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To Anne

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1

Introduction

Abstract Many who have reflected on religion have recognized that it is misguided to try to give it an essentialist definition. Rather, it is thought that religion is a “family-resemblance” concept with criss-crossing and overlapping features. Whichever tact one takes on this matter belief is important for religion, this chapter argues. Even if it is not a necessary condition for a religion and one of a set of sufficient conditions, in the style of an essentialist definition, but only an often recurring family-resemblance feature, religious belief is central to some religious traditions and present in some form in all or nearly all traditions.

This introductory chapter concludes with brief descriptions of the topics and concerns of the nine chapters that follow.

Keywords The concept of *religion* • Ludwig Wittgenstein and “family-resemblance” concepts • John Hick

Many who have reflected on religion have recognized that it is misguided to try to give it an essentialist definition.¹ Invariably such

definitions include either too much or too little. It is perhaps better to recognize that *religion* is a polythetic concept, or in Wittgenstein's terms a "family-resemblance" concept, as John Hick allowed.² If *religion* were a family-resemblance concept, religions would not all share a single defining characteristic or attribute, or set of attributes, as an essentialist definition requires. There would be no attribute or set of attributes the presence of which would make something a religion and the absence of any one of which would mean that it was not a religion. Rather there would be a range of features—relating to prayer, ritual, meditation, practice, belief, conception of the divine, pilgrimage, dress, and more—many of which crop up in some religions but not in all, and some of which appear in all or many religions but also in what are not religions. Such attributes would, in Wittgenstein's words, "overlap and criss-cross."³ One of these overlapping, criss-crossing features would be belief, but it would not be a defining feature of religion. If *religion* were such a family-resemblance concept, this would mean, as Hick saw, that Nazism "appears somewhere within the outskirts of the spreading network of overlapping phenomena covered by the concept of religion."⁴ Such an implication is tolerable as long as we keep in mind that not all religions are good.

On the other hand, if an effort were made to provide an essentialist definition of "religion" almost certainly one of the attributes that would be seen as necessary, and also as one of a sufficient set of attributes, would be belief—certainly if the effort proceeded from a Western perspective. If it were accepted that *religion* is a family-resemblance concept, clearly one of the overlapping, criss-crossing features would be belief. Though belief may not be central to every religious tradition it is central to some and important to many if not all religious traditions. This does not mean that belief defines religion, for many other endeavors, such as political movements, are marked by belief, and this is not to say that belief has been important in the same way in the world's major religious traditions or that the importance of belief has not waxed and waned in religious history. Furthermore, as we will see, different forms of belief are important in religious traditions, particularly in Christianity. Our focus in this book will be on the place of religious belief in Christianity and the roles it has