

It is mandatory that the critical analytic lens be regularly turned to the discipline of religious studies, so that it may itself be better understood. Since all worldviews, including religious and rationally constructed ones, are malleable, dynamic entities, they undergo shifts and changes through time, and across cultures. (2014: 42)

In the same line of thought Rodrigues emphasizes the importance of this critical examination of the tools used in the study of religion, such as its history, interpretation, method and theories, and argue that it is as important as the study of religious phenomena. He uses the analogy of “Just as carpenters must attend to the condition of their tools and not just wooden objects they fabricate, so too we must attend to our disciplinary assumptions, orientations, objectives, and production”. (Rodrigues 2014: 42)

II. Method

Through the careful examination of some preconceptions concerning religious studies, by Rodrigues, such as mentioned above, I intend to zoom in on the sifting process of exclusion and inclusion mainly through the four theories/perspectives and their effect on our understanding of religion and religious motives. Moreover, I will be doing my own “inclusion” of the two perspectives, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism, that I argue could be used in a different manner in the study of religion and that it might therefore broaden our understanding of religion. This is not to state that one theory is better than the other, but rather through gaining an understanding of their outcome one can also conclude the diverse shortcomings and strength. Where religion begins and ends is a highly complex manner, which we tend to comprehend even better by studying its multifaceted elements from diverse perspectives.

Since I will be looking at each perspectives postulates of how they tend to explain the world, and other phenomena such as religion, by their underlying assumptions of the human being as such, the essay will therefore be carried out in a philosophical manner. Moreover, these postulates/premises will be compared to each other and also analyzed through the formulated questions in order to find out the different consequences each premise has on our understanding of religion. Therefore, on one hand the method is philosophical since its interests are the philosophical point of view in the different perspectives and yet it carries some elements of comparative religious methods. At the same time, since I will be analyzing these different perspectives from different disciplines it will mainly have the character of a content analysis method.

In other words, it will not be a philosophical work of religion in the traditional sense. Which Bilimoria defines as a discipline which interests are inward-looking derived from a Judeo-Christian approach on theology, philosophy and natural rationalism (2009: 13). It is rather an intent to understand religion from different point of views and through a critical approach ask some fundamental questions that can only be answered by analyzing the philosophical assumptions of its theoretical perspectives.

Moreover, the fact that the essay will treat such a fundamental and deep layered question regarding the view on human nature, it is also important to mention that my own view on the human nature, whether acknowledged and made conscious or not, will probably affect the way that the material is analyzed and hence its conclusions. Some of our assumptions on the human nature are effects of our upbringing, experiences and backgrounds and other times they are the outcome of inner and conscious reflections. Needless to say, it is a constant and inevitable reality every author is part of whenever approaching research in the field of social sciences and humanities. However, the subject of this essay are the presented arguments, analysis and their validity and should therefore be the main object of critical evaluation.

III. Concepts and categories as analytical tools

I will be using some categories and concepts interchangeably, These will be: Premise(s)/postulates and preconception(s)/assumption(s), Transcendence and the transcendental, underlying, realm and reality.

As to the main analytical tools, that is to say: the theoretical framework and method of the essay, that will be used systematically in the analysis, are the presented categories of: *The human nature*, *A Virtuous Life* and *Transcendence*.

Human Nature

In order to have a systematic and equal view and measurement on the different theoretical perspectives, the analytical concepts of the human nature will therefore be more specified.

In this essay, the human nature, which is defined as “The inherent character or nature of human beings; the sum of traits, characteristics, and predispositions attributed to or associated with human beings.” (Oxford English Dictionary 2022), will be measured by the following selected philosophical analytical subcategories: *Materialism*, *Conceptualism* and *Realism*. The reason for having these three subcategories is that they are well established and used philosophical categories in many fields of studies. They are therefore relevant as categories to understand the human nature and in general used to understand the philosophical concept of universalities (which I will not be doing). These three categories will act as the theoretical framework for the discussion in the analysis and will be applied to the four theoretical perspectives: Critical religion theory, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism, respectively. The definition of each subcategory is presented below and will be used in the analysis with this definition:

Materialism:

“The theory or belief that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications; (more narrowly) the theory or belief that mental phenomena are nothing more than, or are wholly caused by, the operation of material or physical agencies.” (Oxford English Dictionary 2022)

Conceptualism:

“Any of various views on universals and meaning regarded as intermediate between nominalism and realism; *esp.* the theory that universals exist (as opposed to NOMINALISM *n.* 1), but only as concepts or ideas in the mind (as opposed to REALISM *n.* 2).” (Oxford English Dictionary 2022)

Realism:

“The doctrine of the real existence of universals, independently of the mind (opposed to CONCEPTUALISM *n.* 1), and as more than mere names (opposed to NOMINALISM *n.* 2) (now chiefly historical). Also in later use: the attribution of objective existence to a subjective conception.” (Oxford English Dictionary 2022)

A Virtuous Life

The scholar Elaine Graham in her chapter on *The virtuous circle: Religion and the practices of happiness*, makes the point that religious people have a long historical experience with being part of traditions that enables them to think about values (2011: 228). Since the majority of the world religions seems to have some different moral frameworks in common which calls upon the individual and the collective to live a moral or virtuous life, I will be using a virtuous life as an analytical tool in my analysis since it seems to be a philosophical commonality between religions. This is an attempt to try to analyze religion from a philosophical concept that seems to be true to religions and hopefully to its followers. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the different virtues and the hierarchy or priority of what ought to be a moral and virtuous life varies within each religion. But the question of morality and a virtuous life seems to be constant and a very central question of religious endeavors. To this very background, the category of a virtuous life will therefore not be defined in any further detailed way, so that it does not lose its ontological purpose in the essay.

Transcendence

Furthermore, to add a vertical dimension, as an attempt to understand religion as it presents itself, I will be analyzing the concept of transcendence and how it's understood by the perspectives in this essay. Religion and politics as phenomena's are very similar yet different, hence the different terms they have. Perhaps a similarity would be that they both have a belief system that generates values. One big difference, could be seen as: religions attributing its different value systems to a higher power, a transcendent being (a God), or something that is transcendent from human beings in a way, while politics gives ideologies to believe in that are not necessarily related to or motivated by a higher power. Since religion touches upon the aspect of transcendence, and with the given definition of the word above, it is therefore important to have it as an analyzing tool. As well as the category of A Virtuous Life is not defined more in detail, the same method applies to the category of Transcendence so that it doesn't lose its intended purpose as a general analytical category that could be applied to the majority of world religions.

Material

The predominant material of this essay will consist of the theoretical presentation and discussion of the following perspectives: Critical religion theory, Cognitive Sciences of religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism.

Due to the demarcations of the essay, the presentations of the theoretical perspectives and the selected materials from the respective authors, will only act as a first attempt to conclusions that cannot be generally applied since the different perspectives have a wider diversity, that is not presented in the essay, of different ways of understanding religion. The conclusions should be seen as one way of interpreting the theoretical perspectives and should therefore not be applied nor understood outside of its given context.

A few words has to be said in regards to the selection of the respective theoretical perspectives as the essays main material. I intend to pick four very different theoretical perspectives for the comparison on the different understandings of religion. This is so that the discussion can become fruitful and diverse.

The first perspective is Critical Religion Theory, because it is one of the predominant theories that is used frequently in the field of religion with its unique critical stand on the westernized descriptions of religion and on the power struggle perspective in the shaping of religion. CRT is therefore highly relevant to the field and has a different theoretical narrative than the other three perspectives. This theoretical perspective will be presented in the essay mainly through its founder, Timothy Fitzgerald, whom has developed CRT. The motivation for that is to better understand CRT from a primary source. Moreover, I will be using the CRT foundations website to gain a better understanding of it.

The second perspective I picket is Cognitive Sciences of Religion which is one of the more popular theories used to understand religion and is therefore relevant. It has a wide academic arena and treats the question of religion from a neurological perspective and is particularly interested in the mind and its attributes. Since CSR is developed later on from Cognitive Sciences, it is therefore broad and would be better understood if presented from different

angels. Therefore I have picked the three well established scholars within the field: Egil Asprem, Justin L Barrett and Armin W Geertz to represent the CSR.

The third theoretical perspective, Positive Psychology, is a relative young field that treats the question of virtues and human flourishing in psychology from a non-pathological perspective. More recently it also has dealt with religion and its outcomes on the striving for a virtuous life. It would therefore be relevant and interesting to analyze how positive psychology understands religion from its postulates and whether it could be a relevant theory to be included in the study of religion. Naturally the representatives for positive psychology in this essay will be mainly papers written by its founder Martin Seligman together with the other prominent scholars Csikszentmihalyi M and Peterson C. Moreover, Watts, Dutton and Gulliford paper on the *Human spiritual qualities: Integrating psychology and religion*, will represent research done on religion and positive psychology. This paper is especially important in this essay for the analyses of the relevance of positive psychology as a possible theory in the field of religious studies.

The fourth theoretical perspective is rather a selection from the ancient philosopher Plato's writings that treat the question of idealism and is presented here as the Platonic idealism. The selection here is limited to two platonic/Socratic ideas one is The Form of the Good and the other is The Allegory of the Cave. This perspective is, like positive psychology, one that is not currently used in the field of religious studies. To use some of Plato's metaphysical ideas is to use a philosophical different postulate (in this case idealism) from the other perspectives. Idealism is something that seems to be recurring in religious themes and could therefore be relevant to apply to the field of religious studies. Platonic idealism was for a while regarded, and still is, as less relevant, but has now come to be highly debatable and controversial also across academic fields as well as in natural sciences such as in physics. I will be presenting the Platonic idealism mainly through the original author Plato and his famous work on *Timaeus* and *The republic*. Moreover, I will be adding Thanassis Gkatzaras paper to act as a commentary on The Form of the Good in Plato's *Timaeus*. In this case I picked Gkatzaras paper because I could not find any other relevant papers on the subject.

In the presentation and discussion I will use both primary and secondary sources from different previous academic and philosophical work. Because of the nature of this essay, demarcation will be made to a few sources for each perspective in order to insure the studies

meaningful outcome. The following table shows what material I will be using for each perspective:

	Author/Authors	Title
Critical Religion Theory	Fitzgerald, Timothy	A critique of "religion" as a cross-cultural category. Religion and politics in international relations: the modern myth.
	Kannan, Rajalakshmi Nadadur	What is critical religion?
Cognitive Sciences of Religion	Asprem, Egil	Kognitionsvetenskapliga perspektiv. In: Asprem, Egil & Sundqvist, Olof.
	Barrett, Justin L.	Why Would Anyone Believe in God? Cognitive Science of Religion: Looking Back, Looking Forward. Cognitive Science of Religion: What Is It and Why Is It?. The study of religion: a reader.
	Geertz, Armin W.	Cognitive Science. In: M, Stausberg., S, Engler. Brain, Body and culture: A Biocultural Theory of Religion.
Positive psychology	Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M.	Positive psychology: An introduction.
	Seligman, M. E. P., & Peterson, C	Positive clinical psychology.
	Watts, F., Dutton, K., & Gulliford, L.	Human spiritual qualities: Integrating psychology and religion.
Platonic idealism	Gkatzaras, T	The Form of the Good in Plato's Timaeus.
	Harding, John S. and Rodrigues, Hillary P	Allegory of the Cave. The study of religion: a reader.
	Plato	Timaeus. The republic.

Theoretical perspectives

Critical Religion Theory (CRT)

One critical school of thought that is used in the study of religion is *The Critical Religion Theory*, with one of its most known figures, Timothy Fitzgerald, who is the founder of The Critical Religion Association. According to the associations formulation of the CRT, there are two major claims. The first one is a critical point of view of the use of the category of religion itself. That by accepting that religion is a phenomenon one also implies that religion can be applied to all contexts equally and is therefore some kind of common knowledge. That since it's hard to determine when religion begins and ends, religion as a scientific category, is therefore of little avail and have no meaning isolated from other contextual categories such as politics and culture. (Kannan 2016-09-17)

The second claim is that they regard their perspective, unlike some other suspicious attitudes towards religion, to be a positive critical viewpoint. In other words CRT tends to search for a wider meaning, re-conceptualization and interpretation of religion that is not driven from a westernized understanding. (Kannan 2016-09-17)

In Fitzgerald's book *Religion and Politics in International Relations The Modern Myth*, he argues that religion is more of an abstract category and to claim that this abstract category has been observed, described and explained universally has been a problematic understanding of religion. (Fitzgerald 2011: 2-4)

In another article Fitzgerald also criticizes the study of religion to be a cross-cultural study of categories rather than the study of religion itself. According to him religion is studied as a cross-cultural category and religion as an analytical tool is a meaningless endeavor, which he explains as follows:

In other words, when we talk about "religion" in a non-theological way, we are fundamentally talking about culture in the sense of institutions imbued with symbolic meaning through collective recognition. Further, I suggest that the

proposal made by some writers that religion, while part of culture, is a distinct sub-category of culture, fails in that case, I argue that the word “religion”, with its theological and supernaturalist resonances, is analytically redundant. It picks out nothing distinctive and it clarifies nothing. It merely distorts the field. (1997: 93)

Fitzgerald also tends to think of the category of religion to be problematic because its connections to Christian theology and a westernized understanding, simply because a definition is embedded with meanings of power. He argues that what we call the study of religion is in fact the study of culture and since it is the study of culture then religion as an analytical tool should not exist. The attempt to study religion as culture does not seem to solve the problem, however the study of culture seem to be less problematic than the non-critical study of religion, since he means that religion is studied from an imperialistic view with claims about other cultures instead of actually having a dialogue with those who practice the religion (Fitzgerald 1997: 95). Therefore Fitzgerald’s argument is:

My argument is that the study of cultures as institutionalized values and their relation to power, including the institutionalized values of our own academic praxis, is more likely to be sensitive to our mystifying objectification of our own and of other cultures than the present uncritical tradition of comparative religion. (1997: 96)

By that Fitzgerald proposes that the study of religion should instead be the study of culture and not religion. Culture analyzed as institutionalized values such as everyday rituals and the symbolic systems, a relationship between value and power. (Fitzgerald 1997: 98).

Cognitive Sciences of Religion (CSR)

As many other theories or perspectives, *Cognitive Sciences* began at first as a reaction to the famous twentieth century American psychology, *Behaviorism*. Some of the central elements that distinguished cognitive sciences was: The focus on analyzing the mental and its representation as its own separate category and the important tools in analyzing this, which was the computers as simulations of thoughts. It is an interdisciplinary field with phenomena such as culture, context and history and originated from a method of interdisciplinary studies. Within the religious studies of that time, which was also influenced by history, sociology, anthropology of religion and philosophy of religion, Cognitive Sciences became relevant on the field of religion and got its name, *Cognitive Sciences of Religion (CSR)*. (Geertz 2016: 97)

One of its fundamental claims is that the production of culture is not only a social phenomenon but is rather an interplay between heritage and the social environment. One example of this is how behaviorism claimed that language learning was an effect of reward and punishment of behaviors. However, the linguist Noam Chomsky looked more at the biological inherent skills for learning a language but also on the different environmental factors which the child was exposed to for learning a language. (Asprem 2021: 121-122)

It's also important to mention the fundamental contradiction between *Social Constructivism* and Cognitive Sciences. Whereas Social Constructivism sees human behaviors, beliefs, and values as formed by social constructions such as culture, language and socialization. Asprem argues that this kind of assumptions, which are similar to the behaviorisms, could be likened to that which the human consciences is like a clean slate (*Tabula Rasa*). Whereas, Cognitive Sciences makes the contrary assumption that the human being is born with certain mental structures and prerequisites that form and defines the limitations for socialization to happen. Which means that human beings don't have the capacity to learn everything but somethings. (Asprem 2021: 123)

But what, then, is cognition and how is it connected to the body and brain? Beside mental representation, we can understand the human cognition by its sense-dependency and bodily motivations. As Geertz explains it "in other words, the mind consists of an emotional brain intertwined in a web of neural networks that allows intelligent and experiential interaction

with the world around us” (2016: 99). Even the neuropsychologists Chris Frith and Moshe Bar have been able to show the predictable patterns of the brain and how the brain constantly is filled with imaginations with what ought to happen in the next instant. Based on these thoughts, Geertz argues that Cognitive Sciences could be seen as a biocultural approach to the study of religion. So that religion is partly embraind and embodied but also extended from that and is encultured (Geertz 2010: 304).

According to Geertz, all the founders of CSR agree on the fact that religious behavior and culture are merely a by-product of some more important processes. CSR appears to be a field which invites scholars to find different explanations of the religious phenomena. Scholars in this field are not particularly interested in defining religion or to study it from a holistic perspective, they rather focus on understanding the human patterns in behavior or thoughts and tend to explain those that appear to have a religious connotation. Even though CSR does not claim to be able to explain every religious phenomenon. One such explanation is the theoretical definition of a God, provided that God’s existence is believed in, it then acts as a source of motivation for religious actions. (Barret 2014: 319-320)

With the help of Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD) CSR has been focused on detecting and explaining the belief in a counterintuitive agent (a God). But also to understand why somethings appear to us as normality in one instance and in another instance it is experienced as a ghost, God or spiritual experience. However, some issues arise with the use of HADD, whereas people who don’t believe in a God but are familiar with a concept of a God may be detected as having a HADD experience. (Barret 2014: 323)

Nevertheless there are many scholars within the field of CSR that tend to land in different conclusions within the same scientific discipline. Often by explaining religion and a belief in a God as deriving from the mind or by solely explaining it as biocultural and cognitive effects that exists within the mind only. One scholar who would fit with the description of the first group is Justin L. Barrett. He explains his view in the following order:

That belief in God is an almost inevitable consequence of the kind of minds we have. Most of what we believe comes from mental tools working below our conscious awareness. And what we believe consciously is in large part driven by the unconscious beliefs. (Barrett 2004: back cover)

He also explains how the field of CSR is focused on the cognitive structure of the human minds:

Primarily, CSR draws upon the cognitive sciences to explain how pan-cultural features of human minds, interacting with their natural and social environments, inform and constrain religious thought and action. For instance, how might belief in superhuman intentional beings (gods) be explained in terms of underlying cognitive structures? (Barrett 2011: 230)

Positive Psychology

One might wonder what positive psychology is and under what presumptions its model rests on. But also its origin and connections to the field of psychology at large. According to the founders of Positive Psychology, Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the field of psychology at large has foremostly been focused on the healing from trauma after the World War II (2000: 5). However, positive psychology wants to look at the flourishing aspects of the human qualities. Put in their own words as:

This almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the fulfilled individual and the thriving community. The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities. (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 5)

Another definition of positive psychology that they offer is formulated as follows:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 5)

Some of the main thoughts that the authors emphasize as the role of psychology is that it should be concerned with 1) documenting those families that succeed in raising up children who flourish, 2) finding and analyzing the different work models/settings that supports the development and satisfaction among the workers, 3) look into the different policies that result

in strong civic engagement and last 4) “how people’s lives can be worth living”. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 5)

Nevertheless, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi don’t claim to be the first to have molded the different elements of positive psychology. They say:

We well recognize that positive psychology is not a new idea. It has many distinguished ancestors, and we make no claim of originality. However, these ancestors somehow failed to attract a cumulative, empirical body of research to ground their ideas (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 13)

One fundamental element to positive psychology is its positive prescriptive nature. It tends to land in conclusions of what ought to be seen as good and to strive for, instead of being solely descriptive. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi wrote “Alternatively, positive psychology might become a prescriptive discipline like clinical psychology, in which the paths out of depression, for example, are not only described, but also held to be desirable.” (2000: 12)

Since the very foundation of positive psychology is the focus on character strength rather than pathology, its stepping stones are therefore the strength of virtues. Seligman and Chris Peterson (2003) have made categories of some virtues and their strength element as a way to think of them and understand positive psychology better. See the following table:

List of Virtues and Strengths

(From Seligman & Peterson, 2003)

<i>VIRTUES</i>	<i>STRENGTHS</i>
<i>Wisdom and Knowledge</i>	Curiosity, interest Love of learning Judgment Practical intelligence, creativity Perspective
<i>Courage</i>	Valor Industry, perseverance Integrity, honesty Zest, enthusiasm
<i>Love</i>	Intimacy, attachment Kindness, generosity Social/emotional intelligences
<i>Justice</i>	Duty, loyalty, citizenship Fairness, equity Leadership
<i>Temperance</i>	Forgiveness, mercy Modesty, humility Prudence Self-control
<i>Transcendence</i>	Awe, wonder, appreciation of beauty Gratitude Hope, optimism Playfulness, humor Spirituality, sense of purpose, religiousness

There have been some studies made on the relation between positive psychology and religion since they intersect with one another. Watts, Dutton, and Gulliford (2006) claim that positive psychology can act as a bridge between religion and psychology. They suggest that positive psychology could be added to the diversity of the different approaches within religion instead of replacing any other approaches. They mean that “The discarding of religious thinking about emotion was premature and led to a simplistic approach from which it took a long time to recover.” (2006: 277-278)

Furthermore, Watts, Dutton, and Gulliford look at the similarities and differences of the understanding within psychology and religion of: forgiveness, gratitude and hope. They give the following example from looking into forgiveness:

There is an interesting divergence between psychological and religious perspectives concerning where and how forgiveness is initiated. Therapeutic forgiveness assumes that forgiveness originates with the victim, whereas religious thinking often assumes that forgiveness originates with God, and that victims who forgive are participating in something bigger than themselves. (Watts, Dutton, and Gulliford 2006: 282)

Platonic Idealism

One of the most influential Greek philosophers that had an impact on many eras throughout history, who lived around (429-347? BCE) in Athens, is known by the name Plato. He is known to be Socrates student and the teacher of another influential philosopher, Aristoteles. Plato had started a school of learning, near Athens, called Academy, where he would teach his philosophical ideas. His work was often presented in a form of philosophical dialogues between his teacher Socrates and other people. (Harding and Rodrigues 2014: 47)

As mentioned above Plato has written many volumes on different subjects which makes it hard to draw the line on which subjects that are included in Platonism and what isn't. Nevertheless I will be presenting, for the sake of answering some of the essays questions, some of Plato's general idealism, the idea of the Form of the Good and the Allegory of the Cave.

The Form of the Good

One of the most fundamental philosophical topics/problems that Plato discusses both in the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*, is the claim that the Demiurge (God) who has created the world is in essence good. Hence, the concept of the Form of the Good is repeated in many of his work and according to Thanassis Gkatzaras it should be considered as a first principle of Plato's cosmology. (2018: 71)

Plato's definition of Demiurge is as follows:

Now, let us state the reason why becoming and this universe were framed by him who framed them. He was good, and what is good never has any particle of envy in it whatsoever; and being without envy he wished all things to be as like himself as possible. This indeed is the most proper principle of becoming and the cosmos and as it comes from wise men one would be absolutely right to accept it. (Tim. 29d7-30a2)

This definition has been discussed among the antique philosophers, Thrasyllus and Gnostics, and the Neo-Platonists, whether the Demiurge is the same as the Form of the Good or if they should be separated from one another. As Gkatzaras wrote:

However, there has been a debate whether this ‘most proper principle’ should be identified with the Form of the Good and so it should be considered as something separate from the Demiurge, or it should be taken as an inseparable attribute of the Demiurge. (2018: 72)

Plato argues furthermore through a relation between cause and effect of Demiurge and the form of the good:

If the world here is beautiful and its maker good, clearly he had his eye on the eternal; if the alternative (which it is blasphemy even to mention) is true, then on something that has come into being. Clearly he had his eye on the eternal: for the world is the fairest of all things that we have come into being and he is the best of causes. (Tim. 28c5-29a6)

Gkatzaras analysis of Plato’s argument is as following:

This means not only if something is the best cause, then its effect is the most beautiful, but also if something is the most beautiful effect, then its cause is the best. (2018: 74)

The Allegory of the Cave

The famous *Allegory of the Cave* is a Platonic/Socratic dialogue in *The Republic book VII 514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7*, in which Socrates in a dialogue with Plato’s brother, Glaucon, discusses the importance of just leaders and societies.

In the opening of this dialogue Socrates makes the following allegory:

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: - Behold! Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets. (Plato 2012: 250)

The fire which is behind and above the prisoners in the cave casts its glow towards them in the cave, which gives them some light. On the wall in front of them, and thanks to the fire, they can see images like a marionette play. This allows the prisoners to see only the shadow of the images/object itself (Plato 2012: 250). The next step in this allegory is the prisoners' liberation which Socrates explains as:

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, not that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, - what will be his reply? (Plato 2012: 251).

In this process the prisoner realizes the lack of insight to the true reality of things and once he has done that by walking out of the cave, getting over his pain and blindness by the light and examining the reality of daylight, he now has to return to the cave (as his duty) to argue and convince the other prisoners of the true reality of things and that they are only seeing the illusion of what is outside of the cave. (Plato 2012: 251-257)

Socrates final conclusion is:

But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who could act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

(Plato 2012: 253)

Analyses

Some underlying assumptions in regards to the view on human nature

By presenting the four different theoretical perspectives (Post-colonial perspectives, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism) in the previous chapters, one can start to make an attempt to analyze how religion could be understood via the lens of these perspectives. This is a vital process if we ought to understand how religion is understood differently depending on the theoretical framework its analyzed by. In this chapter, the theoretical perspectives will be summarized and analyzed through the lens of the first question of this essay which is: What, in the context of each theoretical perspective: Critical Religion Theory, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism, is the underlying assumptions in regards to the view on human nature?

Moreover, as mentioned in the chapter of *Methodological and theoretical design*, the three subcategories of, *Materialism, Conceptualism and Realism*, will then be applied as the theoretical framework for the discussion in this chapter and will be applied to the four theoretical perspectives: Critical religion theory, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism, respectively.

Critical Religion Theory (CRT)

Needless to say, the Critical Religion Theory is one that is well established in the study of religion and often used as a theoretical starting point in which one analyzes religion and other religious motivated phenomena. It is known to have a critical stand on approaches such as the westernization of religion and its Christian understanding as previously presented in the material by Kannan (2016-09-17). Kannan (2016-09-17) also writes that CRT wants to re-conceptualize the understanding of religion so that it is not driven from a westernized understanding. Fitzgerald (2011) makes the claim that religion is an abstract category and that it is problematic to claim that this abstraction has been observed, explained and described

universally as an object of study. Moreover he claims that religion is studied more as a cross-cultural category rather than the phenomena of religion itself and therefore the study of religion doesn't contribute with anything that distinguish religion from culture (Fitzgerald 1997). Therefore religion cannot be used as a scientific category and it has no distinct meaning from other categories such as politics and culture (Kannan).

In a way by stating that religion is an abstract category that cannot be universally applied to the study of religions, could be seen as a conceptualist view on the human nature. Because if religion only exists in the abstract realities of things then it is only a concept that exists in the mind- which is the very definition of conceptualism. However if religion was just misunderstood by the western approach and should therefore be reconceptualized such as Kannan writes, then it would have the possibility of stating that religion does exist in the world out there, so in a way religion is not understood as a materialistic notion, but rather as a category that is perceived (in this case argued as westernized) but exists a priori in the real world. In other words, it is then more in accordance with realism; that objects are perceived but also have a real existence. Based on the presented material, as mentioned above, some aspects, on the human nature are on one hand more likely to be in line with conceptualism, and on the other hand have tendencies similar to the underlying premise of realism.

Cognitive Sciences of Religion (CSR)

The cognitive sciences of religion (CSR), as discussed in previous chapters, focuses on how the mental presents its self, this is done through computers and simulations (HADD), of the mind (Geertz 2016). It also puts great emphases on the interdisciplinary aspects such as the interplay between culture, history and other contexts. Geertz (2010) also discusses the predictable patterns found in the brain and how the brain is mainly filled with imaginations that predict what ought to happen next. CSR makes the claim that culture is not solely a social phenomenon, rather it is heritage and social environment interwoven. Moreover, Asprem (2021) discusses that the human being is not born as a Tabula Rasa, but rather with mental structures, prerequisites and limitations. According to Barret (2014) the founders of CSR seem to share the idea that religious behavior is a by-product of a more important process connected to human patterns in the mind.

Interestingly enough the Cognitive Sciences of Religion seem to understand the human nature, one could say, through the use of material resources such as the HADD, to study the mental processes and draw some conclusions to the religious behavior. In a way the manifestation of these patterns in the brain that are filled with imaginations, could be seen as prerequisites for what conceptualism stands for, which is concepts or ideas existing solely in the mind. So human nature, in this case, would be explained as mental patterns and processes in the mind. However, CSR doesn't seem to state that ideas in the mind are true only to the subject itself and not as an objective reality. Moreover, it tends to see the human potentialities as mental processes which in a way is beyond the mere description of materialism, since mental reality is not matter. Nevertheless, CSR rejects the idea that human beings are born as tabula rasa and offers the idea that we are born with mental structures, prerequisites and limitations. In that light, it rejects conceptualist conclusions by saying that the human being is not solely constructed by ideas such as culture, and perhaps the potentialities and limitations of the mind are objective realities that exist as biological realities that are beyond the ideas in the mind. The mind is seen as consisting of emotional brain that makes it possible for an experiential interaction with the world outside (Geertz 2016). Since the brain is, by its very nature, filled with constant imaginations of what ought to happen next, it makes its own conclusions of what it experiences even before the experience takes place.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology, according to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), is less interested in pathology and healing from trauma, and focuses more on finding different patterns and virtues that can contribute to a thriving community or flourishing individual qualities. Instead of only repairing and healing it also tends to look at building different positive traits both on an individual and collective level by the strengthening of virtues. Some of the valued virtues are experienced well-being, contentment, forgiveness, hope, spirituality and wisdom among others (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Furthermore Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) stated that positive psychology could be seen as a prescriptive field and less descriptive of reality.

Unlike other psychological branches, positive psychology does not only see the world as pathology which individuals need to heal from, it rather puts emphasis on the positive traits which are possible to be achieved both individually and collectively. These positive traits are the strengthening of virtues such as Seligman & Peterson (2003) presented in the list of virtues and strengths. Some of which are wisdom, knowledge, courage, love and justice (2003). Thus, it does not have a materialistic nor a conceptualistic narrative on the human nature, but instead regards the human being as filled with potentialities of some kind of abstract (psychological) but yet practical growth and strength. In a way, the existence of the virtues could be theoretically only as ideas in the mind, such as conceptualism, however positive psychology seems to be concerned with the manifestation of these abstract concepts (virtues) in the form of patterns of strengthening behaviors. Hence it is more likely to be in coherence with the narrative of realism, which is that objects (in this case virtues) that can be perceived (seen manifested in other people or nature) has also a real existence beyond solely ideas in the mind. In other words, one can think about justice as a concept/idea, but also see its manifestation in the world in the form of a person or institution being just.

Platonic Idealism

As stated earlier, Plato has written many volumes on diverse philosophical and political subjects but for the sake of answering the essays questions, we will be focusing on two concepts: the form of the good and the allegory of the Cave. Plato's idea of the form of the good is understood in many different ways. According to Gkatzara's (2018) analysis, it should be considered as a first principle of Plato's cosmology. Plato's idea in the *Timaeus* (1929) is that Demiurge (God) has created the world and his essence is good. If he is good then he is the best of causes and human beings are therefore wished to be like him. Gkatzaras (2018) understanding of Plato's above arguments is that if the cause is the best then the effect also is the most beautiful and vice versa, that if the effect is the most beautiful then its cause is the best.

The presented arguments doesn't seem to apply to any questions of materialistic existence nor treats any questions on the level of matter. However, it seems to make the argument that the abstract/idealistic idea of the Demiurge (God), whom is in essence good, is also manifested in the real world in the form of human beings whom reflect the goodness of the Demiurge. The

cause seems to be reflected in the effect. In other words, the Demiurge has an a priori/ objective existence that is perceived in the subjective conception, the human being. But also, the human beings are an objective reality (the effect) of the its best cause (God). In that light, the human nature is explained from the narrative of realism and less so of conceptualism or materialism. If there was only the idea of the Demiurge without the connection to human beings, so if there was a cause without effect, then perhaps it would sound like a saga of conceptualism where concepts of ideas would exist only in the mind.

The concept of a virtuous life and transcendence

By identifying the two subcategories, *A Virtuous Life* and *Transcendence*, as helpful analytical tools for the systematic understanding of religion, both horizontally and vertically, I will analyze whether or not and how the four theoretical perspectives take these in consideration.

In this light, in order to understand these aspects of religion, I will be analyzing in which degree these subcategories are considered in the theoretical perspectives. First, by looking at a virtuous life and then analyzing the concept of transcendence. I will here be answering the essays following questions: How can a virtuous life be understood from these theoretical perspectives? How is transcendence explained from these theoretical perspectives?

The presented material in the essay on Critical Religion theory, doesn't necessary consider a virtuous life as a concept as a fundamental part of religions, nor does it suggest what could be seen as virtuous. However, it tell us what is undesired, such as the westernized understanding of religion imbedded in the very concept itself (Kannan 2016). Moreover, it does not seem to analyze nor comment on the transcendence aspect, mainly because CRT is not concerned with finding commonalities between religions, so perhaps it would reject the idea of some kind of universal application (Fitzgerald 2011) of any concept on all religions equally.

The cognitive science of religion isn't particularly interested in the systematic process of a moral framework. It seems to be more keen to analyze the interplay of the biocultural factors in the study of religion and their impact on the mind (Geertz 2010). Perhaps, studies could be made on the brain to understand the physiological connections made when virtues are practiced consciously and overtime to see if there are any effects on the brain and the mind and whether it is a positive or negative impact. Furthermore, when reading what Barrett (2004) writes we come to the conclusion that believing in a God is a natural consequence of the kind of minds human beings have and he explains belief in a God as part of humans' cognitive structures. Therefor Barret seems to touch on the subject of transcendence by stating that the human minds wonder naturally to that dimension of imagination as part of our ideas.

Positive psychology seems to be highly concerned with the question of strengthening individual's virtues and to analyze their virtuous life in order to make conclusions of patterns that can help the spiritual and virtuous growth of societies and individuals. Seligman's & Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) take on positive psychology is strongly connected to the positive individual traits of human beings and communities. Based on the material in this essay, there is no organization of the virtues in a specific hierarchy, but focuses more on labeling the virtues and then sub-labeling the different elements of strength to these virtues. In a way, positive psychology is taking on a similar task as religion and some philosophies, that is to present a moral framework with the purpose to empower individuals and communities to the strengthening of virtuous patterns. When it comes to the transcendence aspect, in the list of virtues and strengths presented by Seligman and Peterson (2003), transcendence is categorized as a virtue and its strength to be categorized as: Awe, wonder, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, optimism, playfulness, humor, spirituality, sense of purpose and religiousness. Moreover, one interpretation could be that the striving after strengthening ones virtues itself, is in a way transcendent, if virtues ought to be understood as a universal phenomenon and that all human beings have the capacity to have virtue and therefore be virtuous beings.

When it comes to the presented parts of platonic idealism, it could be seen as it is proposing the idea of a life that is less fulfilling to live (in the cave) and that one has to ascend from it in order to get a more truer understanding of life. It presents the idea of truth of a thing or the illusions of it. Of course, by indicating that the truth is better. This is seen in the allegory of the cave when Socrates attributes the individuals in the cave to be prisoners that have to liberate themselves from the illusions of the cave (Plato 2012). Perhaps the allegory of the cave is similar to how religion is concerned with the virtuous character of individuals. Both the allegory of the cave and the form of the good treats the aspect of transcendence. Plato (1929) states in *Timaeus*, on the form of the good, that the cause (God) and its effect (human beings) are good in nature even though the former is transcendent from the latter.

Some conclusions applied to the understanding of the concept of religion

In philosophy and physics there is the belief that: Every cause has its effect no matter what the effect is, it still exists. In the same way, perhaps every theory and perspective has its effect on the way we interpret, think and act. As it is important to generate new knowledge and research, it is nevertheless as important to sometimes pause, question and reflect on the underlying assumptions on the human nature that we are generating. This is applicable in all fields of studies, not the least in the study of religion. Ultimately, the consequences or effects of scientific research could perhaps, lead to an elevated understanding of our societies and to find different ways to answer its diverse and urgent needs. As environmental sciences put forward warnings and solutions, the study of religion, could perhaps, also be part of suggesting different solutions to some of the problematization that is connected to religion or to improving the general human wellbeing. It is perhaps not enough to solely observe and problematize different phenomena's within religion, but the study of religion also has the potential to generate different suggestions on solutions. In this chapter I will be answering the second question of the essay: What are some conclusions that could be made, on the basis of the four presented theoretical perspectives (incl. the perspective on human nature), when applied to the concept of religion?

Fitzgerald (2011) lands into the conclusion that religion is an abstract category that cannot be universally applied to the study of religions, and as earlier stated, that this could be seen as a conceptualist view on the human nature. Then, if the idea of religion only exists in the mind similar to constructivism, then religion is more or less a product of the mind, existing only as an abstract reality. One problem with this understanding of religion would be how to explain the different elements that are manifested in the physical world that is seen as religion. Also religions often claim that they have a divine origin which makes it not a social construct but more of an ascending command, CRT seems to have the opposite understanding of this. Moreover, Fitzgerald (1997) argues that the study of religion is in fact a study of systematized values which is culture and that religion as a supernaturalistic phenomenon is meaningless. As religion is misunderstood and would need to be reconceptualized (Kannan 2016) then religion appear to realism and have an existence in the world, but the critique seems to be to the westernized understanding of religion. There seems to be some kind of paradox in the two scholars arguments and it is therefore hard to land in any cohesive conclusion.

As to CSR, understanding the belief in God as a natural consequence of our minds and brains (Barret 2004), is perhaps one way of explaining why there are religions and why people tend to believe in a supernatural power. However, the outcome of this statement should then be that all human beings are wired to believe in a God? Or is it that all human beings have the potentiality to have illusions or neurological pathways that lead to conclusions that are beyond the physical world? One could interpret this as a biological assumption that is based on our minds construction and its abilities and limitations. It does not speak of the choices individuals make in the name of religion, but rather that the mind is constructed to be able to believe in a God and hence religion becomes a relevant phenomenon. Barrett (2004) argues that what people believe in is often driven by unconscious streams of beliefs. Then in one way religious people's motivation or actions are driven from their own unconscious beliefs that they have adapted from their societies and its cultures. If that is the case, then religion is no different from culture or other unconscious believes. It is rather an analysis of the brain being filled with constant imaginations of what ought to happen next and ends up in making some conclusions that could be understood as religious. In this case if, as stated earlier, that the human nature is explained as mental patterns and processes, then religion is understood no different from that.

The study made by Watts, Dutton, and Gulliford (2006) in positive psychology claims that positive psychology could bridge psychology and religion in order to understand human beings and religion better. They also argue that when religious thinking was not taken in consideration about emotions the consequences led to simplistic approaches. When comparing how psychology and religious thinking looked at how and where forgiveness was initiated, the conclusion was that for psychology forgiveness originated with the victim while in religion it originated with God which led to the victims participating in a bigger cause than themselves (Watts, Dutton, and Gulliford 2006). This entails that the belief in a transcendental God somewhat gives the individual a wider perspective that they are not alone and that the forgiving act is not motivated by the victim nor for the sake of the oppressor, but rather by a God. In a way, one could understand this as, if God forgives human beings then the individual also learns to forgive others for the sake of God. One could say that seeing religion in this light, it seems that religion appears to have a psychological dimension to it, a tool one might say. In this regard one understands the driving force for religious individuals (for example practicing forgiveness) in a different manner, which is not dependent on solely outward or

recognized justice but simply, the practice itself, of a virtuous life as a possible motivation. The practicing of forgiveness depends on human beings becoming hurt or unjustly treated, which all human beings can relate to since we are partly psychological beings with emotions. Therefore, religion becomes as a tool for dealing with life's struggles and practicing to strengthening virtues seems to be the means for the higher end which its motivation is seemingly, God. In this light one might understand religion from positive psychology as a helping and guiding psychological tool towards the strengthening of virtues (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000)). However, by only focusing on the positive traits of human beings and rejecting the more pathological traits, there is a risk that positive psychology undermines the power of religion being used as a tool to affect some pathological behaviors as well as the strengthening of virtues.

According to Plato (1929) on the concept of the form of the good, if God is the best cause then human beings are the most beautiful effect. Perhaps, in that light, if applying platonic idealism to religion, since religions claim to be divine and originate from a transcendent power (God), then it must mean that since the cause (God) is the best then its effect (religion) must be the best. A logical argument like this one, is logically and theoretically convincing, it even might be true if applied on practical reality of religions. However, if all effects are good then what about other effects that are not seen as good such as fundamentalism, extremism and other destructive forces such as war, how is that part of this equation? Or perhaps, the potentiality of human beings is the most beautiful effect of its best cause?

One way of interpreting the allegory of the cave is, if the cave symbolizes this world, worldly things, the struggles of life and mortality, then the outside world stands for: The eternal world, life after death, a transcendent reality. Then one can perhaps understand what acts as a higher motivation for religious people to act both in good faith or bad faith. For example fundamentalist's leaders often motivate their followers by reward in the next life if they do as commanded. On the other hand other religious thinking is motivated by the strengthening of spiritual characters in this life so that next step in the cycle of life, individuals are rewarded with nearness to God, enlightenment and so on.

Conclusion

After the extensive presentation, analyses and discussion on Critical Religion Theory, Cognitive Sciences of Religion, Positive Psychology and Platonic Idealism, it is possible to say that there are a few conclusions one can take in consideration. Each perspective depends on a specific postulates on the human nature. Needless to say, these are different attempts to make sense of the human potentialities and limitations. By going through different layers, back to the very starting assumption each theoretical perspective has, we can easier navigate through their outcomes on our understanding and assumptions of the phenomenon of religion. This of course is some scholar's goal in the study of religion, to understand religion in accordance to its different philosophical postulates. As Schilbrack (2005) stated that, behind every theory there is a philosophy and it is the role of each scholar to reflect on the underlying assumptions they carry.

As mentioned in the introduction, the main aim and objective of the essay is to better understand how the concept of religion is understood from the four different theoretical perspectives by analyzing their theoretical starting point and view on the human nature. Analyzing the different postulates on the human nature was methodologically done through the subcategories, as analytical tools, of: materialism, conceptualism and realism. Moreover, by adding, another detailed dimension, the questions of how the theoretical perspectives understand a virtuous life and transcendence, was examined. Finally, by analyzing some conclusions that could be made on the basis of these theoretical perspectives (incl. the perspective on human nature), when applied to the concept of religion.

A parallel objective of the essay was done by picking the two theoretical perspectives, positive psychology and platonic idealism, which are not yet established perspectives nor tools in the study of religion, to compare them to the established ones: critical religion theory and cognitive Sciences of religion. I conclude that they have in fact many common topics and aspects, nonetheless the topics of transcendence and virtuous life, with religion, hence they would be relevant for the study of theology but foremostly religion.

Firstly, a presentation of each theoretical perspective was made. Then an analysis took place at the level of finding out the different understanding of the human nature. The critical

religion theory, presented in the essay, seemed to on one hand land in a more conceptualistic view on the human nature by stating that the concept of religion is meaningless as a universal concept, which means that it lands in the idea that the universal concept of religion only exists as an idea in the mind but is not real in the world out there. On the other hand as it wants to reconceptualize the concept of religion then it tends to have a narrative similar to realism, in this case, religion does exist both in the subjective and objective world but has to be redefined. While CSR see the human nature mainly through analyzing the human nature threw the mind and the brain and its imaginations of what ought to happen next. Therefore it rejects the idea of the mind as being solely socially constructed by stating that the human nature, the mind and brain, also have their biological potentialities and limitations which is an objective reality, hence more likely to accord with realism. Positive psychology has most in common with realism because it deals with virtues and virtues are not only a subjective reality that stays as an idea in the mind only (conceptualism), but it is reflected and manifested in the form of patterns of strengthening behaviors existence beyond solely ideas in the mind. Platonic idealism's points out that the Demiurge (God) is the best cause and therefore its effect (human beings) is the most beautiful. This the cause is an idea and its effect (humans) exists in the real world, its view on the human nature is closer to realism than materialism or conceptualism.

Then the perspectives were analyzed to see what they say about a virtuous life and the concept of transcendence that seem to be common phenomena across religions. The conclusions are presented in the following table:

	Virtuous life	Transcendence
Critical Religion Theory	-	-
CSR	-	Believing in a God is a natural consequence for the human mind
Positive Psychology	Highly concerned with patterns guiding the strengthening of virtues that are fruitful for individuals and communities	It defines transcendence as a virtue and some component of strength to it, such as: Awe, wonder, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope,

		spirituality, sense of purpose and religiousness
Platonic Idealism	Life in the cave is less virtuous than the liberation from the cave.	The main purpose is the ascendance from the cave to the outside world. That process is painful yet worthy.

Finally, some conclusions, applied to the understanding of the concept of religion, where summaries, problematized and laid out in one of the last chapters of the essay. The conclusions are as followed:

The critical religion theory is critical of the distortion of the concept of religion, as an analytical tool, by the west. Fitzgerald argues that since religion is an abstract category it should not be universally applied to the study of comparative religion. CRTs dual view on the human nature, it being conceptualist and realist, creates a logical and rational confusion in regards to how religion is understood. As to CSR is concerned with the prerequisites and limitations of the human mind and not so much of the understanding of religion. Since a belief in a God is a natural consequence of the human mind, then perhaps it explains the need for religion in peoples life's.

In regards to positive psychology, it is rather optimistic to the idea of using religion in psychology. It was shown that that the exclusion of understanding emotions in psychology through religion was rather limiting psychology. It therefore sees religion as a useful tool for dealing with life's struggles by practicing the strengthening of virtues. Nevertheless, its exclusive focus on human positive traits could be seen as to undermined the use of religion as a tool to create some pathological behaviors

Regarding platonic idealism, it seems to suggest that God is the best cause and its effect (human beings) is therefore the most beautiful. Then its effect in terms of religion is also the most beautiful. But, its unclear in regards to, if all effects are good, does that mean that there is no bad traits in the world? Moreover, the allegory of the cave symbolizes the liberation from the illusions of the cave for the ascend to a higher understanding of truth. In this light,

religion could be seen as having the same narrative: the strengthening of one's inner understanding of the truth.

Hopefully, this essay will evoke questions regarding the way which the study of religion is done, to find new ways to include different ways of thinking that perhaps is likely aligned with some philosophical postulates of religion. I suggest further studies to be done cross-disciplines, such as the study of religion and positive psychology or philosophy. Due to the essays demarcations, deeper studies in each theoretical perspective was not possible to be further examined and would therefore be relevant to do so. Through the different selections of materials and different subcategories the essay could lead to different conclusions than the ones presented here. Perhaps also, as a next step, a combination of descriptive and prescriptive studies within the comparative study of religion.

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