

## Some Reflections on Contemporary Theories of Religion

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Though the discipline of the history of religions seems now rather firmly established as a branch of academic inquiry, it still retains, on examination, a notable degree of ambiguity as to its precise nature, method or methods, goals, etc. Scholars engaged in religious research are by no means agreed on what they are up to, as may be illustrated by the circumstance that the discipline is sometimes given names as different as phenomenology of religion, comparative religion, science of religion, etc. In view of this unsettledness, one may be entitled to the observation that the discipline is "still very much in the process of defining itself," is involved in a "crisis of identity."<sup>1</sup>

In the present writer's view this ambiguity is due first of all to lack of clarification with regard to the key concepts and procedures employed in conducting research. More particularly, the problems of definition, explanation, interpretation or understanding, and theory-formation need more careful consideration than has so far, with some exceptions, been the case. Indeed, an increasing number of specialists have in recent years addressed themselves to the logical or epistemological analysis of the above-mentioned or related issues.<sup>2</sup>

1. H. P. Sullivan, "The history of religions: Some problems and prospects," in Paul Ramsey and John F. Wilson, eds., *The study of religion in colleges and universities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 248-249.
2. It may not be amiss to mention a few titles of relatively recent date. The list of course is not exhaustive. Melford E. Spiro, "Religion: Problems of definition and explanation," in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), pp. 85-126; Milton Yinger, *The scientific study of religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1970); Robert Baird, *Category formation and the history of religions* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971); U. Bianchi, C. J. Bleeker, and A. Bausani, eds., *Problems and methods in the history of religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972); Hans H. Penner and Edward A. Yonan, "Is a science of religion possible?,"

To discuss the whole range of such issues cannot of course be the task of a single paper. In the following an attempt, more modest in intention and limited in scope, will be made to examine some of the concepts or definitions now current in the study of religion and to assess their respective theoretical value. In the process, some contribution may result, it is hoped, in the elucidation of at least some aspects of methodological questions important to the discipline. The topics to be taken up include the theories of "the high god," of "the sacred" or "the holy," and of "ultimate concern." This arrangement rests neither on an implicit order of preference nor on a chronological scale of development, but has somewhat different reasons to be made clear in the conclusion.

#### THE "HIGH GOD" THEORY

The first type of theory considered here revolves around the notion of a "high god" or "supreme being" and has been advocated by a number of prominent scholars such as R. Pettazzoni and G. Widengren. As is well known, it was Andrew Lang who first became aware of the existence of a belief in high gods among certain tribes living on a very primitive level. In his book *The making of religion* (1898) he advanced the revolutionary thesis that such a belief in high gods marked the initial stage of religious life, thus rejecting E.B. Tylor's view of the animistic origin of religion in general.<sup>3</sup> This idea was then picked up by Wilhelm Schmidt

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*Journal of religion*, vol. 52 (1972), pp. 107-133; Th. van Baaren and H. J. W. Drijvers, eds., *Religion, culture and methodology: Papers of the Groningen working group for the study of fundamental problems and methods of science of religion* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1973); Ninian Smart, *The science of religion and the sociology of knowledge: Some methodological questions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); *Zur Theorie der Religion* [Internationales Jahrbuch für Religionssoziologie, vol. 8] (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1973). As for Japanese material, mention should be made of the religious studies journal *Shūkyō kenkyū*, no. 189 (Nov. 1967), which features a symposium on the methodology of religious studies.

3. It may be in consequence of this aspect of Lang's thesis that Mircea Eliade, contrary to customary usage, grouped it together with that of R.R. Marett

who, with the help of historico-ethnological method, elaborated it into the grandiose theory of *Urmonotheismus*. As a result of the subsequent debates for and against it, this theory, at least in its rigid form, seems now to have been repudiated as an oversimplification of historical data.<sup>4</sup> The fact remains, however, that a belief in high gods can be found both among some primitive peoples and in the ancient religions, and on this basis R. Pettazzoni sought to establish his thesis of the all-knowing sky gods. This thesis may be regarded as a kind of continuation and revision of the view propounded by Schmidt.

The standpoint of G. Widengren likewise seems to be akin to that of Pettazzoni, though in him other elements are also discernible, such as certain ideas of the so-called myth and ritual school of S.H. Hooke and others. Since Widengren is at present one of the most influential exponents of the high-god theory, I shall consider it in some detail.

Widengren's views are generally distinguished by two features, namely, anti-evolutionism and anti-manaimism, both of which are closely interrelated. In the preface to his *Religionsphänomenologie* (1969), based on the Swedish version of 1945, he states that the book was originally written in conscious protest against the evolutionism then predominant in his country, but that the anti-evolutionistic approach he espouses has in the meantime become internationally accepted.<sup>5</sup> The term "evolutionism" is intended to include not only Tylor's conception of religious history as developing from animism through demonism to theism and Marett's postulation of a stage of animatism before animism, but also Robertson Smith's view that ritual takes precedence over dog-

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as preanimistic. Cf. Eliade, *The quest: History and meaning in religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 45-46.

4. Cf. R. Pettazzoni, "Das Ende des Urmonotheismus," *Numen*, vol. 5 (1958), pp. 161-163. See also Eliade, *The quest*, p. 25.
5. George Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1969), p. vii. In the following, all quotations from sources other than English are tentative translations by the writer.

ma.<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, his polemic is directed against the attempt of earlier scholars like Söderblom or van der Leeuw to interpret the idea of the holy as an elaboration of *tabu* beliefs, particularly the notion of mana as an impersonal, supernatural power.<sup>7</sup> To conceive of mana as a kind of mysterious, impersonal power pervading the whole universe is, according to Widengren, a grave misinterpretation. Mana always denotes, on the contrary, an extraordinary power attached to and emanating from personal entities, whether conceived as gods, spirits, or men.<sup>8</sup> In this way Widengren's anti-evolutionism goes hand in hand with his anti-manatism.

On the basis of the premises broadly outlined above, Widengren goes on to give his definition of religion. He thinks that "the belief in god constitutes the innermost essence of religion" and that "the belief in god stands at the center of religion." "What is characteristic of religion is not a belief in something filled with power, nor a worship of spirits, but primarily the belief in god."<sup>9</sup> As a definition of religion, however, this is insufficient. History shows that high gods often tend to retire into the background and become *dei otiosi*, another class of divine beings assuming prominence as the actual objects of worship. When this objection is taken into account, it becomes necessary to introduce another viewpoint. This Widengren finds, following H. Sundén and J. B. Pratt, in the attitude of individuals and groups toward "a destiny-determining power."<sup>10</sup> People are religious insofar as they adopt a positive attitude toward a power or powers they conceive to hold ultimate control over their interests and destinies. Widengren sees that this view applies especially well to the type of belief in god that centers in the high god. For the

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 30 (n. 28), 209-210, etc.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13, 30-32.

8. What is important, in this connection, is the tendency to see the idea of holiness as "originally a purely religious concept" characteristic of things "belonging to the divine sphere." Cf. *ibid.*, p. 33.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 18, and 46.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 3; cf. pp. 14, 129.

high god, when he remains an active god, is regarded as intervening and shaping the life of people both for good and evil. Thus the presence or absence of destiny-determining activity marks the difference between a real destiny-god and a *deus otiosus*.

In its concrete forms the belief in god naturally varies from religion to religion. Still, the major forms occur with amazing regularity in the history of religions. The major types Widengren distinguishes are pantheism, polytheism, and monotheism. These types may be found across the historical religions, so that in one and the same religion different types can coexist.

What is worth mentioning here is that Widengren seems to give a certain priority to pantheism which regards the world as the body of god and thus puts the two in equation. This is, as it were, a naive form of pantheism which can later be translated into more speculative formulae as in the case of Indian metaphysics. Pantheism is also closely related to the frequently encountered bisexual features associated with high gods among various peoples. As for polytheism, its emergence must be ascribed to a combination of different factors. Widengren first points out that a series of deities in a polytheistic system may be explained as a consequence of the separating out of aspects or attributes formerly associated with high gods. This is particularly true of the so-called functional deities usually regarded, according to Usener, as "momentary deities." In addition, the importance of local cults as well as political influences in bringing about a polytheistic phenomenon cannot be ignored. Polytheism, properly speaking, represents a further development in one or the other of the two major forms of belief in a high god, namely, pantheism and monotheism.<sup>11</sup>

It is neither possible nor necessary to enter here into the rich historical evidence presented in Widengren's magnum opus in support of the high-god theory. Suffice it to say that Widengren gives a central position to the idea of the high god in his definition of religion.

11. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 113, 127-129, 545.

With this much as background, I should now like to make a few comments of a somewhat critical nature.

First of all, it must be pointed out that in establishing his thesis Widengren draws mainly on historically derived materials, mostly of a mythological nature, taken from the sphere of ancient religions. More concretely, it is on the basis of evidences from non-literate tribes in Africa and Asia and from traditions among the Indo-European and Near Eastern religions that he formulated the above view. The religions of the Far East, including Japan, receive short shrift, and hardly any attention is paid to the religions of the modern world.<sup>12</sup> This bias is not altogether without justification, since the author intended his book as a treatise on the history of religions in the narrower sense of the term, that is, the religions of the past. Nonetheless, this data limitation has a significant bearing on the theoretical status of the view itself.

Second, careful scrutiny reveals that this definition of religion is comprised of two heterogeneous elements. As indicated already, Widengren, though convinced of the central importance of belief in god, had to introduce another element—destiny-determination—in order not to exclude the older form of Buddhism from the category of religions. But while belief in god points to the objective side of religion, destiny-determination is a factor that becomes relevant only in relation to the subjective attitude of individuals and groups. If a high god is to remain real and active, it is indispensable that people conceive him as having ultimate control over their lives. And indeed there are many cases where high gods are deemed to possess the power to determine the destiny of man. But the fact that this power is ascribed to them does not prevent them from losing it and retiring into the background, nor does it logically exclude the possibility of people's conceiving of agents other than high gods as ultimately shaping their destiny.

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12. For a similar criticism, see U. Bianchi, *Probleme der Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1964), p. 66. Widengren's response may be found in his *Religionsphänomenologie*, p. 112.

To summarize, the high god theory may best be characterized as a sort of descriptive concept derived from a limited number of materials relating to the history of religions. Problems arise as soon as an attempt is made to enlarge the concept and make it cover all religions, as Widengren does when he says that the belief in a high god is “the core of *every* religion.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the high god theory is one of low to middle range, applicable mainly to the historical religions. Taken as such, however, it can prove useful, and it offers a plausible explanation of certain details such as the emergence of the functional deities referred to above.

#### THEORIES OF “THE HOLY” OR “THE SACRED”

The second major group of definitions of religion is that which takes the term “the holy” or “the sacred” as the key concept. This approach is probably the most influential one at the moment.<sup>14</sup> Especially since the publication in 1917 of Rudolf Otto’s famous *Das Heilige*, this mode of definition has become so widely accepted that it would seem difficult to find a work in this area in which the term does not occur. Gustav Mensching, for example, defines religion as “the experiential encounter with the Holy,”<sup>15</sup> and Joachim Wach uses the even shorter formula of “experience of the Holy.”<sup>16</sup> Again, when Mircea Eliade published his *Traité d’histoire des religions* (1948), he offered it as an essay in the “morphology of the sacred.” Other examples could easily be adduced.

Nonetheless, despite the predominance of this view that focuses on “the holy” as the distinguishing characteristic of religion, this

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13. Ibid., p. 4 (*italics added*).

14. Cf. Henri Bouillard, “La catégorie du sacré dans la science des religions,” in Enrico Castelli, ed., *Le sacré: Etude et recherches* (Paris: Aubier, 1974), p. 34.

15. Mensching, *Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft* (Heidelberg: Quelle und Meyer, 1937), p. 78.

16. Wach, *Sociology of religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press [Phoenix Book ed.], 1944), p. 13.

approach is by no means exempt from ambiguities, nor is there a total absence of disagreement among scholars employing the term. In order to clarify the issues at stake, it may be in order to attempt a brief review of the history of the term. This review will make clear the background against which the word came to enjoy unusual popularity and at the same time make it possible to distinguish among various connotations attached to it. For this purpose, we may omit the long history of the ways words like sacer, sanctus, *Heil*, *heilig*, holy, etc. were used in theological discourse. It will be sufficient to begin with the turn of the century when words like these began to play a decisive role in theoretical thinking about religion.

Perhaps the earliest contribution to the subject is to be found in the philosophy of religion, for Wilhelm Windelband wrote his article "Das Heilige" for the second edition of his *Präludien* (1902). He treated the problem of the holy mainly from his neo-Kantian point of view, but even so, he was not without influence on ensuing discussions. Max Scheler, for example, brought the concept of the holy into close connection with his theory of value, and subsequently it was fully elaborated as an independent axiological category, notably by Johannes Hessen.<sup>17</sup> Though we are not directly concerned with such philosophical considerations, at least it should not be forgotten that the concept often carries with it a philosophical implication and cannot be understood unless we give due regard to the philosophical position of the author.

Apart from this philosophical line of thought, there was another stream that helped give the concept a position of prominence. This was the so-called French sociological school of Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, and Emile Durkheim. In the introduction to the French version of the *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* edited by Chantepie de la Saussaye, Hubert wrote that the idea

17. Cf. Hessen, *Die Werte des Heiligen* (Regensburg: Verlag Pustet, 1938). Concerning the treatment of the subject in the philosophy of religion, see: Jörg Splett, *Die Rede vom Heiligen: Über ein religionsphilosophisches Grundwort* (Freiburg and München: Karl Alber, 1971).



of the sacred "is not only universal, but central, is the very condition of religious thought and of what is most characteristic in religion."<sup>18</sup> Similar statements can be found here and there in the writings of these sociologists. In their view, objects considered sacred are those set apart and forbidden, objects which stand, therefore, in opposition to the sphere of the profane. The idea of the sacred as something separated and forbidden appears to have been taken over from Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the religion of the Semites* (1890), but was subsequently worked out into an overall dichotomy. Thus we have the well-known definition of religion by Durkheim as a system of beliefs and practices in relation to sacred objects.<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy, in this connection, that the sociological emphasis on the sacred was intended in antithesis to the traditional view that the idea of god is the nerve of religion.

A third point of view, partly if not entirely opposed to the sociological approach to the sacred, was that of which Nathan Söderblom and Gerhardus van der Leeuw may be taken as the most notable exponents. Though not fully approving the tendency of the French sociological school to identify the sacred with society or to reduce the former to the latter, both scholars shared with the French group the intention of replacing the idea of god by that of the sacred or the holy. This idea they brought into connection with the concept of power or mana. In a famous article entitled "Holiness" (1913), Söderblom says: "Holiness is the great word in religion; it is even more essential than the notion of God ... Not the mere existence of the divinity, but its *mana*, its power, its holiness, is what religion involves." According to him, this holiness is viewed as a "mysterious power or entity connected with certain beings, things, events, or actions," and its psychological origin is traced to the "mental reaction against what is startling, astonishing, new, terrifying."<sup>20</sup> As may be seen

18. Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Manuel d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Colin, 1904), p. xlvi.

19. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1912), p. 65.

20. N. Söderblom, "Holiness," *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*, vol. 6 (1913),

from these lines, the emphasis is not so much on the distinction between sacred and profane as on the experience of power—or to put it differently, on the subjective reaction to awe-inspiring objects rather than on more or less institutionalized separation of the sacred. Van der Leeuw likewise regarded the notion of the holy as intimately associated with that of power. His *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) starts with a discussion of the concept of power as basic to religion, and states unequivocally that the idea of god is a “late-comer in the history of religions.”<sup>21</sup>

Another, slightly different way of treating the concept of the holy can be found in Rudolf Otto. His approach can perhaps be called psychological, since he devotes most of his *Das Heilige* to a sympathetic understanding and analysis of the numinous experience. Repeated use of the term “feeling” (“creaturely feeling,” etc.) both in this book and in the collection of essays *Das Gefühl des Überweltlichen* (1932), is an unmistakable indication of the nature of his interest. This predilection for the emotional in religion was doubtless inherited from Schleiermacher, and it provides common ground, to some extent, between Otto and Söderblom. Yet this was not the whole or even proper aim of his enterprise. For Otto described the creaturely feeling as a “reflection” of man’s perception of the holy, that which includes among other characteristics the quality of being “wholly other.” At the same time Otto endeavored to establish the holy as an “a priori category,” a value-category *sui generis*. (Here we can see his approximation to the philosophical doctrines of neo-Kantianism, including its axiology.) Precisely at this point emerges the question of how to interpret his theory of the holy. Should it be understood as subject-oriented or object-oriented, psychological or philosophico-theological?<sup>22</sup> Otto himself, it appears, remain-

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pp. 731-732.

21. G. van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1956), pp. 33, 103.
22. Numerous scholars have drawn attention to this problem. See, e.g., F.K. Feigl, *Das Heilige: Kritische Abhandlung über R. Ottos gleichnamiges Buch*

ed peculiarly ambiguous and oscillated between these two approaches. It is clear, however, that he regarded the holy as more fundamental to religion than the concept of god. In chapter 15 of *Das Heilige* Otto distinguishes two general lines of development: "rationalization" and "moralization." The numen is rationalized into god and godhead, whereas the holy is transformed into good and goodness.<sup>23</sup>

Finally we have Eliade's concept of "hierophany" as a manifestation of the sacred. On close examination, his concept of the sacred proves to be a complex one requiring careful study. Characteristic of his approach is the attempt to consider all the relevant forms of the manifestation of the sacred in history and thus to grasp it in its totality.<sup>24</sup> A second characteristic feature is his emphasis on the distinction between sacred and profane. According to Eliade, all definitions of religion proposed so far have one thing in common, that is, each in its own way rests on the opposition between the sacred or religious life and the profane or secular life.<sup>25</sup> In this respect he seems to share the standpoint of the French sociologists, but he also parts company with them by reason of his persistent concern with the meaning of such phenomena. This interest in meaning leads him to identify the sacred with absolute reality and the profane with its opposite,<sup>26</sup> and for this reason he is sometimes accused of mystification and theologizing. The problem need not be pursued here. Instead, I simply wish to draw attention to the central importance of the sacred in Eliade's concept of religion. As he himself says of religion, it does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or ghosts, but refers to the experience of the sacred.<sup>27</sup>

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(Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1947), pp. 7-8.

23. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, 26-28 ed. (Munich: Biederstein Verlag, 1947), pp. 129-130.

24. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1948), p. 21.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

26. Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 13-16, 171, passim.

27. Eliade, *The quest*, Preface.

As will have been seen from the foregoing, theories of “the holy” or “the sacred” are presented in a series of variations, some stressing the dichotomy of sacred and profane, others the connection between the sacred and power, and still others identifying the sacred with the real and transcendent. Taken together, however, they have at least this in common, that they all try to place at the center of religion not the traditional concept of god but the idea of the holy, subsuming the former under the latter. From a different angle, this means that the goal envisioned in the interpretation of religion is not to take it at its face value as a set of dogmas but to see it in the context of the social life of the people concerned (especially in the case of sociologists) or in relation to the subjective experience (as in Söderblom, van der Leeuw, and Otto). In addition to such methodological reasons, mention can also be made of increasing acquaintance with religions that hold no explicit concept of god as we seek to comprehend the general background against which such theories have achieved their remarkable popularity.

Yet the sacralcentric standpoint is not without difficulties. Mention has already been made of the criticism leveled by Widengren, rightly or wrongly, at the notion of power.<sup>28</sup> It is also clear that there is a certain ambiguity in Otto’s theory of the holy, since it refers simultaneously both to the psychological quality of numinous experience and to the nature of the object. As for the dichotomy between sacred and profane, another component of this approach, some scholars doubt that it is as universal as claimed by its proponents. Bronislaw Malinowski, for example,

28. Widengren suggests that the concept of “impersonal, universal power is an evolutionistic construction,” whereas the presence of the belief in a high god among non-literate peoples as well as among early civilized nations “is no *theory*, but a *factual phenomenon*” (*Religionsphänomenologie*, pp. 33 and 47, n. 2, his italics). Personally I am inclined to think this criticism only partly just. For whereas it is evident that we should not ignore facts or relevant data in any form, this does not necessarily preclude the legitimacy of theory-formation—which always implies some sort of construction. Otherwise research would be reduced to mere description of so-called facts.

after examining a few cases, came to the conclusion that the dualistic separation need not always be articulated and that the degree of articulation depends on whether religion plays a central role in society.<sup>29</sup> Carrying the point further, one could even suppose that the distinction itself is culturally determined, in this case by Christian-Occidental culture.<sup>30</sup> Problems like these call for considerable clarification as a precondition of declaring "the holy" or "the sacred" the defining characteristic of religion in general.

#### RELIGION AS "ULTIMATE CONCERN"

The third category of definitions of religion is that based on the concept of "ultimate concern." Though use of the word "ultimate" is by no means new (it appeared, for example, in J.B. Pratt's *The religious consciousness*, 1934, quoted by Widengren), its use in combination with the term "concern" is of relatively recent date. It was first introduced by Paul Tillich in his later works, and its great currency, notably in the United States, seems to have been inspired by his personal influence.

So far as can be seen from published materials, the concept of "ultimate concern" occurs for the first time in the first volume of his *Systematic theology* (1951).<sup>31</sup> In his earlier works, for example his *Religionsphilosophie* (1925), Tillich defined religion as the "direction toward the Unconditional" which supplies all the conditioned forms of culture with meaning.<sup>32</sup> The idea that religion has as one of its functions the grounding of culture both in the positive and negative sense remained basic throughout his life.

29. Malinowski, "A fundamental problem of religious sociology," in *Sex, culture and myth* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), pp. 266-267. Robert Bellah, in a different context, indicates that the world view of the primitive religions is "monistic" in contrast to the "dualistic" world view of the historical religions. Cf. his "Religious evolution," in *Beyond belief: Essays on religion in a post-traditional world* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), especially pp. 30, 32.

30. H. Bouillard, "La catégorie du sacré," p. 55.

31. Paul Tillich, *Systematic theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 10-14, etc.

32. Tillich, "Religionsphilosophie," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959), p. 320.

While, however, the earlier formulation betrays his affinity with the philosophical position of neo-Kantianism, the use of the word “concern” undoubtedly indicates the assimilation of a more dynamic, existentialist way of thinking that has its center in the attitude of the subject. In his later years Tillich used to say that “religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern.”<sup>33</sup>

The practice of defining religion in terms of ultimate concern has been taken up by a number of writers not only in the field of theology but also in that of the scientific study of religion. To illustrate, Bellah declares that he means by religion “man’s attitude and actions with respect to his ultimate concern.”<sup>34</sup> This ultimate concern has to do with what is ultimately valuable and meaningful, and it is one of the social functions of religion to provide a set of ultimate values. Here the concept is linked with the functional approach in sociology. (This emphasis on coupling ultimacy with the functional point of view is remarkable.) A similar statement may be found in the introduction to Lessa and Vogt, *Reader in comparative religion* (1958), where the editors claim to regard religion as “a system of beliefs and practices directed toward the ‘ultimate concern’ of a society.”<sup>35</sup> Again, Robert Baird, adopting Tillich’s terminology, defines religion succinctly as ultimate concern, though he does not care to follow Tillich completely in respect of the connotations assigned to the term. Baird prefers to eliminate the tacit reference to the object (Ultimate Reality and the like), restricting the term to the condition

33. Tillich, *Theology of culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 7-8.

34. Bellah, *Tokugawa religion* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), p. 6. In his later work *Beyond belief* we find a slightly different formulation: religion is “a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence” (p. 21), that which helps him in “making sense of the world” (p. 146; cf. pp. 195, 256). Still, the basic viewpoint seems to continue unchanged.

35. W.A. Lessa and E.Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in comparative religion: An anthropological approach*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 1.

of the person in question.<sup>36</sup>

The last example shows most precisely the inherent ambiguity in the concept as used by Tillich. As was the case with Otto's idea of the holy, it may be taken to mean either the attitude of concern or the object of that attitude. At least within the limits of *Systematic theology*, this equivocation cannot be resolved.<sup>37</sup> In a later book, *Dynamics of faith* (1957), Tillich came to a kind of solution in that he affirmed both meanings by identifying them with one another. He says that "the ultimate of the act of faith and the ultimate that is meant in the act of faith are one and the same," suggesting that this implies the "disappearance of the ordinary subject-object scheme in the experience of the ultimate, the unconditional."<sup>38</sup> Since Tillich was primarily a theologian, it was natural and legitimate for him to resort to such an argument. It is equally evident, however, that for the empirical study of religion this is in principle inadmissible inasmuch as the question of the object has to be suspended as falling outside its purview.

If we thus interpret the term as a purely neutral, analytic concept, bracketing off the theological problem of objective reality as do Baird and others,<sup>39</sup> it will have far-reaching consequences for the study of religion.

First of all, use of the term in this restricted sense enables us to include under the heading of religion a number of phenomena traditionally and in common-sense usage excluded from this category. The outstanding example may be some forms of modern socialism or Marxism whose religiousness has been much debated.<sup>40</sup> Clearly they are not religious in the sense of involv-

36. Robert D. Baird, *Category formation*, p. 18.

37. Cf. John Hick, *Philosophy of religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 68-69.

38. Tillich, *Dynamics of faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 11.

39. Cf. Roland Robertson, *The sociological interpretation of religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), p. 71, n. 15.

40. Concerning this issue, we have contributions by authors as varied as Tillich, Eliade, Karl Löwith, Bertrand Russell, Arnold Toynbee, et al. See G.H. Lübben, "Religiosität im Marxismus?" in *Religion und Religionen: Festschrift*

ing belief in some supernatural entity like a god. But in view of the circumstance that they provide individuals and groups with a set of ultimate values, they may at least be deemed “functional equivalents or alternatives” of religion. From this starting point it is easy to enlarge the term religion to include other belief systems, ranging from political ideologies like nationalism or fascism to less institutionalized ones such as humanism, scientism, etc. From the standpoint of the traditional religions, these belief systems frequently appear clothed in pejorative designations: “quasi-religion,” “pseudo-religion,” “surrogate religiosity,” and the like. These designations are not entirely unproblematic because they imply a value-judgment irrelevant to empirical research. It can be said, however, that the “ultimate concern” way of looking at things opens up new vistas and helps us to discern a religious dimension in phenomena that would otherwise be left out of consideration.<sup>41</sup>

Thus to define religion as ultimate concern, as a means of providing ultimate values or the like, may prove to be useful to students of religious phenomena particularly in relation to the modern situation where rapid change is taking place and new forms of religiosity are emerging. Indeed, the popularity of the ultimacy-definition may itself be understood as historically influenced, if not wholly determined, by this situation. As Edward Norbeck remarks, the concept of “religion as a set of values that may or may not include ideas of supernaturalism

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*für G. Menschling* (Bonn: L. Röhrscheid, 1967), pp. 315-331, and the recent discussion by Joseph M. Kitagawa, “One of the many faces of China: Maoism as a quasi-religion,” in vol. 1 (1974) of the present journal, pp. 125-141.

41. This also has a significant bearing on the so-called secularization problem or the interpretation of the religious situation in modern societies. On this premise it may be possible to see in the contemporary scene not so much a religious decline as a religious change, a de-supernaturalization of religion. (Cf. Milton Yinger, *The scientific study of religion*, pp. vii, 32-34, 533-535, and Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond belief*, p. 227.) This view runs counter to that of the gradual disappearance of religion, the conventional view supported by some anthropologists, e.g., Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Religion: An anthropological view* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 264-270.



seems also to be a reflection of changing cultural circumstances in our society,"<sup>42</sup> a reflection, that is, of secularization.

This advantage, however, is accompanied by some shortcomings. Serious criticisms are launched against this way of perceiving religion, mainly on methodological grounds. These criticisms may be summed up in two major points. One is that such a definition is too broad and inclusive, the other that it lacks workability as a tool in empirical study because of its subjectivistic orientation. Probably the most succinct statements embodying these criticisms are those by Melford Spiro and Roland Robertson. Starting from the thesis that the aim of definition is to delineate the boundaries of that which is to be investigated, Spiro finds the core variable of religion in the "belief in the existence of superhuman beings." It does not follow, however, that these beings are necessarily objects of ultimate concern. "Conversely, while religious beliefs are not always of ultimate concern, non-religious beliefs sometimes are." For example, communism, baseball, or stockmarket returns may become matters of ultimate concern in some societies, but they are by definition not religious beliefs. In short, Spiro wants to define religion substantively and not functionally, and this in favor of more precision in defining the boundaries of empirical research.<sup>43</sup>

On the basis of a slightly different premise, Robertson likewise finds the definition by reference to ultimacy least satisfactory and prefers the substantive, exclusive approach to religion to the functional, inclusive one.<sup>44</sup> Without tracing further the details of the

42. Edward Norbeck, "Anthropological view of religion," in J.C. Feaver and W. Horoz, *Religion in philosophical and cultural perspective* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1967), p. 422. He admits, on the other hand, that in dealing with primitive societies supernaturalism will continue to be considered the basic feature of religion.

43. Melford E. Spiro, "Religion," especially pp. 87-96.

44. Roland Robertson, *Sociological interpretation of religion*, pp. 34-51. See also a kind of counter-criticism in Baird, *Category formation*, pp. 22-27, as well as a related comment in Michael Pye, *Comparative religion: An introduction through source materials* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972), pp. 11-12. Günter Dux, "Ursprung, Funktion und Gehalt der Religion," in *Zur*

arguments pro and con, it may be noted that such a criticism seems to have a valid point. For in spite of the advantage suggested earlier, it is also certain that the concept of ultimate concern needs more elaboration if it is to be employed as a heuristic tool in empirical research.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

So far I have picked up a few prevailing concepts of religion and tried to analyze them briefly, in full awareness of their mutual heterogeneity. For it might be expected that by juxtaposing them in this way, the basic problems in the definition of religion and in theory-formation about religion might come out more clearly than by treating them in isolation from each other.

As a result of the foregoing, admittedly preliminary survey, it may be pointed out that the different concepts have varying degrees of applicability to the field of studies from which the relevant data are drawn. Whereas the more descriptive or substantive kind of definition focusing on the idea of god (including the high god) or other superhuman beings is primarily congruous with religions in history and/or in the so-called primitive societies, the dynamic and functional definition framed in terms of ultimacy is obviously more appropriate to situations where change is in process, as in modern societies.<sup>45</sup> The former approach is oriented to relatively isolated and therefore easily identifiable components, while the latter tends to see religion in the context of, and as an aspect of, the entire life process of the persons or groups in question. The definition based on the idea of "the holy" may be said to fall between these two poles, since "the holy," as previously noted, may have a double reference, one to the object, the other to the attitude of the subject.

This schematization does not necessarily mean, however, that

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*Theorie der Religion*, pp. 7-67, esp. pp. 19 and 60, acknowledges the necessity of combining both the functional and substantive approaches to religious phenomena.

45. Yinger, *The scientific study of religion*, pp. 4-5, 22-27.

the various positions are mutually exclusive. We have seen that Widengren, notwithstanding his strong emphasis on the belief in a high god as the core of religion, had to consider another element—the consciousness of destiny-determination—in order to avoid insisting that the mere idea of a god is enough to make a religion (which would have been nonsense). This difficulty comes even more to the fore when one seeks to apply the substantive definition of religion to, say, our contemporary age where the belief in supernatural entities as traditionally understood is undoubtedly on the decline. If one sticks rigidly to this position, he would have in the end no religion at all to study—or he would have to search for “equivalents” and “substitutes.” This, however, would entail an approximation to the dynamic and functionalist point of view.

The inference to be drawn from the above consideration is the rather commonplace statement that it is extremely difficult to develop a broad concept of religion applicable to different classes of data—in consequence of which different approaches must be used in combination.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, one who seeks to develop such a concept must always be conscious of the distinction between different types of definition—nominal or operational on the one hand and real or essential on the other—and be careful not to confuse them. In practice, confusion often results both in the substantivist and functionalist camps, either through declaring the belief in supernatural beings the core of every religion or by postulating that every individual or group must at every moment have an ultimate concern. True, these two kinds of concepts cannot be absolutely separated, but they must at least be distinguished for the sake of greater clarity in the study of religion.

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46. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 13-14. Also pertinent to the subject is an interesting article by U. Bianchi, “Quelques remarques concernant l’usage des mots <religion> et <sacré>,” in *Le sacré*, pp. 87-98.