

Commentaries

ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION

by Robert A. Segal

Murray Wax's call (*Zygon*, March 1984) for a less parochial anthropological definition of religion is admirable but in several respects moot.

First of all, Wax's call is scarcely novel, as he himself recognizes. As far back as 1871 Edward Tylor, the "father" of anthropology, objected to the narrowness of Andrew Lang's definition of religion—the belief in a single supreme god—and proposed instead the belief in gods, or "spiritual beings," of any kind (Tylor 1871, chap. 1). In 1909 R. R. Marett objected in turn to the narrowness of Tylor's definition and advocated instead the belief in powers of any kind, whether impersonal ones or, as gods, personalities (Marett 1909, chap. 1). It was likewise against the parochialism of definitions like Tylor's that Emile Durkheim in 1912 redefined religion as the belief in the sacred, thereby encompassing inanimate objects and even human beings as well as gods (Durkheim 1915, bk. 1, chap. 1). A search for ever more comprehensive definitions spans the history of the anthropology of religion.

At the same time, that search has, since Durkheim, shifted its focus from substantive to functional definitions, from concern with the content of belief to concern with its efficacy. Wax's criticism is really of only substantive definitions, as his list of the false dichotomies assumed by past definitions attests: "supernatural/natural, sacred/profane, ritual/nonritual, transcendental/mundane" (Wax 1984, 9). Wax does point out that both W. Lloyd Warner and Robert Bellah have used Durkheim's definition to discover "civil" religion in America alongside Christianity, but he does not explain why: because Durkheim *defines* the sacred functionally rather than substantively—as whatever stirs a society most deeply. Durkheim is a functionalist not only because he seeks the function rather than the origin of religion, let alone because he seeks the social rather than the individual function of religion, but also because he defines religion functionally.

The function of religion defined functionally need not be social. For Bellah (1970, *passim*) and Clifford Geertz (1966, 1-46), for example, the function is existential: religion serves above all to make an individual's life meaningful. For Bellah, it does so by providing ultimate values. For Geertz, it does so by rationalizing threats to meaninglessness. Whatever belief accomplishes either end constitutes religion, which can thereby include otherwise "secular" beliefs like Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and existentialism.

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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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