RELIGION AND IDENTITY

A Dialectic Interpretation of Religious Phenomena

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Keynote Address, opening the 15th Congress of the
International Association for the History of Religions

INTRODUCTION

In 1924 the German professor of philosophy, Heinrich Rickert published a little book "Das Eine, die Einheit und das Eins" in which he suggests that identity and difference (or sameness and change) are the purest logical categories. We can all agree with him. Yet there is a problem with pure categories. Like all abstractions they may become vague, irrelevant or comprehend too much. It is for that reason that all religions resort to concretizations of the divine, whether they are called incarnations, prophets or Bodhisattvas. Some scholars of religion have not taken this dilemma seriously and have elevated such concrete phenomena as sexuality (Freud), class (Marx), social solidarity (Durkheim) as the essence on which religion rests with the result that they lost in comprehension what they gained in concreteness. By doing so they left themselves open to the justifiable charge (for instance, Eliade, 1973, 193) that they reduced religion to 'sociologisms' and 'psychologisms'. On the other hand those scholars who defended the purity and independence of the religious category have often made the opposite mistake: by defending the independence of religious phenomena too much they have run the risk of being hounded into the scientific wilderness. Religious phenomena are neither entirely dependent (determined) or independent (unconditioned), but interdependent. They affect and are affected, they condition and are conditioned, they mold and are molded, they determine and are determined, or to use scientific jargon, they can be treated as independent (affecting) or as dependent (affected) variables.

The purity, independence and comprehensiveness of the identity concept has similar problems to the ones encountered in the study of religion.

Erik Erikson (1963, 282; 1968, 9) has made identity the cornerstone for his theoretical model, but confesses that the more he writes about it and the more pervasive it becomes, the more unfathomable it appears. Anselm Strauss (1959, 9) similarly uses identity as his main organizing concept, but also judges it to be ambiguous, diffuse and elusive. Maybe that is the way it should be. Yet I want to go beyond aesthetic embroidery and entertaining comments. For I believe that an alternative and exciting approach to the scientific study of religion is possible if one operationalizes both terms (religion and identity) and if one subsequently builds a set of generalizations about the way they affect one another mutually. And I therefore propose the following

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outline for this address:

In section (I) I will analyse the concept of identity and propose usage which best advances our understanding of religion. In section (II) I will do the same for the concept of religion and propose a usage which fits the large variety of cross-cultural and diachronic data at our disposal. In section (III) I will concentrate on the various relations existing between religion and identity as defined in (I) and (II). And finally is section (IV) I will discuss the potential (or lack of potential) for this approach by comparing it with other ways of studying religion scientifically.

I IDENTITY

There is a fascinating cultural bias in the way 'identity' has been defined by philosophers. They generally thought (and often still think) of it as consciousness, the rational essence of the individual. And as theologians and scholars of religion were and are heavily influenced by this philosophical culture they too have built their view of, and apologies for, religion on the increasingly tottery structure of rational individualism. Yet as a fundament for our understanding of religion, this culture and structure are too constricting.

But let me first say something more about the usage of identity in the classical literature. Locke (1801, Vol. II, p. 52; Book II, chap. 27, paras. 9-10) related the concept to the thinking, intelligence, and reflection of a person, but this in turn could be summed up as 'consciousness', which, he said, 'makes personal identity'. On the same page he also described it as 'the sameness of a rational being'. For Leibniz (1961, Vol. 1, p. 405) too, personal identity consisted in the consciousness of the thinking self: this consciousness was evidence for (the existence of) moral and personal identity. Similarly for Kant (1965, p. 343), only that of which we are conscious belonged to our identical self, although he warned that identity was not an objective property of the observing self. A related emphasis on self-awareness is found in Kierkegaard's (1941, pp. 112, 299) view of identity, in Jaspers (1963, p. 125) and in Bronowski (1965).

The 'rational' component of this view of identity begins to be questioned in Heidegger (1969, 25), who denies the link with thinking and instead associates it with the Being of beings, a fundamental characteristic of which is the unity within itself, a belonging together. William James (1890, Vol. 1, 336) is also in this non-rational camp as he stresses continuity of feelings when he mentions identity. This is decided progress. The unity and sameness which the term 'identity' conjures up are much more closely linked to feelings of loyalty, allegiance, commitment than to rationality which 'murders to dissect' to paraphrase Wordsworth's observation in The Tables Turned.

The 'individual' component of this view of identity also begins to erode in Erik Erikson's work (1964, 93) when he uses the term 'collective identity' as separate from personal identity. To him collective identity can be a tribe (the Sioux Indians whom he studied) but also a class, a culture or a nation. Yet Erikson is primarily interested in personal identity and if he strays at all to other kinds he does so generally to point to the forming effect that they have on the individual. This he has in common with the social psychologists and symbolic interactionists who are interested in how an individual acquires an identity and are therefore stressing socialization processes. Their popularity in Western culture is due to the identity problems of individuals in that culture, but their theories are not particularly useful when one wants to relate identity to religion both cross-culturally and diachronically: the maintenance of identities is just as crucial, if not more so, than their formation.

And so after rejecting the classical definitions of identity as too exclusively rational or too exclusively personal, we now also have to reject some of the modern approaches which treat identity as arising harmoniously in interaction between individuals. Again the approach is not wide enough, however true and useful in many instances. To account for identities underlying such elementary forms as prayers of confession or totem clashes in some Australian Aboriginal tribes I need a definition of identity which allows for both individual *and* collective, rational *and* non-rational, congruent *and* conflicting elements.

Strangely enough this definition and usage emerge when we listen less to abstract, isolated musings and more to the context in which the term is used. There is an advantage in discovering the meaning of a term or an event in relation to something else. After all meaning is ordering and relating rather than abstracting in isolation. Doing this we hear and read that someone's identity has been thwarted by his family (Laing, 1971) or that in Hutterite history, periods in which communal cohesion was strong and family identity weak alternated with periods in which family identity prevailed over the community of goods (Peter, 1976, 339). Or we read that in Yugoslavia the strong sense of Croatian and Serbian identity has weakened national cohesion. Yet there are just as many, if not more, instances of identities being sustained by others. Belonging to a tightly knit community is often thought to advance personal identity (Erikson, 1963, 154).

The picture which emerges from these samples is one of a field in which jostling systems both co-operate and contend, in which survival hinges on capacity of a system to both firmly draw the boundary around itself, but also flexibly co-ordinate efforts and therefore open boundaries. In other words, nearly always the word 'system' or 'unit of social organization' can replace or be substituted for the word 'identity'. All three terms have in common (a) that they attempt to preserve sameness (the age old meaning of 'identity') within, (b) that boundary defense and boundary reinforcement are used to accomplish this, and (c) that yet boundaries are weakened and new 'alliances' have to take place to insure survival.

Basically then in this emerging model or field, sameness (identity) is wrestling with change (difference), order is fighting it out with chaos, salvation (wholeness, integrity) conquers, yet is constantly threatened by sin (breakdown, fragmentation), the feminine mode (inclusion) is in collision, yet also in concert with the masculine mode (intrusion), yin alternates with yang, purusa (the static) is polluted by prakriti (the dynamic), dharma is subverted by adharma, consolidation is undone by expansion, integration is foiled by differentiation. All this may seem miles removed from the serenity of pure mathematics and philosophy. Linear, logical thought seems an altogether different world from the dialectic, dynamic field sketched above. Yet both acknowledge the same basic pattern, albeit that the dialectic approach finds it necessary to add the word 'tendency to' identity and difference, in order to link the world of abstraction to the vale of tears in the here and now.

II   RELIGION

In the last paragraph I already strayed into the 'religion' segment of this address. In the context in which religion is universally used, the interpretative, dramatizing component is an important one. It is often called myth ('a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom', Malinowski, 1954, 101). In western societies it is often called 'theology', or in more secular settings 'ideology'. Myth, theology and ideology provide individuals and societies with a fitting contour for existence and as such help them to survive better. *Dialectic dramatization* concerns itself with similarity in basic content.

And quite often the content oscillates concretely between what fragments, divides and what makes whole, heals. For the Kwakiutl Indians of the south coast of British Columbia Baxbakualanuxsiwae ('Man Eater at the Mouth of the River') is the most formidable of great spirits. He is a cannibal and stands for destruction, bestiality and anti-social conduct. The myth of his taming is dramatized in the Kwakiutl winter dances the secret of which according to Locher (1932, 41) 'consists in the conception that life and light do not come into being without death and darkness, so that both these aspects not only may, but even must, be united.'

In Christianity too it would be difficult to attend a church service on any Sunday morning anywhere, in which not in some way or other basic themes of sin versus salvation, evil versus goodness, crucifixion versus resurrection, freedom versus constraint, chaos versus order, integrity versus fragmentation, the sacred versus the profane are dramatized by means of Bible stories or mundane illustrations. At first sight the dynamic quality of the dramatization seems to be denied when salvation is pronounced as being established once for all. Actually it is meant to say that underneath all decay and change there is the irrevocable changelessness of God. To put this more philosophically: in life the thesis (salvation, wholeness) contrasts with the anti-thesis (sin, fragmentation), but the outcome of the pull and counterpull between them is a new level of synthesis (God, Jesus, summing up in their Beings the salvation represented in the thesis).

These theological dramatizations correspond closely with the congruences and conflicts of the various units of social organization. The salvation/reconciliation elements correspond with basic forces of healing and wholemaking of individuals, families and communities. If the language is invariably couched in individual references, that does not mean that the integrity of family and society is not latently involved. Love is intimately tied to salvation in Christianity. Yet it is also a basic feeling linking individuals, families and communities and making each of them into a more cohesive unit. Sin is the opposite of salvation, but it also corresponds with the discords and frictions that weaken persons, groups and societies and the relations between them. Goodness and justice are part and parcel of God's Being. Yet they also correspond with human behaviour which facilitates the well-functioning of social organizations. Evil and injustice jar with what Christians believe to be God's purpose for human living. They also clash, as we all know, with the forces integrating our societies and the sub-systems within them. And so we can go on with each of the paired opposites in our myths, theologies and ideologies.

I have purposely used the word "correspond" when I linked the content of theology with what I previously called a field of jostling, contending, but also co-operating units of social organization. Social scientists with an atheistic bent (such as Durkheim, Freud and Marx) or with an inclination to make the sociological perspective sacred, tend to say that these religious forces and dramatizations are caused by, rather than correspond with, social needs. By contrast religious functionaries and believers also prefer the causal expression, but then start from the opposite angle: God causes individuals and social structures to become whole and rescues them from fragmentation. By using 'correspondence' I think that I am both avoiding atheistic and theistic biases and can point more accurately to mutual effect rather than one-way determination. Or to put it in other terms: inter-dependence reflects reality better than dependence or independence.

Apart from the hermeneutic component there are other elements of religion which contribute to the identity, identities, or jostling of systems which have survived the onslaught of time. By bringing in 'survival' we may, as a sort of bonus, also increase our insight into why religions have maintained themselves so well in all cultures.

When the late William Stanner (1972, 270) tried to sum up totemism he called it the principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man. Elsewhere (1966, 35) he calls it "the language of the ontological system". Religion then in the context of Australian Aborigines has something to do with ordering. Yet the 'identities' or units of social organization it ordered were incomparably simple (a tribe, a moiety, a clan, an individual, gender). Nor was the ordering very transcendental (the totem and the identity were one; neither nature in the abstract nor time nor history existed for traditional Aboriginal society). Religion and traditional Aboriginal society perished together. The former could not stretch its canopy sufficiently to cope with, or to absorb, the devastating change brought about by the coming of the whites in 1788.

By contrast, the religion of the whites colonising Australia possessed an ordering mechanism which was much more transcendental and therefore much less tied to the mundane. The sacred did not pervade everything. In its organizational form it was so powerless in fact that the first chaplain to the penal colony of New South Wales had to build his own church attended by about 3% of the population on Christmas day 1793, the year it was built. It was burnt down by the convicts five years later (Mol, 1985a). Personal and family identity where much more clearly separated within the social system as compared with Aboriginal society. And yet as in Aboriginal society, religion represented culture and moral order even when it was despised by convicts. It was therefore only natural that the first Catholic priests allowed into the colony in 1820 to keep the Irish convicts under control were paid from the Police Fund (O'Farrell, 1968, 16).

Transcendental ordering therefore is a second component of religion which comes to mind as we look at the context, even though there was quite a difference between the almost non-existent, embryonic transcendental quality of that ordering in Aboriginal society as compared with the full Christian panoply of abstract ideas such as atonement, revelation, eternity, providence, covenant, justification, sanctification, eschatology. In other words the more complex civilization became, the more the transcendental canopy stretched as if to contain sprightly progeny. Too long have scholars of religion stared at Otto's definition of the sacred as entirely other and Durkheim's and Eliade's separation of the sacred and the profane to see behind the gradual separating a sophisticated evolutionary process counterbalancing a complexifying field of jostling systems or a growing transcendentalism interacting with growing differentation.

The social advantage of the separation is that now both spheres can retain the relevance for one another (as a blueprint is relevant for action and construction) and yet not contaminate the mundane with counterproductive rigidness or the sacred with maladaptive flexibility (transcendental order is by definition permanent and continuous).

In the West this separating of earth and sky had a variety of consequences. Transcendental ordering became two-faced. It relativized in two ways. Firstly it became a means for managing discord, disorder, disruption through relating them to, or placing them in, a context of order: personal identity could be restored if the traumatic event could be interpreted to be part of a larger blueprint (God's inscrutable design). In its Protestant guise it even began to legitimate certain forms of marginal individualism thereby advancing democracy, private enterprise and scientific objectivity (Mol, 1983, 27-31). This is the conservative face of relativization. The other side is the reforming one. Instead of reinforcing man's units of social organization through relating them to a source of legitimation in the beyond, it 'relativizes' them through diminishing their importance and 'holiness' in relation to this source in the beyond. In 1984 during his visit to Canada Pope John Paul II unambiguously endorsed the critique of Canadian

society by his bishops who a year earlier had condemned the unalloyed chasing of the profit motive at the expense of better work opportunities for the unemployed. In other words the transcendental frame of reference contains standards of justice which may demand change rather than legitimation. This reforming face concerns itself with improving the justice, wholeness and viability of social identity. In a slightly oversimplified way the relation between the ordering component of religion and the various identities in modern society might be summed up by suggesting that the conservative evangelicals' are primarily interested in saving, healing the individual, while the social activists are interested foremost in saving, healing society. For the latter it is necessary that the transcendental frame of reference provide both perspective and leverage for change.

In summary: the second component of what religion means in the context of both Australian Aboriginal and Christian religion shows that ordering kept pace with differentiation and complexification through increasing transcendentalization. It also suggests that surviving religions reflect the dialectic between identity and change in the environment by synopsizing order and anticipating disorder. More concretely, these surviving religions unify individuals, groups, societies through images of order, defining what each of them is about.

Yet consciousness of belief unifies less than strong loyalties to these beliefs and to the systems protected by them. That's why *emotional anchorage* or commitment is so often tied up with religion whenever it is practised or mentioned. In the Bhagavad Gita the warrior Arjuna defeats his uncle's army through clinging in utter devotion to Krishna, his charioteer and the incarnation of Brahman. Mutual loyalty between Yahweh and Israel was the essence of the covenant. Often when something went wrong morally or militarily the cause was squarely laid at the door of the nation's unfaithfulness. Yet God's loving, enduring commitment was assumed all along in spite of the nation's less than perfect response to His love. God became (or actually was) the personification of love, loyalty and commitment. And if God loved them, so the Israelites thought, how could they withhold affection from one another? God had commanded not just to love one's neighbour, but even an alien (Leviticus 19:34). National identity was cemented together through faith.

An altogether different context in which religion is used as commitment is the secular environment of the modern West. Commentators as well as the man in the street make fun of ardent feminists or ecologists for making their cause into a religion. Yet their own commitments to private enterprise, democracy or private goals of promotion, status, wealth, power is often just as strongly held. More importantly these commitments have often lead to the formation of common interest groups or lobbies separating themselves as effectively from the environment as tribes did who increased internal solidarity in order to be all the more capable of dominating that environment. Whether in ancient or modern times, feelings of loyalty or commitment have been crucial for the strength of the boundaries around the various systems now contending, now cooperating in the kind of jostling field I have used as our point of departure.

Yet in the same way as transcendental ordering can ossify and thereby become maladaptive, so emotional anchoring can anchor too much and obstruct adjustment to new situations. And similarly as transcendentalization and relativization can both comfort and open the way to change, so commitment has developed both attaching, unifying, welding characteristics and detaching, separating and stripping tendencies. Of course it would be difficult to still call the latter commitments when in actual fact they de-commit.

I would like to give a number of examples of religion both committing and de-committing. On the level of personal identity conversion in Christianity and satori in Zen Buddhism usually involve a clearing of the underbrush before the new foundation

can be laid. It is also true for ideologies, such as communism. After reading Marx, Engels and Lenin, something clicked in Arthur Koestler's brain, he said (1951,32). The tortured past, full of doubts, conflicts and confusion had now become an area of darkness from which he had to constantly and consciously detach himself before his new faith could take hold. Christian conversion, Chinese brainwashing (Schein, 1961,119), Alcoholics Anonymous have in common that all vigorously and continuously dissolve old patterns in order to create new ones through an intervening phase of meaninglessness.

On the level of collective identity charismatic leaders have emerged all through history at times of stress and confusion. They emotionally strip the unsatisfactory past and weld their vision of the future in the minds and hearts of their people. In the second half of the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th centuries a variety of Maori leaders in New Zealand, such as Te Whiti (1832-1907) and Ratana (1873-1939) relativized tribal boundaries by forging a supratribal vision of the Pakeha enemy being driven into the sea or Maori identity being re-established. All the biblical themes of Exodus, Promised Land, and resurrection were grist for the mill. In the process they replaced defeatism with purpose, a defunct identity with a new one (Mol, 1982, 26-35).

Fourthly, religion is also very often used on contexts where it means ritual, or where it *enacts sameness.* In Transcendental Meditation the secret Sanskrit prayer formula or mantra has to be repeated for about twenty minutes in the morning and also in the evening. It retraces the grooves of order for the individual and reassures that the familiar has not succumbed to the unfamiliar. Family prayers do for a family what the five daily prayers do for a Muslim community and the national anthem for a nation. Ritual provides man with a sense of identity and belonging (Klapp,1969,125,37). In the Christian West hundreds of millions attend church each Sunday where again and again they hear which norms and values are judged to be good (altruism, caring, consideration, responsibility, etc.) and which are bad (selfishness, cruelty, self-assertion, unreliability, etc.) Common beliefs in God whose entire Being closely fits with what the group or society thinks of itself ideally are professed. Feelings of dedication to Jesus, the Lord of Life, are aroused on the correct assumption that in the bustle of existence ideas and sentiments tend to be consigned to oblivion unless the memory of them is refreshed.

Yet at the heart of ritual (as with transcendentalization or with commitment) there is also often a dialectic with variety. Variety on the periphery and in the forms of articulation contrasts with sameness at the core of values and beliefs. Ministers and priests may repeat the Apostles' Creed every Sunday, but they hate to be accused of preaching the same sermon.

More pervasive is the dialectic basic to rites of passage (birth, marriage, initiation, death). Here rites function to channel change within permitted boundaries. They form a very hardy, enduring form of ritual which has persisted from the most primitive to the most secular periods of history and in all cultures, irrespective of ideology. One can find them just as readily in the Christian West as in Communist East Europe. Wedding ceremonies are a good example of the phases of emotional detachment and attachment to a new, or re-aligned identity or unit of social organization. The bride is detached from the family in which she grew up and 'given away' by the father. The new family is now symbolically welded together with strings (in some Asian cultures) or with rings (in Christianity) and solemn oaths are sworn by the partners to be faithful and loving until death. The honeymoon underlines the separation from the household of which the partners were members and on return the husband carries the wife over the threshold to again accentuate the transition across the boundary between two families.

III RELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGION AND IDENTITY

We have already constructed a fair number of generalizations about the relationship. Here it remains to systematize, summarize, refine, amend and qualify these generalizations.

Elsewhere (Mol, 1976, 1) I have defined religion as 'the sacralization of identity'. A description of this kind may be short and pithy, and may do as a point of departure, but from the foregoing it is obvious that it needs refinement and elaboration. The advantage of the definition as it stands is two-fold: (1) it draws our attention to a process (sacralization) rather than fixity (religion) and therefore allows us to go beyond the indubitable separateness and otherness of the sacred to a better understanding of the contribution separation paradoxically makes to the integration of identities. (2) It links religion to survival in that the ubiquity of religion appears to have something to do with the way it increases the viability of systems and their relations in a field of cooperating, but also contending units of social organization.

Before qualifying the definition, I must for a moment summarize the ways various identities were and are indeed sacralized.

A transcendental frame of reference relates a welter of sometimes chaotic events and experiences to an underlying order which on the level of personal identity restores confidence and on other levels also swiftly repairs broken boundaries. Faith, loyalty and commitment strengthen emotional links between this point of reference and various units of social organization and thereby makes each of these units more cohesive. Ritual retraces the grooves of order so that integrative elements are not forgotten and remain uppermost in consciousness. Myths and theological themes dramatize the tension within and between the systems to which we belong, usually resolve them and thereby lessen their destructive impact. So far our definition holds.

It is already implied in the previous paragraph however, that in a system of countervailing identities sacralization of one may weaken another. In those countries to which Ukrainians have migrated in this century both the Ukrainian Catholic and the Ukrainian Orthodox churches have been the most formidable guardians of Ukrainian identity (Mol.1985, 71ff) and have often successfully battled those forces of the host country which advanced national identity at the expense of ethnic identity. By contrast the major denominations in those same countries carried out the kind of mission work amongst Ukrainians which implicitly strengthened the language and culture of the host country at the expense of the ethnic one. Examples of this kind can be multiplied many times over for other ethnic groups. These examples also show that structurally religious organizations can and do have their own identity and as such are in no way exempt from the boundary maintaining and boundary challenging forces impinging on them.

However, even on the functional level (the contribution mechanisms of sacralization make to the consolidation of units of social organization) there are many examples of sacralizations being accompanied by desacralization. I have already pointed to the inner dialectic within each of these components of our definition of religion. Transcendentalization can and does lead to sacralization/legitimation, but also to desacralization/censure. Commitment was often preceded by de-commitment, particularly in the cases of conversion and charisma. An important category of rites (rites of passage) always incorporates a phase of stripping one identity in order to weld a new one all the more effectively. Myth and theology act out basic disparities within a particular society, recognizing both boundary fusing and boundary fissioning elements.

There is more. I have advanced ideas with one hand (sacralization) some of which I then subsequently have taken back with the other (desacralization). This seems

unpardonable, particularly when we have been taught that any scientific model must be logically consistent, aesthetically elegant and orderly hierarchic. And yet the data at our disposal somehow cannot be squeezed into such a model. As in the biological sciences, identity (heredity) and its tendency towards hierarchy and integration is countered (for the sake of survival) by change (mutation), or as Bertalanffy (1969,74) suggests, hierarchy and openendedness seem to both be necessary, if the model is to be comprehensive. This then brings us back to the dialectic model fitting best not only in the scientific study of religion, but also in the natural and social sciences (Mol, 1978, 22ff).

The correspondence between sacralization and units of social organization is also not neatly congruent. The transcendental frame of reference is usually cosmic enough (particularly in the universal religions) to be potentially as relevant for the international system as for national, social, communal, familial, personal ones. Yet the weakness of both the World Council of Churches and the United Nations shows that actual loyalties do correspond much more closely with lower level systems than with configurations of international brotherhood and such like. The Vatican is constantly engaged in moderating between its international ethos and the strength of competing national sentiments.

In summary: we can define religion initially and ideally as the sacralization of identity, but identities are always proximate and situated in a jostling field in which they have to be capable both of cooperation and contention in order to survive. Therefore we have to add to this definition (a) that sacralization of one identity may contribute to the weakening of another and (b) that the mechanisms of sacralization (transcendentalization, commitment, ritual, myth) have developed the wherewithal to desacralize in order to ensure both function and survival.

IV COMPARISON WITH OTHER WAYS TO STUDY RELIGION

(a) Phenomenology.

Phenomenologists ask themselves the questions: How does it appear? How can one observe religion as accurately and precisely as possible? While they observe, they think themselves into the situation of those who experience the various religious phenomena. In so far as phenomenology attempts to uncover the structure, essence and meaning of phenomena it has much in common with the dialectical method described above. However, phenomenologists are generally not interested in generalizations about the effect of religion, how it correlates with other phenomena or in latent analysis (the construction of these generalizations on the basis of what lies below appearances and beneath the surface of phenomena).

By contrast the above sketched dialectical method zeroes in on what lies beyond culture-bound surface categories and concentrates on 'identities', 'systems' and their opening and closing boundaries. It tries to answer the question: How does religion affect the strength or weakness of these boundaries? By doing so it claims that it can elucidate the functioning and survival of religious phenomena. However unique cultures are and however foolish it is to underestimate their differences, the dialectical or 'identity' method is particularly interested in underlying patterns they have in common. It is less afraid of being accused of cultural relativism, if only because it claims that by specifying identity levels it can analyze the relevance of religion for both intra- and inter-cultural systems.

The specification of identity levels also allows the dialectical method of studying religion to go beyond the generally subjective (or personal-identity oriented) treatment of meaningsystems. Weber (1964) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) correctly trace

the emergence of systems of meaning in subjective terms. Yet objectification and unifying belief systems, group and social identities have in common with persons.

(b) Hermeneutics.

The search in hermeneutics seems to be for the key to unlock the interpretation of religion as it were from the *outside.* Yet what if this key is actually to be found *within* the religions we study? What if the sin/salvation dialectic in Christianity and its equivalents in other religions proves to be *more* rather than *less* sophisticated than the linear progressive thinking of Darwinists, the rationalist assumptions of the creationists and the cognitive positivism which has some of the sciences teetering on the brink of bankruptcy? I have taken the view that at the present state of scientific endeavour the integration/differentiation or identity/change dialectic is the best fitting and most comprehensive model for the interpretation of natural, social as well as religious data. On this assumption the ordering of religious phenomena cannot be arbitrary. The vantage point for ordering therefore must distinguish between superior and inferior hermeneutics.

From this angle the best interpretations result from a series of systematic questions. First: which units of social organization ('systems', 'identities' or more concretely persons, groups, societies) are implicitly or explicitly involved in the data (belief, commitment, ritual, myth)? Second: are these units congruent or are they in conflict, or both? Thirdly: do the religious phenomena reinforce, restore, reconcile each of these units and do they divide, disaffect others? A prayer of confession may reconcile a community or a family, but it may also repress the self-assertion necessary for the integrity of a particular individual. A rite may reinforce a sense of tribal identity, but thereby endanger super-tribal loyalties.

By implication, inferior interpretations ignore some units of social organization (a collectivity of some sort) and attach exclusive importance to others (individual perception, for instance). More frequently hermeneutics concentrates on religious ideas, beliefs rather than religious commitments, rites. In this way a partial account may be taken for the whole and so distort the total picture. Alternately surface intentions of individuals or groups may hide deeper motivations and structures and so lead to incomplete analysis if they alone are described.

(c) Structuralism

Levi-Strauss (1970,341) correctly felt that mythical thought portrayed the nature of reality and organized the diversity of empirical experience. To him (1969,29) the relation between myth and empirical fact was dialectical. It was not obvious to the naked eye. And yet it was the essence of the underlying structure of myth. Structuralists therefore look for binary opposites, or to put it in language I prefer, notions of integration and differentiation crystallized and synthesized in a suitable symbolic core.

There are two problems with structuralism as presented by Levi-Strauss. The first one it has in common with all other theories here reviewed: it may elucidate important aspects of religion, but it is not a comprehensive theory of religion and therefore runs the risk of taking the part too much for the whole. The fit of the myth in a particular culture may be just as important if not more so than its structure. Structuralism may have contributed substantially to our understanding of myth (and theology I may add), but it has little to say about ritual, faith and transcendentalization.

The other problem is the tendency of Levi-Strauss to reduce emotional drives to intellectual processes and therefore to underestimate commitment in relation to myth. A dialectical rather than a reductive relation between commitment and myth seems to reflect religious reality better.

(d) Psychoanalysis

The important contribution psychoanalysis (both in its Freudian and Jungian variant) made to the study of religion is that it delved below the appearance of religious phenomena by analysing their latent effect on the sanity (or insanity) of individuals. Sigmund Freud thought of religion as an emotional crutch which people interested in knowledge should avoid. Yet his own strong attachment to individual rationalism was not any less irrational and the fit of religious symbolism with reality as people experienced it was generally better than the fit of Freud's belief in rationalism. After all, reason proved to be a rather utopian interpreter and poor mender of man's predicament, whereas such irrational factors as love and loyalty, stressed by religion, had an indubitable effect on integrity.

Carl Jung understood this better. To him individuation (the whole-making of a person, personal integration) could be significantly assisted by religion. It provided the individual with a system of meaning outside him or herself in terms of which the patterns which the jungle of life had put into jeopardy, could be repaired. Psychoanalysis also detects much conflict between individual and culture (which Freud regarded as primarily a regressive institution). This emphasis on conflict between personal and other forms of identity and on latent factors involved in the opening and closing of boundaries around the self must be part of any theory of religion. Yet conflict and latency also exist between and in other units of social organization. Religion is as much, if not more, involved in these and psychoanalysis therefore lacks the comprehension which we have attempted to achieve in the dialectical approach.

(e) Functionalism.

Functionalism, like psychoanalysis was equally interested in what lay below the surface of appearances and Durkheim's importance for the study of religion lies in the link he saw between ritual and commitment (rather than belief) and social solidarity. This was progress, since almost all figures of the nineteenth century who thought about religion (such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Edward Tylor, Sir James Frazer) looked at it through the coloured glasses of individual rationalism. The problem was that in his enthusiasm Durkheim made the opposite mistake. He correctly pointed out that collective effervescence was not ancillary to the rational individual but had a life of its own. Yet he overlooked that even amongst the Australian Aborigines (the subjects of his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*) totems for individuals (associated with the conception site — the place where the mother had first felt the stirrings in the womb) were separate from, sometimes even in conflict with, tribal totems.

The problem with the functional approach therefore is that it too readily assumes that units of social organization harmoniously interact and that religion reinforces this harmony. It was for reason of conflict that Robert K. Merton introduced the concept of 'dysfunction' (whatever produces consequences of lesser adaptation for a given unit of social organization). An example: When in Central Australia Namatjira (the father of the famous aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira) eloped with a girl from the wrong kin-group, he was denied instruction in the sacred traditions of his own conception site (Strehlow,1970,122). In other words this knowledge was regarded as functional for Namatjira's confidence and integrity, but dysfunctional for clan solidarity (Mol. 1982a, 12).

(f) Conflict theory

Conflict theories stress the ubiquity of conflict, contradiction and change in society. They stand in contrast with functionalism, which emphasizes integration. From the point of view of our dialectical theorizing, the polar position of each underestimates

the interaction between congruence and conflict, or the way both the factors moving towards identity and those moving towards change, are of vital necessity for survival. Conflict between units of social organization prevents sterile ossification, congruence prevents certain extinction following the wake of unimpeded change.

Conflict theoreticians are not particularly interested in religion. Negatively they point to religious organizations backing the powerful against the powerless. Positively they point to, for instance, the social gospel in Anglo-Saxon countries or liberation theology in South America as means to counterbalance the injustices perpetrated on the weak by the strong. In the dialectical approach religion is treated rather similarly. Here too social action is regarded as a means to heal broken societies. Yet more comprehensively religion is also regarded as the reinforcer of boundaries in primitive societies where the kinds of conflict the conflict theoreticians are interested in, are largely unknown.

More importantly, the relevance of religion is not confined to patching over economic friction (slums and poverty versus affluence), political conflicts (establishment power versus radical powerlessness), and racial strife (negro versus white). Its relevance also rests with its capacity to place frictions in a larger cosmic setting where threat and anxiety are relativized. In other words it too interprets reality — in the sects, for example, by means of the sin/salvation dialectic.

(g) Marxism

Marxism is closely allied to the conflict theory of society. It accuses religious organizations of supporting the ruling classes and there is indeed good evidence that this has been and is the case. Yet the Marxist assumptions were and are too narrow for the general state of affairs even in 19th Century England and Germany. Class was only one of a variety of units of social organization and religion was just as much concerned with the community, the family, the individual and their interactions, quite separate from the class-structure. Of course there is also considerable evidence that the same religious organizations which reinforced the status quo somewhat incongruously vigorously defended the workers against the injustices of a capitalist economy around the turn of the 19th Century.

More importantly, about the same time both in Britain and North-America Christian sects had often greater appeal for the 'exploited' than those political movements which promised paradise through the overthrow of capitalism and improvement in material conditions. The reason for the remarkable attraction of Methodism, the Salvation Army and the Baptists in Canada and the U.S.A. for the working class lay in their capacity to address themselves to the entire realm of human experiences (not just economic deprivation, but also family conflicts, alcoholism, death, birth, marriage, divorce, frustration, adultery, pain, ill health, plain human cussedness, evil, greed, fortune as well as misfortune, diffidence, etc.). All these could and did weaken personal identity in the same way as more globally culture contact, military conquest, trade, injustice, disaster damaged social identity.

(h) Deprivation theories

Like Marxism, deprivation theories of religion assume that in an undeprived state man would not need religion, because it is only a means towards the end of mastery. But looking at religion solely in terms of technological mastery or social differentiation ignores the function it has for the other side of the dialectic: the knitting together or integration of societies and individuals. Religion deals with the interpretation of any reality, not merely with ones which can be reduced to a form of deprivation. A win in the lottery can obviously not be reduced to a form of deprivation. And yet the event has to be fitted in a balanced set of interpretations if the lucky ticket holder is to survive the altered change in circumstances. The Jesus Freaks with

their millennialism or the New Guinean cargo cults do not just compensate for the relative deprivations of this world, but, more fundamentally, interpret present disorder in the light of an anticipated event.

When religion reinforces identity, it thereby strengthens the side which complements rather than sugarcoats alienation. In other words the dialectical or identity approach to religion maintains that mastery (the profit motive, technical progress, efficiency, etc.) is not independent of the way facts and goals are interpreted. It maintains that there are no uninterpreted facts or goals and that the only alternative to interpretation is disorder or even chaos.

Both to Marxists and some of those who favour the deprivationist approach to religion, the transcendental point of reference is an unnecessary illusion which in the past led to exploitation and which in the present distorts reality. By contrast, in the dialectical or identity model of religion, this transcendental point of reference delineates and sums up an order in terms of which disorder and change can be better managed.

CONCLUSION

Deep down scientific papers of this kind are motivated by specific convictions, biasses, values or beliefs of the author. Making a clean breast of these basic motivations has the advantage for the audience that it can both understand why the address took the turn it did and facilitate the positive or negative judgment necessary for linking it with the variety of favoured approaches.

It is not accidental that the term 'comprehension' presented itself as often as it did. To understand religion systematically has been a much more demanding and puzzling intellectual exercise to me than any other topic in the social sciences. How could the large variety of religious data at my disposal be ordered and accounted for, given the most up-to-date theories of individual and social behaviour? Why had religion survived for so long and why were all those scholars of past generations predicting its inevitable demise so hopelessly wrong? It is this concern with comprehension which has made me judge the nineteenth century scholars of religion as overestimating both personal identity and rationalism at the expense of the social system and commitment. The first scholar not to do so (Emile Durkheim) made the opposite mistake (overestimating the predominance of the social system). He also underestimated the conflict between the various forms of identity. By contrast Sigmund Freud was quite aware of conflict and non-rational commitment, but underestimated the saliency of the social system and his own non-rational commitment to rationalism. Karl Marx correctly saw the sacralizing, legitimating characteristic of religion, but failed to see both its application to the numerous forms of identity not reducible to class and the internal, de-legitimating elements at the very heart of the surviving forms of religion. Max Weber made very astute observations about the effect of meaningsystems on social structures, but had little to say about commitment to transcendental beliefs. The phenomenologists have made important advances in the study of religion through stressing objectivity and understanding from within, but have tended to avoid generalizations based on latent analysis and for that reason have not looked as much as they could have, beyond the culture-boundness of their categories. The deprivation theories of religion were not any less partial in that they generally failed to see it operating in situations which could not be reduced to deprivation.

Criticism is easier than construction. With comprehension as the goal, how could we produce a fitting accounting scheme? Obviously the model of a jostling field

of congruent and cooperating systems lacks in elegance what it gains in dynamism. Yet the dialectic between the variables making for identity and consolidation and the variables making for change and disjunction is obviously elementary in both the social and natural sciences. Arnold Toynbee's (1946,65) view of history as well as the intrinsic components of the major religions of the world (sin and salvation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, ch'ien and k'un, yang and yin in Chinese religion, prakriti and purusa, adharma and dharma in Hinduism) fit as a hand in a glove with the dialectic emerging as the template of the sciences.

What is more, this comprehensive dialectical way of thinking about religion and identity has the advantage of operationalizing and concretizing what is essentially a rather vague grand theory. Identity can be translated into actual units of social organization being subject to boundary eroding and boundary reinforcing forces. Religion can be translated into the diachronic component of transcendentalization and the three synchronic components of commitment, ritual and myth. Most of this paper has attempted to sketch the effect that these mechanisms of sacralization have on the various forms of identity. In the process of doing so, we found it necessary to modify the simple idea that religion is the sacralization of identity. After all not only do units of social organization clash (thereby creating the dilemma that sacralization or strengthening of one implicitly leads to weakening another) but also the mechanisms of sacralization have their own in-built de-sacralizing potential to survive the onslaught of change and to absorb the latter back into order.

Paradoxical though it may sound, the prime motivation of comprehension has its own limitations. One cannot be single-mindedly scientific in the comprehensive sense and simultaneously avoid being a cultural relativist and a reductionist, two accusations which can be rightfully addressed to this dialectical interpretation of religious phenomena. And I may add, two accusations which render the approach unacceptable to many scholars of religion. All I can say to colleagues for whom these approaches determine scholarship is that an over-emphasis on the uniqueness of a culture tends to preclude the study of that culture from an exterior vantage point. On reductionism: any exterior vantage point (apart from the religious one intrinsic to the particular tradition under investigation) usually reduces religious phenomena to a framework of order at odds with the religious one. Objectivity and reductionism belong together. All scholars of religion and most theologians (Karl Barth, for instance, is an exception because he stood squarely within the Christian tradition) reduce religion by the mere fact that they treat it as an independent (affecting) or dependent (affected) variable, whatever the case. If anything this dialectical methodology is least reductionistic of all approaches in that the oscillation between salvation and change, yin and yang, prakriti and purusa on the one hand and the paired opposition of identity (wholeness, integration) and difference (fragmentation, dissolution) on the other belong to the same family of ontological assumptions.

The implication of all this of course is that however valid within the academic setting, the scientific study of religion cannot materially contribute to the well-being of religion, unless theologians and embattled Christians cry out for an apology of their existence. If the latter is needed, there are specific areas in which religious exposition is more sophisticated than scientific analysis. For instance the former is much more articulate about inescapable emotional commitment to basic ontological departures than the latter. Analytic procedures (so close to the scientific enterprise) are partisan explainers of reality. Synthetic procedures, much closer to the heart of what any religion is about, may also be partisan. Yet they are more likely to contribute to whole making than the former. After all salvation is seldom the expressed purpose of the academic communities in which I have worked and still work, in spite of the fact that the motto of my own university (McMaster in Canada) is: Ta Panta

Sunesteken En Christoi (In Christ everything hangs together). Nothing is further from the truth on our and any other campus.

All this leads to the inescapable conclusion well expressed by Ninian Smart (1979,7) that being a saint is more important than studying religion. Or to say the same with the theme of this congress: studying identity does not necessarily lead to having one, learning about salvation does not make one saved, religious scholarship does not produce religious people, in the same way as knowing all about love does not help one much to be in love.

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