

Because the function specified by any functionalist definition of religion is invariably universal—for example, upholding society and making life meaningful—a functionalist definition invariably makes religion universal. It thereby circumvents one of the parochialist pitfalls noted by Wax: excluding by one's definition what by at least some other criterion qualifies as religion.

Wax's assumption that those who decry the state of the anthropological study of religion are decrying the definitions used is dubious. Wilfred C. Smith (1963) may be doing so, but he, who himself is no anthropologist, is decrying most the usage of historians of religion, not anthropologists. Both Geertz and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, the anthropologists cited by Wax, are primarily bemoaning anthropological *explanations*, not *definitions*, of religion. They are seeking to increase less the instances than the functions of religion: both want to supplement noncognitive functions with cognitive ones.

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THE PARADOXES ARE NUMEROUS

by Murray L. Wax

Western society is characterized by an intensive division of social labor in both its occupational structure and its institutional framework. Not only are there, for example, a set of occupations ("educators") claiming the specialty of teaching but also a set of institutions ("schools") claiming to be the agencies for such teaching. Rival parties debate the claims of other persons and agencies to bear those mandates, and an elaborate and polemical rhetoric flourishes about the extent to which one or another is actually performing the task of "educating" (Hughes 1971). One might then define as "primitive" those numerous societies where that refined division of social and institutional labor is lacking and the

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[*Zygon*, vol. 20, no. 1 (March 1985).]

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corresponding rhetoric is absent. In such societies children—and adults—nonetheless learn and even sometimes are subjected to brief periods of formal instruction, but there is no specialized vocabulary of educating.

Religion parallels education: in Western society there are occupations whose incumbents claim to be religious specialists and institutions in which they practice their callings. Debate rages about the content of *religion*, so that the term is not neutral and descriptive but is “politicized” and, at the extremes, a marker of high praise and great contempt. Again, in primitive societies the Western division of labor is lacking, and “religious” activities, institutions, and occupations may be distinguished only by importing the concepts of the Western observer.

As a term of scholarly discourse, *religion* may be defined in a variety of ways or used in a variety of styles (e.g., functional, substantive). But, for comparative students of humanity, the problem comes in achieving a concept that has large or even universal application and so fits the experiences of peoples within primitive as well as civilized and Western societies. The temptation is to formulate what appears to be a universal and seems to have applicability to non-Western societies but then to distort the application to the West by equating the concept, supposedly universal, with the institutions and occupation of the West that claim to have the mandate for religious activity. As I noted in my essay (Wax 1984), Emile Durkheim’s definition can claim a universality, but it would then lead the user to classify as religious a variety of entities, including patriotism (“civil religion”), school spirit (note the athletic rallies), corporate loyalty (note the veneration shown the company’s products), and Marxism. Thus, a predominant message of my essay is that, if scholars hope to achieve any progress in the comparative study of religion, they must be more rigorously consistent in how they use the term and not waffle back and forth between its universal and parochial (Western) denotations.

A second theme of the essay is that investigators need to be more explicit about whether or not the system of categories they employ reflects native or Western conceptualizations of experience. If there were some set of terms, relevant to religion, present in every natural language, then one might have an easy path toward a universal characterization. Unhappily that is not the case, for the basic concepts of religious analysis are unique to the languages of modern Western societies, and only to some of those. The attempt to locate such a set of concepts in the languages of primitive peoples has led toward the usage of misleading dichotomies (supernatural/natural, sacred/profane, ritual/nonritual, transcendental/mundane).

In my essay I make it clear that I do not claim originality for my criticisms of these dichotomies or of the procedures that led to their usage. Rather, I note that, despite the repeated demonstration of the inappropriateness of these concepts, they continue to be used by generation after generation of students of anthropology and comparative religion. Robert Segal seems to believe that this set of errors will cease as students switch from substantive styles of definition of religion toward functional ones (Segal 1985). It is true that, if the student is as consistent in his application of the functional approach (as Segal seems to be in his) by including such “secular” systems as “Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, existentialism,” he would obviate one of the major errors to which I called attention. Yet, it must also be noted that this approach then pays a heavy price; for example, it is extremely difficult to deal empirically with *religion* defined as that which upholds society and makes life meaningful. One slips only too easily into tautologies. One also encounters difficulties in agreeing

upon the society that is being upheld, and the risk is that the social investigator will minimize considerations of power, status, and class. Moreover, when one defines religion as a social entity that upholds society, one risks excluding the millennial and chiliastic movements that are conventionally classified as religious but that tear apart the fabric of conventional society. Nevertheless, I should emphasize that this does not reflect part of the argument of my original essay and should not then be pursued further in this comment.

Turning now to some particulars. Since Durkheim's views changed over time and since in any case he relied on what now must be considered inadequate ethnographic data, this is not the place for a debate about what he meant by *sacred*. I simply argued that Durkheim erred by imputing to non-Western primitives (Australian aborigines in particular) the dichotomy of sacred/profane. In addition to W. E. H. Stanner I could also quote Steven Lukes who notes that conceptually the *sacred*—

is problematic in a number of ways. For example, "the profane" is a residual category which in fact includes a number of quite disparate classifications: namely, "commonness, (work is an 'eminent form of profane activity'); minor sacredness (the less sacred is 'profane' in relation to the more sacred); nonsacredness (the two classes have 'nothing in common') and anti-sacredness (profane things can 'destroy' sacredness)." As Stanner has justly remarked, "Things so disparate cannot form a class unless a class can be marked by a property, its absence, and its contrary" (Lukes 1973, 27).

Segal lauds the definitional procedure of Clifford Geertz. In my essay I explicitly eschewed dealing with Geertz, but I cannot now refrain from noting the incongruence between the definition which he used in his 1966 essay on "Religion as a Cultural System" and the one which underlies the logic of his ethnographic study, *The Religion of Java* (1960). I would also note that in the interval since I drafted my essay, a spirited critique of the 1966 argument has been published by Talal Asad (1983). In his abstract he says of Geertz's definition that it "omits the crucial dimension of power, that it ignores the varying social conditions for the production of knowledge, and that its initial plausibility derives from the fact that it resembles the privatised forms of religion so characteristic of modern (Christian) society, in which power and knowledge are no longer significantly generated by religious institutions" (Asad 1983, 237).

From E. E. Evans-Pritchard's devastating critiques of theories of primitive religion (1963; 1965), Segal has chosen to mention only that he bemoaned anthropological *explanations* of religion. This is true, so far as it goes, for Evans-Pritchard did judge that his anthropological forebears and colleagues were atheists who were concerned to "explain away" religion; however, he also perceived that the issues quickly became ones of definition and of the necessity for the ethnographer to grasp the native system of categories. Let me cite more extensively the paragraph from which I drew but a few phrases for my essay:

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. Let me give some brief examples. Anthropologists still distinguish between or pointedly do not distinguish between, as the case may be, magic and religion among primitive peoples in terms of categories derived from an analysis of ideas of our own culture. The scientific procedure, on the contrary, would be to start from distinctions made by primitive peoples between two kinds of thought and action and then to determine what are the essential features of each and the main differences between them. If one then cares to label them magic and religion one may do so. . . . In other words, in the sphere of religion anthropologists have still not yet sufficiently broken away from the

rationalist, introspective, and ethnocentric anthropology of the nineteenth century; and their classifications still lack objectivity (Evans-Pritchard 1963, 7-8).

In a more generalized context, twenty years later, Edmund Leach affirms that critique:

Anthropological textbooks, along with the arrangement of the university syllabus, usually give the impression that an alien way of life can always be analysed according to a more or less standard set of chapter headings which divide up the total field into sub-sections denoted by the English language words: economics, kinship, politics, law, religion, magic, myth, ritual. . . . Most professional anthropologists use these words as if they were technical terms, but there is no general agreement about how this should be done. . . . The terms kinship, magic, myth and ritual are devoid of any general agreed meaning and are not tied with any clearly identifiable set of representative social roles. Yet anthropologists regularly write as if this whole rag-bag of English language categories together form a unified matrix from which the sub-divisions of a scholarly discourse can be developed. The paradoxes which then result are very numerous (Leach 1982, 131-32).

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