

RELIGION AS UNIVERSAL: TRIBULATIONS OF AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

by Murray L. Wax

Abstract. The English term *religion* is used to refer to local Christian churches, their organizations, and their practices. Nevertheless, Western anthropologists have tried to utilize it as if it were a technical term with universal applicability. Anthropologists have sought to characterize religion by several dichotomies, although their own field researches have revealed the irrelevance of such dichotomies as well as the fact that non-Western peoples do not recognize an entity equivalent to religion. Were the characteristics used by anthropologists in defining *religion* precisely applied to Western societies, then several other kinds of organizations, ceremonies, and practices would have as much, or even greater, claim to being included within the rubric of religion as the Christian and allied churches. The consequence of this conceptual imprecision has been the theoretical stagnation noted by eminent theorists.

In 1956 E. E. Evans-Pritchard wrote, "It seems to me to be only too evident that our study of religion has hardly begun to be a scientific study and that its conclusions are more often posited on the facts than derived from them" (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 7). A curious counterpoint to this is the judgment of Clifford Geertz that "no theoretical advances of major importance" have been made in the anthropological study of religion since the second world war and that "it is living off the conceptual capital of its ancestors" (Geertz [1966] 1973, 87). If Geertz is correct in his judgment, which he repeated unamended seven years later in the volume of his selected essays, then there has been no progress during the last thirty years of study of religion; if Evans-Pritchard is correct, then there never was much in the way of conceptual capital.

In such situations of scholarly stagnation one obvious possibility is that researchers have been relying uncritically upon faulty conceptualizations of the most basic terms. Such is the position of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who reminds us that *religion* "is notoriously difficult to

Murray L. Wax is visiting distinguished professor at the College of Saint Thomas, Saint Paul, Minnesota 55105.

[*Zygon*, vol. 19, no. 1 (March 1984).]

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define. At least, there has been in recent decades a bewildering variety of definitions; and no one of them has commanded wide acceptance. In some cases of this sort, a repeated failure to agree, to reach any satisfying answer or even to make any discernable progress towards one, has turned out to mean that men have been asking the wrong question" ([1962] 1964, 21). When we reflect on the fact that *religion* is a term easily and intelligibly employed in popular English speech, functioning unproblematically as a folk category of discourse, both high-brow and lowbrow, it surely is perplexing that scholars have found the term "notoriously difficult to define" and have emerged with "a bewildering variety of definitions." Smith's diagnosis of the failure noted by Evans-Pritchard and Geertz leads to an examination of the problems and mysteries of the scholarly attempt to respond to the question, What is religion?¹

The disparity between popular fluency and scholarly perplexity becomes more comprehensible when we perceive the difference in intent. While the general public is content to focus locally, modern scholars wish to outline a concept that is universal.² They postulate that, suitably defined, religion is present in every society. But that postulate entails linguistic consequences, for, if religion were present in some significant sense, we would anticipate that the members of each society would have found it necessary to discuss so vital a social entity and that they would have in their own language words or phrases that could be translated easily and unambiguously into the English term *religion*. Unhappily, this is not the case: only the languages of the modern West contain a term corresponding to *religion* (although some other languages have recently acquired such a word as a consequence of the necessity for dealing with the notion as earnestly proffered by missionaries and other alien visitors). Even the ancient Hebrew Scriptures contain no word corresponding to *religion*: we learn that God established a covenant with Abraham and his descendents or that He gave to Moses a set of instructions, but never that there was established a Jewish religion. Likewise in the New Testament Jesus does not speak of bringing a new religion; rather the Gospels are messages concerning the appearance of the Saviour and the imminent transfiguration of the world. Nowhere is it stated that Jesus came to establish a (Christian or other) religion. Indeed, if religion is conceived to be institutional or enduring, it would have made little sense to have preached "a religion" in a world poised on the brink.

Thus, Western scholars who wish to define *religion* so that it signifies a societal universal are confronting a formidable cultural and linguistic barrier. If the members of a society do not distinguish so significant an activity or social entity, then it becomes problematic whether an outside observer can delineate such within their total social fabric. Before we

review how scholars have been handling this perplexing task, it might be useful if we first examine how *religion* is used within our own language and culture, so that we better appreciate the hazards of translation or transfer.

RELIGION IN THE UNITED STATES

Within the United States *religion* is a folk category, a common term of popular speech whose usage finds validation in our fundamental law and in bureaucratic and administrative action. For popular speech the core referent is the set of organized denominations: Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and so on. By extension, other formally organized associations of suitable heritage or tradition—temples, synagogues, mosques—are also labelled as instances of religion. Legally, such associations enjoy privileges and protections deriving from the First Amendment to the federal Constitution (passed in 1791): “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . .” Any social entity—be it therapeutic center, ethical-philosophical association, ethnic enterprise, or social club—that can claim to function like an organized church has a powerful motive to have itself recognized as a religion. Responding to those appeals, judges and legislators must routinely make decisions about What is a religion? and the criteria they evolve are foreign to those of concern to the scholar who wishes to formulate a concept of religion as a societal universal. Officials seem to operate with the notion that a religion is an organized and enduring association whose avowed purposes are benevolent or expressive, not primarily commercial, and whose membership is affiliated on an enduring and exclusive basis.³ These latter qualities are epitomized by the dog tags of the armed services with their notations of P, C, or J.⁴

Before we examine some of the definitional strategies scholars have employed for *religion* let us review summarily some of the problems associated with the application of the term to civilized societies outside the Western world.

RELIGION(?) IN OTHER CIVILIZED SOCIETIES

In an effort to assert the universality of the term, some scholars have coined religions with such names as *Confucianism*, *Taoism*, *Shintoism*, or *Hinduism*. These inventions have been subjected to severe criticism by regional specialists, but the convention has become so deeply engrained that it is hard to discard. Sometimes a specialist will utilize the nomenclature in the title of a book or essay, possibly at the request of the publisher or editor, but then in the introductory statement will explain how misleading the term can be and how foreign it is to the way

of living of the people in question. Writing on *Confucianism* in the 1958 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Lewis Hodus declares in his first sentence, “*Confucianism*, a misleading general term for the teachings of the Chinese classics upon cosmology, the social order, government, morals and ethics” (cited in Smith [1962] 1964, 248, n. 2).

In kindred fashion, a specialist like Ernest Benz may use the word *religions* in referring to *Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, or *Shintoism*, but then immediately note how different these are from Christianity and from Western patterns of thought and life. In an essay “On Understanding Non-Christian Religions” Benz ([1959] 1964) explains that these lack the personalistic idea of God, do not accept a basic essential difference between creation and the creator, and have little in the way of formal theology or doctrine. Further, he points out that their membership does not constitute churches, there is little in the way of formal organization except at local levels, membership or participation in a community or cult is not exclusive, and much of what Westerners would label magic or sorcery is intermingled with the activities of these “religions.”

We may illustrate Benz’s predicament by a discussion of Shintoism. The word *Shinto* is Chinese, rather than Japanese, and was introduced by Chinese scholars in order to designate the traditions of the natives and to distinguish these from their own cultural norms. The Japanese speak of *kami no michi*, “the way of the gods”; and in the nineteenth century the Europeans developed the interesting formulation of *Shintoism* to designate the religion of those who would honor “that way” and would respond to it. Then, in the 1930s a minor international issue grew out of the unanswerable question, Is Shinto a religion? Until the nineteenth century *this question could not even have been framed in Japan*. When it was raised, the Japanese answered it negatively (Smith [1962] 1964, 67-68).

Benz accepts the term *Shintoism* but notes that it and Buddhism mix and interpenetrate in Japan:

The Japanese is a Shintoist when he marries since the wedding ceremony is conducted at the Shinto shrine; and he is a Buddhist when he dies, since the funeral rites are conducted by Buddhist priests, the cemeteries are connected with Buddhist temples, and the rituals for the souls of the dead are held in Buddhist temples. Between the wedding and funeral, the Japanese celebrates, according to private taste, preference, and family tradition, the Shinto shrine festivals and the Buddhist temple festivals. . . . The “Pure Buddhism” mentioned in our textbooks of the history of religions does not exist at all (Benz [1959] 1964, 7).

Concerning *Hinduism*, Smith comments that

The classical Hindus were inhibited by no lack of sophistication or self-consciousness. They thought about what we call religious questions profusely and with critical analysis. But they could not think of Hinduism because that is

the name we give as a totality to whatever it might be that they thought, or did, or thought worth doing. . . . the mass of religious phenomena that we shelter under the umbrella of that term [Hinduism] is not a unity and does not aspire to be. It is not an entity in any theoretical sense, let alone any practical one. . . . It is remarkable how many modern treatises on *Hinduism* have as their opening sentence some such reflection as "Hinduism is very difficult to define," and then proceed to try to define it (Smith [1962] 1964, 61, 63).

Smith concludes that the interpenetration of different traditions and movements had been such that, within pre-Muslim India, the scholarly observer could not meaningfully have distinguished as separate religious entities Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, or animism (Smith [1962] 1964, 250-51, n. 52, 53, 55).⁵

We cannot move further in this empirically based discussion until we deal with some strategies for the definition of *religion* as a societal universal. Classically these have involved dichotomous predicates.

DICHOTOMOUS PREDICATES

Definitions usually involve contrast, and religion is almost always contrasted with magic or science. More important, *religion* is usually defined in relationship to one side of a pair of polar opposites: supernatural/natural, sacred/profane, ritual/nonritual, transcendental/mundane (empirical). When the social context is the Western world, the application of these predicates is usually self-evident (or at least presumptively so). However, in the context of a non-Western nonliterate—generically "primitive"—society, the application may not be so evident, especially if we inquire whether the distinction is one which is made by the native actors. Is it the actors or just the Western observers who characterize the ceremony as directed at supernatural powers (Goody 1961)?⁶ Do the actors divide their world into the sacred and the profane? Given that scholars are concerned with achieving a universal concept, most have sought for predicates which are within the frame of reference of all native actors. Obviously, for any pair of predicates, it becomes an empirical question as to whether the actors do indeed recognize this distinction; and, as we shall see, finding such a universal dichotomy has proven a difficult quest.

One of the earliest scholars to recognize the treacherous difficulties of characterizing the frame of reference of the native actors was Emile Durkheim. Well over a half-century ago he observed that "in order to say that certain things are supernatural it is necessary to have the sentiment that a natural order of things exists, that is to say, that the phenomena of the universe are bound together by necessary relations, called laws . . . but this idea of universal determinism is of recent origin" (Durkheim [1912] 1961, 41). This lucid and accurate pair of statements

has never been challenged. The first statement is tautological (or definitional). The second is an empirical generalization that is almost elementary in its historical facticity. Under these circumstances it is startling to discover contemporary, reputable scholars ignoring the critique by Durkheim and employing the supernatural/natural dichotomy to characterize the religious lives of people who have not assimilated the Western modality of scientific thought.⁷ A procedure so pervasive yet so erroneous must cause us to take stock, and it further confirms our initial hypothesis that something is wrong in the fundamental kinds of questions that are being asked about religion. We will deal with this issue later.

Durkheim himself had proposed the centrality of the dichotomous separation of "the sacred" and "the profane," and in making this distinction he was in tune with contemporary usage. Unhappily this pair of terms also proves to be peculiar to the Western tradition and not translatable into other languages; viewing the matter obversely, non-Western languages do not have terms corresponding to this dichotomy, and their speakers do not conventionally recognize the separation.

A number of leading anthropologists, controlling large volumes of excellent ethnographic data, have rejected the universality of the sacred/profane dichotomy. Evans-Pritchard argued (1965, 65) that what Durkheim "calls *sacred* and *profane* are on the same level of experience, and far from being cut off from one another, they are so closely intermingled as to be inseparable. . . . I have never found the dichotomy was of much use." Jack Goody, writing about the LoDagaa, declares that not only do they not recognize the distinction between natural and supernatural "but neither do the LoDagaa appear to have any concepts at all equivalent to the vaguer and not unrelated dichotomy between the sacred and profane which Durkheim regarded as universal" (1961, 151). W. E. H. Stanner, who became a recognized authority on the same aborigines who were the type case for Durkheim's argument in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* remarks that, during his initial researches among these people, he blamed himself for incompetence when the facts would not fit the dichotomy! "One doubts if many anthropologists subscribe literally to the thesis of a 'bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes which embrace all that exists, but which radically exclude each other' [he is, of course, citing Durkheim]. . . . The aboriginal universe of 'all that exists' is not divided in fact and therefore should not be divided in theory, into two classes. To use the dichotomy is to disregard what is the case" (Stanner 1967, 229-30). In his study *Nupe Religion* S. F. Nadel remarks that we have to "judge the transcendality of things by our own way of thinking . . . the very conflict between

supernatural and empirical knowledge on which we base our judgments is likely to be absent in a primitive culture" (Nadel 1954, 3-4, as cited in Goody 1961, 155).

In short, the major difficulty with the various dichotomies employed by Western scholars is that they are imputed to the frame of reference of actors who are not within the Western tradition of rational-scientific thought. Considering that the claims being made that this or that dichotomy is universal, the negative evidence that has been accumulated is far stronger than it needs to be. The critics are eminent anthropologists—well versed in social theory, students of religion—and are then arguing on the basis of data which they personally have collected, which is in the context of fieldwork within several different societies. With any universal hypothesis or characterization, it formally requires but one negative instance to disconfirm; without any pretence of an exhaustive survey, I have assembled several major disconfirming instances. It can only be regarded as amazing that scholars generally have been indifferent to these rebuttals and have continued to employ these dichotomies as if they had logical and scientific validity.⁸

For those scholars who are deeply attached to one or another of these polar dichotomies, a possible resolution is to abandon the claim that the distinction is one within the frame of reference of the native actor. This research strategy is advocated by Goody, but it has not generally appealed to social scientists of religion because it means the abandonment of the quest for a societal universal, an entity that is perceived as distinctive and significant by the native actors and thus denominated by a term or phrase translatable as *religion*. Goody is content to renounce this quest, for he concludes: "It is impossible to escape from the fact that the category of magico-religious acts and beliefs can be defined only by the observer" (1961, 160).

AN EARLIER DICHOTOMY: REVEALED OR NATURAL RELIGION

Etymologically *religion* can be traced to Latin origins, but the usages of the classical terms were quite different from the modern (Smith [1962] 1964). For a sense directly related to ours, we turn to the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment.⁹ Bitter critics of Roman Catholicism and of other established denominations, they utilized the term *religion* frequently and polemically (Gay 1966). By grouping the various strands of Christianity together with Judaism and Islam, and labeling these all as *religion*, they undercut the pretensions of each to being uniquely authorized and sanctioned by God. By the further device of referring to them as instances of "revealed religion," they juxtaposed the claims of each to possess scriptures that were direct revelations from God. The *philosophes* attacked these scriptures as unseemly compounds of

mythology that stultified science, of narrative whose lessons were immoral, of commandments that were unnatural, and of pretensions that were outrageous. Christianity and the Bible had inhibited the growth of celestial mechanics, which nonetheless had triumphed owing to the inspired genius of Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, and Gottfried Leibnitz. The *philosophes* compared that magnificent intellectual achievement with Biblical versions of "science"; they also compared Christianity with the philosophical and ethical legacies of classical antiquity; and they emerged with contempt for revealed religion.

To revealed religion *philosophes* such as Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau counterposed not atheism but "natural religion," a creed they derived from the classical world but which they invigorated by imputing it to the "noble savages" who were being encountered in the voyages of global exploration. They saw the essence of religion as belief in a creed, and in the case of natural religion the tenets were simple and evident, as in Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social*: "the existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent and bountiful God: the reality of the life to come: the reward of the just, and the punishment of evil-doers: the sanctity of the Social Contract and of the Laws. The negative element I could confine to one single article:—intolerance, for that belongs to the creeds which I have excluded" (Rousseau 1762 in Barker, ed. 1968, 306).

On the social and moral level a dramatic explication of natural religion was given by Diderot in his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1772), which purports to be an account of the life of the people of Tahiti, and of the incongruity of the effort by the French military to assert sovereignty over their lands and by the Catholic priests to missionize their people. Perceptively, Diderot does not have the Tahitians employ the term "religion," but their spokesman Orou declares: "Would you like to know what is good and what is bad in all times and places? Pay close attention to the nature of things and actions, to your relations with your fellow creatures, to the effect of your behavior on your own well-being and on the general welfare. You are mad if you believe that there is anything in the universe, high or low, that can add or subtract from the laws of nature" (Diderot [1772] 1973, 402).

Unwittingly, modern anthropologists have followed the lead of the *philosophes*. Religion as societal universal is but the refashioning of natural religion, although brute encounter with exotic peoples has rubbed the sheen off the myth of the noble savage and his consonance with Nature. Nevertheless, fieldwork often seems to confirm the presence of religion, if only because no other group in the world is as rational and disenchanting in its worldview as the social scientists of the

West. Faced with the mythologies, ceremonials, passions, and collective enthusiasms of the exotic peoples, scientists have found "religion" to be a convenient heuristic. While "religion" does not explain and while it defies anthropological attempts to categorize by such devices as dichotomous predicates, what do we have that serves better? Besides, given the imprecision of the popular English-language term *religion*, some connection usually can be established between it and the lives of these peoples. "If anthropologists used the word *religion* in the sense in which it is ordinarily used by ordinary speakers of English, where it is tied in with such compartmentalized matters as church membership and a professional priesthood, then it would have no application at all to most of the societies which anthropologists usually study. Yet anthropologists regularly write monographs about particular 'primitive' religions and even about 'primitive religion' in general" (Leach 1982, 133).

DURKHEIM AND CIVIL RELIGION

Among the most influential of the definitions of *religion* as a societal universal was that proposed by Durkheim (1912). While his definition did rely on a dichotomy that has proven not to be universal, his recognition of the roles of morality and social cohesion served to move discussion beyond the sterile emphases upon belief and upon the individual as solitary believer.

We already have noted Durkheim's simple, exact, and severe critique of the dichotomy of supernatural/natural. Instead, he argued for the universality of the dichotomy sacred/profane. He then defined *religion* as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" ([1912] 1961, 62).

We need not deal further with the use of the dichotomy sacred/profane or enter into the question of how radical must be the bipartite division of the world for the definition to be generally applicable (cf. Lukes 1973, 24f). Rather, we can agree that important social configurations within *Western* societies are distinguished by a conscious veneration of the sacred and a separation from the profane. We also can note in passing that Durkheim's definition requires a set of native activities which are so distinct and socially so significant that it would be amazing if these were not evident in their discourse by words and phrases which somehow were translatable into the English *religion*.

Given a definition of this character and influence, the rudimentary scientific wisdom would be to determine precisely what it excluded and what it included. It would then be incumbent upon the users of the

definition to formulate their field of investigation accordingly. For example, it should be quite clear that within Western national societies a significant instance of (Durkheimian) religion would be national civil religion, whose sentiment is patriotism.¹⁰ Not only does the state cult fit neatly into Durkheim's initial definition, but it accords equally well with his subsequent interpretation of the social life of the Australian aborigines. If the aborigines were worshipping Society (writ transcendently), so the citizen patriot was worshipping civil society in the form of the state (Wax 1968, 229f). Yet, evidently, scholars had a pronounced blockage against perceiving that, if *religion* is defined as a Durkheimian societal universal, one might be lead to investigating entities beyond the churches of established Christian denominations. So far as I know, it was not until William Lloyd Warner described Memorial Day as "a sacred American ceremonial" that this was even hinted in the literature (1953, chap. 1). Further, although Warner was deeply influenced by Durkheim, whom he cited twice in his chapter, not even he made the identification explicit. Instead, Warner cautiously declared that "Memorial Day and similar ceremonies are one of the several forms of collective representations which Durkheim so brilliantly defined and interpreted in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*." He then explicated Durkheim's terminology and noted that "the Memorial Day rites of American towns are sacred collective representations and a modern cult of the dead." But he spoke of neither "a religion" nor "a civil religion" (Warner 1953, 22).

A generation was to pass before Robert N. Bellah's "Civil Religion in America" (1967) revealed more explicitly what might be entailed in the use of a societally universal definition of *religion*, as Durkheim had elaborated it. Bellah's essay created a minor furor within the academy; yet, from the point of view of our present inquiry, it is startling that neither Bellah nor his principal commentators (Richey and Jones 1974) trouble to relate civil religion to the definitions advanced by Durkheim or by any other major theorist of the past century. Instead, Bellah (1967) referred to Rousseau's *Du Contrat Social* (1762) as the source of his notion of civil religion.¹¹ Then several years later, in response to his critics, he spoke not as if American civil religion were an active and enduring social institution or process, involving millions of persons over scores of years, but as if it were a novel mode of apprehending social reality which he had ventured to construct: "In a sense, and not in a trivial sense, civil religion in America existed from the moment the winter 1967 issue of *Daedalus* [containing his essay] was printed. . . . it was what Peter Berger would call a social construction of reality" (Bellah [1967] 1974, 256). Likewise, Bellah's commentators operated with a hypostatized view of religion since they never dealt with a verbal

definition, against which to compare American practices; yet, they were able to spin elaborate arguments on the issue of whether or not there is an American civil religion.

In the chapter "Of Civil Religion" in his book *The Social Contract*, Rousseau delineates the varieties of religion and evaluates their suitability for political societies. He takes for granted the reader's understanding of the term and does not present a definition, but his review does lead him toward the notion of the form of religion most suitable:

a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it behooves the Sovereign to fix, not with the precision of religious dogmas, but treating them as a body of social *sentiments* without which no man can either be a good citizen or a faithful subject. Though it has no power to compel anyone to believe them, it can banish from the State all who fail to do so, not on grounds of impiety, but as lacking in social sense, and being incapable of sincerely loving the laws and justice, or of sacrificing, should the need arise, their lives to their duty (Rousseau 1762 in Barker, ed. 1968, 305-6).

By grounding his discussion of civil religion in these passages from Rousseau, Bellah has deftly sidestepped the issue which this paper has attempted to address. We are translated from the realm of the societal universal to that of wise planning by a sovereign who wishes to maintain domestic tranquility and national strength. If we wish to comprehend the realities of civil religion in the United States, whether past or newly constructed by Bellah, Rousseau cannot help us. Yet, like the other philosophes discussed above, Rousseau does direct our attention toward the motivation for seeking a concept that will prove to be a societal universal. The roots of that quest may be anchored less in science and more in criticism or statecraft.

Finally, this discussion dramatizes the fact that the decision about a definition does have consequences. Only too often writers of books on religion formulate a definition in the initial chapters that purports to characterize a societal universal. Then, in the subsequent chapters they shift the meaning of the term so that it comes to have the range of relevance of popular discourse. The initial definition thus plays the role of the chaplain's prayer before the opening of the sessions of Congress: it has no effect on what subsequently occurs. In the case of anthropological science such a procedure can only lead to theoretical muddle and the stagnation mentioned by Evans-Pritchard, Geertz, and Smith.

CONCLUSION

I sat next to her, and she said to me early in the afternoon, what is the answer? I was silent. In that case, she said, what is the question?

Then the whole afternoon was troubled, confused
and very uncertain (Toklas 1963, 173).

In one paper I cannot do justice to this richness of anthropological and social-scientific labors on the concept of religion. Critics will note that I have neglected some recent efforts, in particular the definition proffered by Geertz (1966) which has indeed been formulated in a fashion so as to sidestep some of the quagmires I have noted above; its success in that regard leads to other and significant limitations, which I hope to discuss in a later essay. My justification for the present limited essay is that so many anthropologists have been repeating the errors diagnosed so effectively by reputable colleagues.

Some reminders are in order. A term can only be stretched so far without losing utility. *Religion* is a valid term of popular and administrative discourse within the United States and the English-speaking world; it also may be useful as a term for designating a societal universal, but with most definitions the overlap between the two ranges of discourse is so minimal as to lead to severe distortion. Perhaps we can gain reassurance from the fact that, when *religion* began to be employed in intellectual discourse, it was mostly by philosophes who were denouncing Christianity. When they applied *religion* to the lives of noncivilized peoples, these were being so romanticized that the term had no true referent. Now we know that in most non-Western societies the natives do not distinguish religion as we do; indeed fieldworkers have found it difficult to delineate a religion that is distinct from culture. At this moment, the following three suggestions may seem modest but would ensure logical clarity.

(1) In the course of their texts, when scholars formulate either a definition of *religion* or a specification of dichotomous predicates such as "sacred/profane," they should (a) be careful to explore exactly which social entities are included and excluded and (b) endeavor to be consistent in their subsequent usage and references. Comment: The danger is that they will confound the range of reference of *religion* as a term of popular usage in English and other Western languages with the range that is implied by a strict application of their definition. It is this basic lack of precision which is responsible for our conceptual disorder.

(2) Once a definition of *religion* (or related predicates) has been formulated, it then becomes an empirical question as to its (their) presence in given societies or groups. Comment: Medieval definitions of the Deity tried to incorporate *existence* as a predicate; since the time of Immanuel Kant, we realize this was a maneuver that begged the question at issue. While anthropologists are more sophisticated, we still

tend to be ethnocentric in our discussions of religion, and we too easily impute to others the characteristics of Western religious practices.

(3) When anthropologists talk of the religion of a particular people or of their religious characteristics, they should be careful to distinguish between the terms of Western scientific discourse and those of native or popular discourse. Comment: As a matter of conceptual or theoretical strategy, anthropologists may choose in their definition of *religion* to emphasize its emotional, expressive, mythic, or irrational characteristics. While this may permit a sharp contrast to science in a fashion of great importance to those who bear the tradition of social-scientific rationality, the cultural phenomenon is unlikely to be so distinguished by native actors.¹²

NOTES

1. "Rather than addressing ourselves to the problem 'What is the nature of religion?' I suggest that an understanding of the variegated and evolving religious situation of mankind can proceed, and indeed perhaps can proceed only, if that question in that form be set aside or dropped, as inapt" (Smith [1962] 1964, 16).

2. Among the ethnologists of the nineteenth century, some such as James G. Frazer defined *religion* so that it proved not to be universal, but others such as Edward B. Tylor so that it proved to be. Since then the move among anthropologists has been strongly in the latter direction. Presumably this could be linked to the anthropological perception of the psychic unity of mankind, but my goal in this paper is not a detailed review of that intellectual history.

3. A parallel system of public classification and membership operates in many European nations, especially those with established or recognized churches. By virtue of registration in a particular church or denomination, individuals not only allocate personal tax support but also may affect the educational assignment of their children.

4. Not to mention popular usages such as WASP and WASH.

5. Writing in 1915, James Bissett Pratt managed to speak of Hinduism as a religion only by making it universal and so encompassing every possible creed: "[The Hindu] has always enjoyed very ample liberty of thought because he and his fellows have never conceived of religion as being in any way identical with creed. The Hindu atheist is in as good and regular standing as the polytheist, the theist or the pantheist, and provided he lives according to the ancient customs is never regarded as in any way heretical. In fact Hinduism includes within itself every kind of creed, and from this point of view claims to be the only universal religion extant" (James Bissett Pratt 1915, 11 as cited in Schneider 1964, 84-85).

6. Interpreting events from the frame of reference of the actor, i.e., understanding the meanings of actions from his or her point of view, is of course intrinsic to *verstehende Soziologie* (cf. Truzzi, ed. 1974), to "thick description" in cultural anthropology (Geertz 1973), as well as to the Symbolic Interactionist social psychology of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer.

7. The following are some recent instances of the usage by anthropologists and sociologists of the term *supernatural* in order to describe the religious practices of peoples who are not in the Western tradition of scientific rationality: "The shaman, with his supernatural powers, . . ." (Foster 1976, 778). "Supernatural sanctions were not ultimate sources of authority and privilege in such societies [ancient complex societies, especially early states], . . ." (Webster 1976, 825). "Masquerade is, of course, a very prominent theme in Pueblo drama since all impersonators of the supernaturals—kachinas, clowns with masks, *Tsaveyoh*—can be said to be masquerading" (Ortiz 1972, 147). "Similarly at Isleta . . . it is clear the people relate differently to the supernaturals as priest, member of

a religious society, or laymen" (Harvey 1972, 210). "Religion can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is supernatural and sacred" (Johnstone 1975, 20).

In his textbook on primitive religion, Edward Norbeck relies heavily on the term *supernatural* but does mention the issue of in whose frame of reference it is to be relevant: "The least constricting terms our vocabulary provides to enable us to set off the realm of religion from the rest of culture are the natural and the supernatural. . . . Using this distinction, as others have done, we shall define religion as ideas, attitudes, creeds, and acts of supernaturalism. . . . It is important to add that this definition of religion undoubtedly represents the extension to the primitive world of ideas of Western society. We have often been warned from within the ranks of anthropology that our classifications must represent native points of view. Unfortunately, we can never be certain that we know native viewpoints. . . . For those who object to a definition of religion as supernaturalism, we offer the alternative of regarding this book as a discussion of supernaturalism." Unhappily, Norbeck is not consistent in this view that the supernatural need not be interpreted from the native point of view, for even in the initial discussion of his definition of religion he insists that "most if not all peoples make some sort of distinction between the objects, beliefs, and events of the everyday, workaday, ordinary world and those which transcend the ordinary world. Using this distinction, . . . we shall define religion as ideas, attitudes, creeds, and acts of supernaturalism" (Norbeck 1961, 11-12).

8. Talcott Parsons has been a vigorous advocate of his usage of these dichotomies. On this issue in his influential *Structure of Social Action*, he referred first to A. D. Nock and then to Malinowski: "men do not in general 'believe' their religious ideas in quite the same sense that they believe the sun rises every morning. . . . Professor Malinowski has, I think, satisfactorily demonstrated the existence of such an empirical distinction in the sense in which primitive men believe in the efficacy on the one hand of magical manipulations, on the other of rational techniques" (Parsons [1937] 1949, 425, n. 1). On the basis then of Nock and Malinowski, Parsons is thus contending that men universally distinguish between rational and magical activities and, further, that the belief that they have as to their efficacy is different, in significant degree.

Two decades later, at the time that Goody was preparing his critique, he found that Parsons was still insisting upon the existence of these kinds of distinctions within the actor's own frame of reference (Goody 1961, 152-53).

9. There is no need to recapitulate Smith's insightful review of the history of the root *religion*. He would lay greater stress upon the Reformation as the period in which its modern usage evolved. I see anthropologists and other social scientists as being more directly in the tradition of the *philosophes*, particularly because of their personal scepticism, which was so clearly dissected by Evans-Pritchard (1959).

10. A recent and dramatic case of civil religion is to be found in Israel, with the emergence of new shrines and "The Resacralization of the Holy City" (Webber 1981 and Aronoff 1981).

11. Bellah does make one reference to Durkheim in an introductory note: "Why something so obvious [as American civil religion] should have escaped serious analytical attention is in itself an interesting problem. . . . But part of the reason this issue has been left in obscurity is certainly due to the peculiarly Western concept of 'religion' as denoting a single type of collectivity of which an individual can be a member of one and only one at a time. The Durkheimian notion that every group has a religious dimension, which would seem as obvious in southern or eastern Asia, is foreign to us" (Bellah [1967] 1974, 41).

12. Arguing that the thesis of this paper has been understated, an anonymous reviewer for *Zygon* has written a forceful comment of interest to readers who have followed the argument thus far. I have slightly condensed the wording, but otherwise not altered the passionate style of expression: "The kind of cultural imperialism involved in making the Western style normative is bound to skew the contact situation between scholars and native peoples. Western students will only learn/see what their eyeglasses (blinders?) allow, and the 'others' will remain simply objects upon which Western 'scientists' operate. The results are both demeaning to native peoples and dehumanizing for

scholars. Thus, far more than 'scholarly stagnation' and 'lack of progress' are at issue in the direction which the anthropological study of 'religion' has taken."

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