DEFINING "RELIGION"

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       The past decade has seen an efflorescence of concern for theory and methodology in the study of religion. Since about 1970 an increasing part of that concern has centered around the problem of defining religion.[1] One element in that discussion has been the work of Robert D. Baird, particularly his *Category Formation and the History of Religions*. In brief, Baird notes that most historians of religion have ignored the ambiguity of the terms which they employ, especially the central term "religion." He goes on to argue that attention to the problem of definition is an essential prerequisite to the accurate presentation and examination of "religious" data.[2]

       This paper is an attempt to determine (1) whether religion should be defined, and (2) if so, how? We shall examine the types of definition available, and the presuppositions and implications of each type. We shall then attempt to determine which type of definition will be most useful in the study of religious phenomena. Finally I shall put my conclusions into practice, and attempt to construct a definition which will be useful in the study of the religious aspects of human cultures.

Robert Baird on Defining "Religion"

       Robert Baird asserts that most historians of religion falsely assume that "religion" is an unequivocal word referring to "a something out there whose `essence' can be apprehended by the historian of religions." Any writer on religion who does not preface his study with a definition of "religion" betrays such an assumption, and is to be categorized as an "essential-intuitionist." That category includes not only Mircea Eliade and C. J. Bleeker, but George Foot Moore, and even Hans Penner.[3] Now Baird will find a number of scholars who will agree that phenomenologists have tended to utilize overly vague terminology; most members of the Groningen school, for instance, brand such terms as "power" and "the sacred" worse than useless.[4] But whether Baird's category of "essential-intuitionist" can serve any useful purpose in methodological discussions is another matter. I feel that most scholars will agree that Baird could have made his point quite satisfactorily without trying to squeeze Moore, Eliade and Penner into the same category.

       Pummer, for instance, agrees that to define religion in terms of "the sacred" "either implies a theological or ontological understanding of the sacred, or, in the absence of such an understanding, requires a definition of it."[5] But Baird's thesis is that one should adopt only a "functional definition" (i.e., an arbitrary definition to specify how a given term will be used in one's work);[6] by this means one avoids the ontological question of whether one's definition really reflects the nature of the assumed objective referent.[7]

       However, it has been argued that such a position avoids the issue of what religion really *is*.[8] For if twenty different scholars choose to use the term "religion" in twenty different ways, does that not merely cause confusion? How can they use the single term if by it they mean

twenty different things? Would it not be simpler to use twenty different terms, each one universally accepted to be used in a single specific way? But such a course would evidently be impractical, since universal agreement on the meaning of all the terms would be difficult to obtain. And what if each of the twenty insisted on using the term "religion" and demanded that the other nineteen use other terms? In fact, that is somewhat like the present situation, since dozens of scholars have dozens of different ideas of what religion is, and all want to use the same term.

Defining "Religion": Preliminary Considerations

We do all share certain basic ideas about religion: no one, for instance, would think that the word "religion" referred (*tout court*) to a telephone, an airline, or a presidential election. Since we could all agree to a certain extent on what religion is not, it follows that to that extent we can agree on what religion is. The problem is (1) whether the extent of that agreement is great enough to warrant our usage of the single term, and if so, (2) whether a single definition can be advanced which will meet with general acceptance? The answer to the second question is probably negative, but that fact does not mean that the endeavor would necessarily be a futile effort: even if not everyone accepted the new definition, it at least might serve to stimulate (1) one's understanding of the topic, or (2) one's understanding of one's colleagues. Therefore I conclude that the search for a "real definition" of religion is not only possible, but perhaps even very fruitful for the study of religious phenomena.

At this point we come to another hurdle: should one's definition precede analysis of the data, or should it follow the analysis? Some scholars contend that unless we start out with a definition of what we are looking for, we shall have no way to separate relevant from irrelevant data: we must have some preliminary concept of "religion" (explicit or implicit), or we might end up studying culture, or philosophy, or psychology. Others retort that if one define the subject beforehand, he might distort the data owing to preconceptions,[9] or at very least he might miss some data which really are relevant, but which have been mistakenly excluded from the outset. Weber, for one, stated that a definition of religion "can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study."[10] This is obviously a classical dilemma.

The solution must take both sides into account. In the terms of Ugo Bianchi, a "dialectical" solution is called for, one which "unite(s) the two requirements."[11] Bianchi, however, does not specify exactly how such a dialectical solution is to be obtained; nor, it seems, has anyone else ever solved the dilemma.

I propose to solve the problem by suggesting that we split the definition into two parts, each part serving the appropriate function and only the appropriate function. That is, we should start out with some criterion/criteria for determining the relevance of data, and conclude by deducing further generalizations from the data which have been ajudged relevant. We might term the first "definition" our "field-delimitation" or delimitative definition. The final "definition" we may style an "inductive definition" or determinative definition. The delimitative definition need not predetermine one's later findings, nor need it imply anything about the "nature" of the phenomenon investigated (although it might be used to do so should one later decide that the delimitative definition should be incorporated into the determinative definition).

Before going further into our discussion, I shall propose at this point a delimitative definition for religion. For my purposes, I believe that the most useful delimitation of religion

can be derived from religious actions or behavior: religious activities are non-pragmatic, they are conscious, compulsory activities performed without any obvious utilitarian purpose.[12]

For instance, in preparing an analysis of the religion of the Scythians, the historian of religion could open Book IV of Herodotus and note the following items:

1) sacrifices of horses or cattle;
2) sacrifices of a small percentage of enemies captured;
3) collection of the scalps of enemies killed;
4) soothsaying (divination);
5) embalmment of a ruler's body, followed by the carrying of it throughout the tribe, whereupon the men who see it mutilate themselves in honor of the deceased; the ritual execution of servants, horses, and a concubine of the deceased; and other subsequent rituals.

None of these actions have any discernible morphological similarity. Yet they may still be classed together in that they all have no utilitarian value sufficient to account for their origination and endurance. We shall thus consider them all under the rubric "religious actions."

This is not to assert that all non-pragmatic acts are necessarily religious acts. It is merely a device for assessing the relevance of data. After we have analyzed the data assembled by that field-delimitation, we might decide that "religious acts" is a subset of "non-pragmatic acts," i.e., that religious acts are non-pragmatic acts of a certain particular type. But whether that is so, and what that "particular type" might be, remain to be settled by an examination of the relevant data. When all data judged relevant have been analyzed and assessed, then, and only then, can one set about formulating a determinative definition of what religion is.

Alternative Approaches to Defining "Religion"

Now we have reached the point at which we can begin to discuss and evaluate different types of (real) definitions which one might employ to define religion (in the determinative sense).

There are two broad types of definition in general use in the study of religion. The first is **substantive definitions**, i.e., definitions in terms of the supposed content or "substance" or religious thought and values. An example is the Tylorian definition of religion in terms of supernatural or superhuman beings; this definition is still employed in various forms by some respectable scholars of religion.[13] Others who have wished to employ a substantive definition have dismissed such a definition as too narrow,[14] and chosen to define religion in broader terms, as e.g. man's relation to "the sacred" or to "sacred power."[15] Yet, as we have seen, in recent years a number of scholars have objected to such terms, since they consider the terms vague, and since assertions in terms of "the sacred" can not be empirically verified.[16] But it is false to assert that any substantive definition must fall victim to the problem of vagueness.[17] There is no a priori reason that a substantive definition cannot be clear and precise. As for the demand for empirical verification, we shall return to such matters later. We can conclude with Milton Yinger that substantive definitions of religion can be of great value under appropriate conditions.[18]

The main alternative to a substantive definition of religion is a **functional definition**, i.e., a definition of religion in terms of its supposed consequences or functions within (1) the human

psyche, (2) human society, or (3) human culture in general. The alleged advantages of a functional definition are as follows:

> 1) it can be applied equally well to theistic and non-theistic belief-systems; to societies which recognize a supernatural order apart from the natural, and to those which make no such distinction;
> 2) it can account for historical change and discontinuity better than any substantive definition;[19]
> 3) it can be readily incorporated into empirical research, so that it can (theoretically) be proven true or false.

One can argue, however, that those "advantages" are illusory, since (1) it is possible that a definition could be devised which is not strictly functional and which could yet satisfy the first two demands, and since (2) it is questionable whether the third demand is valid (a point to which we shall return).

On the other hand, functional definitions of religion have some disadvantages, the major one being that they tend to lead to a functionalistic explanation of religion, and functionalistic explanations tend to lead to **reductionism**. A "functionalistic explanation" of religion is an explanation which finds that there is nothing to religion (or a specific religion) beyond the social or psychological functions which it performs.[20] Such an explanation reduces religion to a social or psychological phenomenon. As Streng says, "It is comparable to reducing the aesthetic value of a great masterpiece of art to a study of the fiber used in the canvas, the pigments in the oils, and the number of brush strokes made by the painter."[21] To understand art, one must take such things into account, but they do not themselves constitute art; there is something further involved, a distinctive "artistic factor."

Likewise, one can study the mind of a composer, the nature of the instruments at his disposal, and the social effect that his composition might have upon its audience; but such studies would not suffice to account for the musical quality of a Brahms symphony.[22] Why, then, does it make sense to say that by analyzing the psyche of a religious person and the social influence on, and effects of, his words and acts, one has exhausted that person's religion?

Is it a priori impossible that there might be something abstract and subjective which is essential to the existence of religion? That can hardly be asserted. At most, one might object that if there were some such subjective element as a "religious quality" of human life, empirical analysis has no way to go about studying it. But does that necessarily mean that the "religious quality" does not in fact exist? After all, we know that love exists, but empirical analysis has no method by which to measure or analyze it. The reductionist fallacy is that if one can study only the functions of religion, then religion can be concluded to consist solely of said functions.

A functional definition of religion does not necessarily entail a functionalistic explanation which reduces "the religious" to "the social" or "the psychological."[23] But a definition or explanation of religion which takes into account solely its functions inherently tends toward the reductionist fallacy. It is well-known that a substantive definition essentially concerns what religion is, while a functional definition is basically concerned with what religion does. The reductionist fallacy may be avoided by stating simply that whatever one may find that religion does, one may not assume that that is all religion is.

A classical example of a functionalistic explanation of religion is Durkheim's equation of

religion with society: religion, Durkheim said, is the integrative or socializing power of society. Examples of the Durkheimian confusion may be found even in recent works by respected scholars, as for instance Milton Yinger:

> ...religion brings each individual into a fellowship that emphasizes shared experiences....Religion is the attempt to relativize the individual's desires, as well as his fears, by subordinating them to a conception of absolute good more in harmony with the shared and often mutually contradictory needs and desires of human groups.[24]

But what of religious movements which engender beliefs and values antagonistic to the existing norms of the overall society? (Cf. Matthew 10:34-36.) Or what of religious groups which take up arms against each other?[25] Do such groups "relativize" divisive fears and desires, or do they rather aggravate them? And is a "fellowship that emphasizes shared experiences" necessarily religious? Does not any grouping of human individuals (even to some extent kinship) produce such an integrative effect? If so, where does "religion" come in? Yinger's explanation falls into the category of functional explanations which "impute to religion some of the functions of a total sociocultural system."[26]

As Milford Spiro has noted clearly, any social solidarity which religion might provide furnishes us with an explanation not of religion, but of society.[27]

> If social solidarity is a consequence--an unintended consequence--of the practice of religion, social solidarity is properly explained by reference to the religious behavior by which it is explained; but religion, surely, is improperly explained by reference to social solidarity.[28]

The same argument can be made for the distinction between religion and socio-political legitimation.[29] Other sociologists of religion have correctly pointed out that even if religion does serve an integrative or legitimatory function in some societies, it is fallacious to assume that such a function accounts for the existence of religion in general.[30] The fallacy is again that of explaining what religion does (or actually, can do) and claiming to have explained what religion is. Because of the nature of such a definition, no purely functional definition of religion can legitimately claim to explain all that religion is.[31]

Another problem with functional definitions (cf. Yinger's above) is that anything which performs the prescribed functions thereby becomes "religion." There is thus no clear line separating religion from non-religion.[32] The only way to differentiate clearly between a religious belief and a non-religious belief, a religious act and a non-religious act, is to introduce some substantive element in terms of which to make the distinction.[33]

Thus it would seem that if substantive definitions of religion tend to be imprecise and less useful in empirical research, functional definitions tend to be reductionistic and insufficiently restrictive.

Let us then look at some suggested definitions of religion which are, strictly speaking, neither substantive nor functional. In general, such definitions tend to stress the power of religion to answer life's basic questions and resolve its apparent problems. Such definitions usually consider religion in psychological or existential terms, or both. For lack of a better characterization, I shall refer to such definitions as explanatory/consolatory.

The basic premise of this view of religion is that humanity faces certain "ultimate

problems" in life, which cannot be escaped. Those problems are usually explained as follows:

      1) Uncontrollable events (e.g. sickness, death, natural disasters);

      2) Uncertainty;

      3) Injustice;

      4) Scarcity or deprivation;

      5) Hostility of others.[34]

All of these factors (as the view goes) work to produce frustration and anxiety, for which people need some solution if life is to be bearable. Religion is humanity's means of coping with these basic problems of human existence. This conception of religion has been propounded by such widely diverse figures as Max Weber, Clyde Kluckhohn, E. O. James, and Milton Yinger.[35]

      Now few will deny that religion aids people in coping with these basic problems of human existence. I would only pose the same question here which was directed at the functional definitions: is that all there is to religion, or is there something more? Does the explanatory/consolatory view exhaust the nature of religion, or does it, like the functionalist explanations, only describe what religion can do?

      Frederick Streng includes two elements in his definition of religion: "ultimacy" and religion's "effective power" (the explanatory/consolatory aspect).[36] It would seem reasonable to follow that scheme and consider the explanatory and consolatory aspects of religion a power of religion, which excludes neither other powers or functions nor some more fundamental aspect of religion. But if there is a more fundamental aspect of religion, what is it?

      I believe that we may get at the answer to that question by noting a crucial omission in the explanatory/consolatory position. It defines religion as a set of beliefs and practices designed to allow people to cope with life's "ultimate problems." But it does not say how those beliefs and practices accomplish their intended end. What is there about religious acts and beliefs (as opposed to profane acts and beliefs) which serve satisfactorily to explain the most profound problems of human existence?

      It would seem that the explanatory/consolatory explanation might prove serviceable if it included some dynamic or transformative element, by which otherwise incomprehensible or unbearable facts of existence become truly comprehensible and manageable.[37]

      Several scholars have proposed that that transformative element should be, in Tillich's terms, "ultimate concern." Robert Baird understands that term to refer to whatever "is more important than anything else in the universe for the person involved."[38] But such a definition quickly falls victim to Spiro's criticism: "if communism, or baseball, or the stockmarket are of ultimate concern to some society, or to one of its constituent social groups, they are, by definition, sacred" or religious.[39] Once again, no objective distinction can be made between religion and non-religion.

      Robert Bellah avoids that pitfall by apparently sticking more closely to the explanatory/ consolatory position. Religion, says Bellah, may be defined "as a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence."[40] This definition is wonderfully equivocal: the "ultimate conditions of existence" can be taken to refer to the ultimate dimensions of reality (or "God," as Bellah himself sees it), or it can be construed as referring to the aforementioned ultimate problems of existence (as Yinger interprets it). Because of its ambiguity, Bellah's definition is rather difficult to attack. However, one may note that, appearances to the contrary, Bellah's definition lacks the stipulation of intensity, which is the core of Baird's Tillichian definition. Hence if intensity is indeed to be deemed an essential

characteristic of the definition of religion, Bellah's formulation is deficient. The question is whether intensity is indeed essential to religion.

The Problem of Reductionism

At this point we must stop and ask a basic methodological question: to what degree should our analysis of religion be "etic" and to what degree should it be "emic"?[41] In other words, do we pose as objective observers and analyze religion by means of our own categories, or do we seek to understand religion "from within," in terms comprehensible and agreeable to the subjects of our study? The problem with "emic" explanations is that they sometimes tend to adopt the preconceptions and value judgments of the subjects; in Smart's terms, they become "Expressive" of the religion under examination.[42] The problem with "etic" explanations (such as most functional explanations) is that they tend to distort the views of the subjects by translating those views into alien categories,[43] which are themselves based on preconceptions and value judgments.

What is at issue here is a fundamental dichotomy in the study of religion: many scholars see religion as pertaining basically to the humanities, while many other scholars demand that the study of religion should be a science.[44] The basic disagreement is whether there is something to religion which science cannot fathom, or whether religion, like everything else in the world, can be satisfactorily explained by "science" alone. The "scientific" school accuses the humanists in general and phenomenologists in particular of being "dogmatic" and even "theological," because the humanists oppose purely empirical treatments of religion, and seek to "understand" religion emically.[45] But is it valid to imply that only empiricists can be objective (hence perceiving actual reality), while phenomenologists alone can be swayed by preconceived "a prioris"?

It is only beginning to be appreciated that the empiricists, too, approach the materials with preconceptions, which can distort said materials and prejudice their interpretation. Almost every definition or explanation of religion, humanistic or scientific, starts with certain axioms which cannot be definitely proven.[46] The assumption of the empiricist view is that science can prove everything true or false, and nothing is a priori outside the purview of scientific analysis. That thesis is an unwarranted assumption, for it itself cannot be proven true or false. Hence the true scientist will, like the phenomenologist, "bracket out" any ultimate truth claims which might be made on the basis of his findings.[47]

To say that because science finds no evidence for the existence of supernatural beings, such beings cannot exist, is fallacious.[48] Science by definition deals with empirical realities alone. Since religion, by any reasonable definition, contains non-empirical elements, religion is clearly an unfit object for application of the scientific method. To attempt to apply scientific methods to fields in which such methods are inherently inapplicable is not science: it is scientism. Scientism, particularly in a field such as religion, is methodologically indefensible.

Why, then, do so many insist on approaching religion scientifically? Because science has proven so successful in achieving its goals that for decades, workers in other fields have longed to incorporate the scientific method into their research (witness the transformation of the "social studies" into the "social sciences"). Some scholars have been so envious of science that they have ignored the inherent limitations of the scientific method, and applied it under invalid circumstances. Hence scientism arose, and today plagues the study of religion, engendering

fallacious conclusions regarding the nature of religion.

There are two fine examples of scientism in the study of religion. One is the "methodological atheism" once proposed by Peter Berger, by which religious conceptions (such as supernatural beings) are reduced to productions of the human mind projected upon an otherwise vacant universe.[49] As a truth claim, such a hypothesis regarding religion is clearly false. No one can prove scientifically that the gods about which men speak do not in fact exist. As non-empirical entities, their existence can be neither proven nor disproven by empirical methods. Therefore "methodological atheism," in so far as it assumes that gods truly do not exist, is inherently fallacious.[50] Berger now realizes this flaw in the "projection" theory, and concludes that "if transcendence is to be spoken of as transcendence, the empirical frame of reference must be left behind."[51]

A second way in which scientism has illicitly influenced the study of religion is by its depreciation of (1) substantive definitions of religion, and (2) *Verstehen* as a valid approach to the study of religion.[52] Those two elements of the study of religion are not inherently related, but they have been deprecated (often together) by those who have insisted upon a functional explanation of religion.

Peter Berger has recently taken a critical look at those who assume a functional view of religion. Berger concludes that such scholars have an "ideological" motive for adopting a functional definition: they presuppose a "secularized world view," and therefore appeal to functional explanations for a "quasiscientific legitimation of the avoidance of transcendence."[53] In our society, religious experiences and beliefs have lost their plausibility and legitimacy;[54] therefore, scholars who represent accepted social positions cannot treat religion as an autonomous reality: religion, in so far as it coincides with reality, has to be an aspect of something else, something socially legitimate (such as society, or the human mind).[55] Hence functionalism arises, and from it reductionism.

Yet even when the functionalists manage to stay clear of blatant reductionism, they infallibly omit the religious factor which the humanists generally claim to be essential. Their only excuse for that omission has been that empirical research cannot take seriously any factors which cannot be empirically verified. But such a position in regard to religion ipso facto shows the inability of empirical methods to deal with this subject matter. Can it be proven that the criteria for empirical validity are the same as the criteria for actual reality? Clearly not. Those who insist on an empirical approach to religion display an implicit "ideological" stance, i.e. they are clinging to assumptions which cannot be proven, but yet which are never questioned. To make truth claims as to the nature of humanity and reality based on such unverifiable assumptions is to overstep the boundaries of science and land in fallacious scientism.

How, then, can we avoid such fallacies? It is clear to me that there is only one way to define religion without making unwarranted assumptions concerning reality. That is, we must define religion in a manner which neither adopts (or in Smart's term, "Expresses") the religious view, nor rejects it. We should treat a religious phenomenon in a way which fully allows for the autonomous "religious factor" without presupposing or requiring it.[56]

Other Factors in Defining "Religion"

What else should our definition be? First, it should be free from criteria which are

culturally determined. In other words, we may not look at two or three cultures and base our definition solely on their religious structures (as, for instance, by defining religion in terms of supernatural beings, for in some systems with good claims to be "religions," deities are totally insignificant, or even lacking). The definition must be sufficiently broad to apply equally to any culture (without presupposing that "religion" must necessarily exist in every human culture).

Secondly, the definition should be narrow enough to afford a clear distinction between what is "religious" and what is not.[57] We have noted above that many functional definitions are deficient in this respect, but other types of definitions also share this problem. For instance, Van Harvey has defined religion as

> ...a perspective, a standpoint in which certain dominant images are used by its adherents to orient themselves to the present and the future...a way of interpreting certain elemental features of human existence.[58]

Erich Fromm has proposed a similar definition: religion is

> ...any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion.[59]

Both of these definitions stress the orientative capacities of religion. But even if we argue that orientation is a characteristic and not merely a capacity of religion, we might ask if these definitions are sufficiently limitative. Either might function well as a definition of "world-view," save that they emphasize the "depth" of the views, or their affective significance for the individuals concerned. Moreover, they resemble certain definitions of "culture":

> ...Culture is a system of symbolic meanings which supply man with his orientation to reality (that is, to his natural environment, to his relations with his fellowmen, and to himself).[60]

The above definitions of religion fail to provide a criterion to differentiate clearly between religion, culture, and world-view. Even if we add the stipulation that religion is intensive, that it concerns humanity ultimately, would that satisfy the demand for specificity in our definition?

Evidently, Ferré is correct that a definition of religion must contain a "referential characteristic."[61] It must contain some element specific enough to permit a clear distinction between religion and non-religion. This element cannot be functional, for then any variable which could perform the prescribed function would be religious. The referent must be in some sense substantive. It must also, as mentioned earlier, be transformative, i.e. it must not only explain what religion does, but it must further explain how religion does what it does.

In my view, Streng is correct that "the conceptual formulations, ethical practices, and social institutions that are generally labeled as the religious data are not in themselves the sum of that reality with which the student of religion must deal."[62] Therefore in order to explain religion fully (substantively and transformatively), we must take into consideration not only "the concrete data, the forms of religious expression, but also the intention of these forms which seek to point beyond themselves."[63] Or, as Waardenburg puts it, we must "analyze the ideational contents of a given religious expression or phenomenon in such a way that the meaning which it has for the people concerned...can be ascertained."[64]

Such a goal demands a real sensitivity to the subjects concerned, and, at least to a certain degree, an empathy for their religious experiences.[65] This is not to say that one should become a proponent of those particular religious concepts or practices; one must maintain, in Smart's terms, "an empathic objectivity, or if you like a neutralist subjectivity."[66] Nor do I wish to

imply that participation (real or vicarious) in a religious experience is sufficient for explaining the experience and associated phenomena. At no point may "objective" analysis of the observable (or recorded) data be dispensed with. But such analysis alone cannot fully explain the experience (since the transformative power of the experience is non-empirical). Full explanation of a religious phenomenon requires both subjective and objective comprehension; and full description requires accurate communication of both the objective and the subjective aspects of the phenomenon.[67]

If we then proceed with an "empathic objectivity" based on the delimitative definition of religion formulated earlier (p 4), what do we find religion to be? We may begin, I believe, with Jacques Waardenburg's observation:

> Within any given society there are a number of data which have, beyond their implicit 'everyday life' meaning and beyond their functional--technical,economic, social, and so on--meaning, some kind of 'surplus value' which strikes the outsider through its gratuitousness if not apparent uselessness, and which distinguishes itself thereby from utility and everyday life meanings. Part of such data are, in terms of the culture concerned, called 'religious'; they generally contain significations relating to realities different from the verifiable one.[68]

Why do these data not concern ordinary, observable reality? Because religious persons tacitly assume that there is more to life, more to reality, than physical existence, observable events, and commonsensical notions. There is a wider reality of which the physical, the observable, is merely a part; and for those respects which are beyond sensory perception, ordinary common-sense does not hold.[69] The other aspect of reality is sensed to be deeper than physical existence, to be real in a different way and (usually) to a fuller degree. That is the aspect of reality which needs no further referent;[70] it is so of itself, beyond the contingency of ordinary events.

Hence I conclude that one element of our inductive definition of religion should be that religion assumes a transcendent (superempirical) order of reality, beyond which no further reality is conceivable.[71] Precisely how that reality is conceived, and what its relationship to humanity and the sensible world is felt to be, varies widely from culture to culture, and even from individual to individual. It is possible that we can make one broad distinction. The "ethnic" religions of non-literate peoples (so-called "primitive religions") strongly tend to assume the unity of reality, empirical and trans-empirical being inherently closely related;[72] while the "founded" religions of more sophisticated cultures (the so-called "high religions") tend to feel a real difference between the sensory and the transcendent, a gap which needs somehow to be bridged.[73]

Let us ask a further question: if, however it be conceived, the transcendent level of reality is of great concern to religious people, what accounts for its importance to him? In other words, what is there about the superempirical that accounts for the fact that, once perceived, it is not forgotten or ignored?

First of all, we must note that religion, in Ferré's terms, belongs to "a valuational genus."[74] That is, no religious thought or action is possible except insofar as the actor evaluates, finding certain things preferable or more worthwhile than other things. Now, once trans-empirical reality is perceived, it enters the valuational sphere: ordinary life, being more limited, must now be assessed in light of the transcendent (*sub specie aeternitatis*).[75] Since super-empirical realities are viewed as completing empirical realities, and since the transcendent cannot be completed by anything further removed, the transcendent tends to be evaluated as the

source of all completeness, of all true reality. "Thus," as Luckmann states, "both the ultimate significance of everyday life and the meaning of extraordinary experiences are located in this 'different' and 'sacred' domain of reality.[76]

This is the second crucial factor, as I see it. Religious people assess their everyday experiences and ask what they add up to: such people want to understand what life means, both in its wholeness and in its individual components.[77] By reference to the super-empirical aspect of reality, they discover the meaning and value of their life experiences.[78] Life is meaningful (or worthwhile) to the religious person only insofar as it reflects the transcendent.

A specific religious system can provide meaning in two ways, depending upon historical circumstances:

1) it can keep life meaningful (within a stable, "static" context); or

2) it can make life meaningful (within a revolutionary, "dynamic" context).[79]

Either way, religious realities are the fountain from which flow the reality and worth of everyday experiences.

Since religion brings out the ultimate meaning of life experiences, it provides models and guideposts for the meaningful integration of all one's experiences. That is, it not only allows the person to understand what phenomena and events mean singly, but it also shows him how they fit together into a single homogeneous reality.[80] It thus provides a comprehensive worldview, and means of orienting one's life in all its facets.[81] If dissected, this comprehensive system might be seen to consist of (1) a conceptual complex and (2) a set of values (pertaining to various aspects of life).

Inasmuch as religion provides a set of values related to the meaning of life, it furnishes guidelines or prescriptions for most (if not all) of one's thoughts and acts. This is religion's prescriptive and motivational aspect, its power to provide direction for carrying out the various activities of life.[82] It gives people a means of deciding what is relevant, what is important, what is best, what is proper, what is true.[83] But no one will accept the value-dictates of any person, group, or institution, except insofar as those values serve a meaningful purpose in his or her own life.[84]

Finally, there are the empirical or observable components of religion: symbols (visual or otherwise nonverbal images of religious truths), myths (verbal portrayals of transcendent realities and their relations to ordinary reality), and rituals (non-pragmatic acts intended to actualize -- or re-actualize -- the ideal relationship to the transcendent). It is records (or relics) of these phenomena, and the writings of intellectuals concerned with the transempirical and man's relation thereto, that the historian of religion studies.

These, then, are the characteristics of religion, which together may be taken to comprise the "nature" or "essence" of religion.[85] Our task, then, is to integrate all of the above observations into a single determinative definition. A one-sentence synthesis of so many inter-related elements will invariably strike a certain number of persons as "counter-intuitive," owing mainly to vagaries of phraseology. Yet I would consider my efforts fruitless were I not to provide a complete and concise definition of religion. Therefore I offer the following formulation, in the hope that it might help serve others in constructing definitions more amenable to their own sensitivities.

Religion is humanity's sensitivity to the ultimate meaning of existence, which derives

from his relationship to a transcendent or super-empirical plane of reality. Comprehension of the meaningfulness of things serves to integrate harmoniously every aspect of one's being -- cognitive, evaluative, motivational, and existential -- and to provide the individual with orientation, purpose, and direction for his life. It further provides guidelines for thought and action under all circumstances (which guidelines can be incorporated into a shared cultural system, though losing thereby much of their meaning through loss of immediacy). Humanity's religion may be expressed in various ways, as through myths, symbols, rituals, or intellectual constructions. As a group of persons with the same basic views come to share and exchange their individual views and religious expressions, traditions evolve which tend to become more or less systematized. However, in order to have true religion, each individual in every culture needs to have some direct experience of the transcendent source of life's meaningfulness; otherwise, he will not obtain the full benefits of integration and orientation which religion can provide.

No doubt many readers will take a certain part (or parts) of this definition as most meaningful, dismissing the rest as extraneous. But it is my hope that a significant number of people might be able to agree to its basic points (even if they disagree with the manner in which those points are expressed). If such is in fact the case, the goal of this paper will have been achieved.

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NOTES

[1]A good example of the state of the definitional problem before about 1965 is a Symposium on "The Problem of Attempting to Define Religion," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2 (1962-63).

[2]   See esp. Baird (1971), 15. Cf. Baird (1975), 111ff., and Kishimoto, 236-37.

[3]Baird (1971), 1-4; (1975), 116. It is most remarkable that there are still scholars who fall victim to precisely such difficulties as Baird protests: J. G. Oosten recently answered the question, "What is Religion?" by stating, "We go by the accepted meanings of the concept religion in this culture." (van Baaren and Drijvers, 102) Baird's point is that there are no such "accepted meanings." Yet many scholars do believe that

there are: for instance, we have an "American Academy of Religion," yet the academy has never defined "religion." Does that fact make the entire association "essential-intuitionist"? According to Baird's criteria, the answer is obviously yes.

[4]L. Leertouwer says that such terms are vague, hence "mysterious," hence "mystifications"; they are useless for scientific analysis, and can only play a "dogmatic role." (van Baaren and Drijvers, 81, 83-84; cf. Penner in Baird, 1975, pp. 54f., 90) Drijvers declares that definitions or descriptions of religion employing such terms as "essence of religion" or "ultimate concern" "are no more than `definitional tautologies.'" (ibid., 57, quoting Baird, who, incidentally, uses "ultimate concern" as his definition of religion: 1971, p. 18) For an earlier critique of sacred "power" by a phenomenologist, see Bleeker, 40ff.

[5]   Pummer, 164.

[6]   It must be borne in mind that to Baird, a "functional definition" defines only the _word_   "religion"; it does not define religion (the "thing") in terms of its supposed functions. For someone who is so hard on other scholars for imprecise terminology, Baird looks rather   absurd using such a term, for now the phrase "functional definition" is ambiguous, and   itself requires a functional definition at the beginning of any discussion. My "functional definition" of a "functional definition" shall be a definition in terms of functions of the object   defined (in Baird's terms, this falls into the category of a "real definition").

[7]Cf. Kishimoto, 237; Pye, 9. As regards basic points, Baird says little that Kishimoto did not say ten years earlier.

[8]   See e.g. Williams, 3.

[9]Baird, for instance, once said that a preliminary definition is necessary, but that it thus predetermines the conclusions. (Baird in Helfer, 24) Hence he now urges definitions of only the **word** "religion," never the "**thing**" religion (1971, 14f.).

[10]   Weber, quoted in Dobbelaere, 536.

[11]   Bianchi, in Bianchi, Bleeker, and Bausani, p. 20.

[12]This concept is usually associated with Branislaw Malinowski, but Talcott Parsons traces it back to certain ideas of Durkheim: see Parsons in Robertson, 55. Cf. Saliba, 79 and n., and esp. Waardenburg, quoted below, p. 21. By "conscious, compulsory activities" I mean actions which the actor feels _must_ be done, and/or must be done in a certain way. I exclude such actions as the actor might feel free not to do, or to do in different ways, according to an arbitrary decision.

[13]Among those who have adopted this definition are J. Goody (157f.), A. F. C. Wallace (52, 107, etc.), M. E. Spiro (in Banton, ed., 91 et passim), and most recently T. P. van Baaren of the Groningen school (van Baaren and Drijvers, 38). A "classical" formulation of this theory is to be found in P. Radin, 3f and 6; but besides adding other factors, Radin asserts (8-9) that the idea of spiritual beings originated in

"compensation fantasies" à la Freud: primitive people "*postulated* the supernatural" (p. 15, emphasis mine). Cf. now also Saliba, 149-50.

[14] Cf. Kishimoto, 238-39, and more recently, Ferré, 7.

[15]This definition was first formulated by Durkheim (see e.g., the selection in Robertson, 42ff.) and more recently popularized by Mircea Eliade, though even Peter Berger makes heavy use of it.

[16] Vide supra, note 5, and cf. Dobbelaere, 543.

[17]Dobbelaere declares that any substantive definition of religion "searches for the essence of religion and defines it as `sacred.'" (542; cf. Eister, 2) That is false on several counts. First, no one who has defined religion by means of the term "the sacred" has ever stated that "religion" *is* "sacred"; rather "the sacred" is that to which religious phenomena refer. Secondly, the Tylorian definition disproves the implication that a substantive definition of religion must needs utilize the concept of "the sacred."

[18] See Yinger, 4.

[19] Ibid., 4-5.

[20] Cf. ibid., 5-6; Norbeck, 65.

[21] Streng, 41.

[22] I have here borrowed and elaborated upon an analogy used by Ninian Smart, 143.

[23] Cf. Yinger, p. 5 n. 6.

[24] Yinger, 15, inverted.

[25]For example, the Crusades; monastery-burnings by Buddhist monks of opposing sects in medieval Japan; the Protestant-Catholic strife in Northern Ireland; etc. For a recent study of religion and its negative as well as positive impact on society, see R. K. Fenn, "Religion and the Legitimation of Social Systems," in Eister, 143-161.

[26] Spiro, in Banton, 90. Cf. also Saliba, 23.

[27] Ibid., 118.

[28] Ibid., 108.

[29]I have elsewhere distinguished a religion from a *legitimation system*, which is based on the metaphorical investment of worldly events with a (reputed) transcendental significance in an effort to justify the collective will and/or certain existing social institutions. An example of such a system is the "American Civil Religion" of Bellah and others (which I prefer to term "Americanism"). A legitimation system can be fashioned out of a religious tradition (as with Americanism) or out of an ideology (as with Maoism), but religions and ideologies do not necessarily function as legitimation systems. I use "ideology" to mean an intellectual system which applies purportedly axiomatic propositions to practical affairs, and presents as a result of that critique an outline for reforming said affairs to conform with what is axiomatically "right" or "true." Obviously such an intellectual system could only exist in the Modern world:

opposing as it does the acceptance of traditional assumptions, ideology traces its roots back to Socrates, whose influence on modern thought has been inestimable.

[30]E.g., Demerath and Hammond, 39-40; Goody, 147; and cf. van Baaren 37 (quoting V. Turner) and Parsons, 303. Gordon Allport notes further that "the place of religion in the personal life is basically different from its place in society." (Allport, 27-28)

[31] Cf. Saliba, 151.

[32]Cf. Yinger, 10; Dobbelaere, 547; Drijvers and Leertouwer in van Baaren and Drijvers, 164-65.

[33] Cf. Spiro, in Banton, 90; Bianchi, 16ff.

[34]See esp. Dobbelaere, 537 (citing Parsons and T. F. O'Dea); and C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley, 1970 c 1961), p. 1.

[35]See Streng, pp. 30 and 5; Berger (1970), 25-26; Spiro in Banton, 110, 112-13; Yinger, 6ff.; Norbeck, 23; Geertz in Banton, 12-24; Drijvers in van Baaren and Drijvers, 71-72; Pruyser in Eister, 195; C. K. Yang, loc. cit. Cf. W. H. Goodenough in Eister, 169; and L. G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion*, 2nd ed. (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1975), 18. Cf. now also Saliba, 138.

[36] Streng, 4-5.

[37] Cf. Kishimoto, 239-240.

[38] Baird (1971), 18, citing W. A. Christian; emphasis Baird's.

[39]Spiro in Banton, 96. Cf. Ferré, 10; Bianchi, 17; Smith, 67. Spiro holds that such things may be "sacred," but cannot be "religious," since he has defined that word in terms of reference to supernatural beings. Such a distinction does not diminish the validity of the criticism when applied to definitions such as Baird's. For a brief critique of Baird's definition, see T. Ahlbäck's review in *Temenos 8 (1972), 136.*

[40]In Bellah's famous "Religious Evolution," in Robertson, 263. Cf. Yinger, 6; Berger (1974), 127; and Kishimoto, 240.

[41] For an explanation of these terms, see A. J. Vink in van Baaren and Drijvers, 149f.

[42] See Smart, 12-13 et passim.

[43] Cf. Berger (1974), 126.

[44]Cf. Saliba, 38. This dichotomy is well exemplified by the antagonism of W. C. Smith and Hans Penner in the symposium edited by Baird (1975). The vociferous scientific school can be well studied in two other recent anthologies: van Baaren and Drijvers (in which Jacques Waardenburg is the sole humanist), and Eister. Another sign of the dichotomy in the U.S. is the separation of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion from the more humanistic American Academy of Religion. The excesses of certain of the scientific school can be seen in van Baaren's demand for a "systematic science of religion" (45ff.), as if any "science" could be "unsystematic."

[45]See esp. van Baaren and Drijvers, 64f., 81-84, 159-160. Van Baaren is so opposed to "understanding" (45, 48-49) that he fails

to take care to understand the methods of the phenomenologists: he says that "understanding" is differentiated from other forms of explanation (sic) *only* by assuming the values and beliefs of the people being studied (45). That is unquestionably an inaccurate oversimplification, as can be verified by careful attention to the fundamental process of epoche or "bracketing" (cf. Smart).

46 Cf. Dobbelaere, 549; Ferré, 4; Pummer, 165; etc.

[47]Cf. e.g. G. Abell, *Exploration of the Universe*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1969), 6.

48 Cf. Kishimoto, 238.

[49]Cf. Berger (1967), 28, 23, 180, and (1970), 45-46; and see esp. Norbeck, 7-10; Geertz, in Banton, 4. Berger has since backed down from such a theory of the nature of religion.

50 These arguments are mine, but cf. Smart, 58-61.

51 Berger (1970), 83.

52 See note 42 supra on van Baaren, etc.

53 Berger (1974), 128-29, emphasis his; cf. Dobbelaere, 547-48.

54 Berger (1974), 132; cf. Berger (1970), 1-27.

55 This is my analysis, not Berger's.

56 Cf. Pye, 18.

57 Cf. Ferre, 7-8; Smith, 65.

[58]Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York, 1966), 258-59, cited by Jacob Neusner in Baird (1975), 31, cf. 37 and 75.

[59]Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (Yale, 1950), 21, cited by Demerath and Hammond, 132.

[60]J. Tennekes, *Anthropology, Relativism and Method* (Assen, 1974), 61, cited in van Baaren and Drijvers, 141.

[61]Ferré, 11. Cf. Vink (van Baaren and Drijvers, 143) who cites Spiro's statement that "viewed systemically, religion can be differentiated from other culturally constituted institutions by virtue only of its reference to superhuman beings." (Spiro in Banton, 98)

62 Streng, 8-9.

63 Streng, 8.

64 Waardenburg, 120.

[65]Cf. ibid., 130; Smart, 67; Berger (1974), 126-27, 129; and even Baird (1971), 59. Cf. also Saliba, 31.

66 Smart, 6.

[67]Smart (32-34) discusses "evocative phenomenology" by analogy with the rhetorical device of *oratio obliqua.*

68 Waardenburg, 113.

[69]I am here building upon certain points made by the following scholars: Streng, 4, 48; Berger (1970), 2, 94, and (1974), 129-132; and Clifford Geertz, in Banton, 27.

70 Williams, 8.

[71]Cf. Waardenburg, 122, 129, 132f.; Luckmann, 58, and Dobbelaere, 538; G. Winter, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 2

(1962-63), 61. Cf. also Demerath and Hammond, 35-36; Berger (1974), 128; Yinger, 15-16; C. K. Yang, loc. cit.; R. H. Lowie, *Primitive Religion* (1924), xvi, cited by Williams, 10; and esp, A. Leroi-Gourhan, *La Religion de la Prehistoire* (Paris, 1964), 5, cited by van Baaren, 35. Cf. also Saliba, 57, 62.

72 Cf. e.g. Saliba, 97.

[73]This is my own formulation. Two articles by scholars in philosophy shed great light on the structure of the "high religions": J. E. Smith has found a common structure of Ideal (religious object and goal), Need (flaw or defect in ordinary existence), and Deliverer (a power bridging the gap to the Ideal). (Smith, "The Structure of Religion," *Religious Studies* 1, 1965-66, 63-73) Smith's structure fits most of the high religions, and certain elements of some non-literate mythologies (e.g. African creation myths); but it possesses a conceptual sophistication absent in most "primitive religions." R. L. Franklin has the same problem, though by stressing a transformative experience he seems more concerned with individual experience than with conceptual patterns. (Franklin, "Religion and Religions," *Religious Studies* 10, 1974, 419-431)

74 Ferré, 8-9; cf. Parsons, 317ff.; Kishimoto, 236; Saliba, 171-72.

[75]Cf. Streng, 82. The modern West tends to view superempirical concerns in light of the empirical because its inherited concepts of such concerns no longer have meaning in our secularized worldview.

[76]Luckmann, 58; cf. Berger (1970), 96; Saliba, 153. Luckmann, being a sociologist devoted to a "scientific" analysis of religion, assumes this "sacred cosmos" to be a human construction not corresponding to objective reality. But he falls victim to the scientistic fallacy, by assuming a truth-claim which cannot be verified. Science cannot prove that the "sacred cosmos" is created by human beings rather than a pre-existent reality merely perceived by human beings. The truly neutral researcher assumes neither view, but merely attempts to understand and clarify human experience.

[77]See esp. van der Leeuw, II, 679-680; Allport, 19-20, 25-26; Parsons (citing Weber) in Robertson, 59-60; Smith, 66; etc.

[78]See esp. Waardenburg, 109, 118, 133; Streng, 47-48; Saliba, 51, 65, and M. P. Nilsson, in *Classical Approaches*, I, 615. Allport (150) presents empirical evidence for this point, citing an Illinois poll during the 1940s asking people why they were religious (if they were): "Out of sixty-five suggested answers the one most commonly endorsed was that `religion gives meaning to life.'" I use "meaning" in a completely different sense from Hans Penner (in Baird, 1975, 79-94), who attempts to reduce religious meaning to semantics, and the study of religion to a subbranch of semantics (92). Baird is correct (ibid., 116ff.) that Penner fails to distinguish between words and their referents. Anything can have religious meaning independent of the meaning of any or all words used to refer to it: a doorway can have the mythico-religious meaning of a gateway between

heaven and earth (or the sacred world and the profane world) regardless of the word (in any language) one might use to refer to it.

[79]I have developed the concept of "static" and "dynamic" religions based upon categories proposed by Henri Bergson. In some instances, static religions are "ethnic" ones and dynamic religions are "founded" ones, but that is not the basic distinction. (The great founded religions began as revolutionary religious movements, but owing to powerful historical forces they all became static after a certain period; in many cases new revolutionary movements were then born out of the old, static founded religion.) The basic distinction is that in the static tradition, a given phenomenon is viewed as legitimate insofar as it accords with, and maintains, traditional norms; while in a dynamic religious movement, legitimacy is conferred through some new revelation or insight of a specific individual (or group) who stands (by virtue of said innovation) outside the inherited social order. It is significant that both types of religious activity can be viewed as the re-actualization of a paradigm-- even simultaneously--provided it be recognized that the pattern re-actualized would be different. It should also be remembered that neither type of religion (particularly the "dynamic") need be inherently social.

[80]   Cf. Allport, 141, 78; Saliba, 51.

[81]The importance of religion's integrative potential should not be underrated, but neither should it be overrated. Wach once cautioned, "It must be understood that this integration should not be viewed as a `purpose' of religion; on the one hand it should be regarded as a precondition and on the other as a result of religious experience." (Joachim Wach, *Comparative Study of Religions*, New York: Columbia, 1969 c 1958, 34-35) Obviously the religious individual does not hold a belief, perform an act, or cherish a symbol in order to integrate his psyche and his world -- even though it may well serve to do so; he does so because it would be absurd, inconceivable, to do otherwise. The belief, the act, the symbol represent to him the ultimate truth of life, the source of the highest meaning and value. To disregard them is something for which there could be no conceivable motive or rationale once he has encountered Transcendent Meaning. Only those who have not had such an experience (or who had it so long ago that it no longer seems real or compelling) could disregard the belief, rite or symbol.

[82]   Cf. Allport, 141.

[83]   Cf. Streng, 5; Allport, ibid.

[84]   Cf. Allport, 28.

[85]Ferré (6) points out that use of the phrase "essence of religion" does not imply postulation of "immutable essences either *in rebus* or *ante rem*." What is meant by "the essence of religion" is simply "the minimum set of characteristics that are laid down as both necessary and sufficient for the application of the term to whatever possesses them."