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The Definers Defined: Traditions in the Definition of Religion

The problem of definition is a central issue,
involving not only the concepts within the field of study
but also the nature of the field itself.¹

Summary

This article surveys three traditions of defining religion. It proposes an operational definition in the Tylorian tradition expanded with the definer proposed by the anthropologist Jan van Baal, to wit, the non-verifiability/non-falsifiability of the addressable 'meta-empirical reality'. Dealing with religion as a social institution, I offer tools for the analysis of religion as postulated communicative events within believed networks of relationships between believers and their non-verifiable/non-falsifiable beings or (addressable) reality.

[181] 'Operational definitions' of religion

Many definitions of 'religion' have been constructed in the past.² It is likely that many more will be proposed in the future. So far, they seem to have been constructed for mainly two purposes: to define what religion 'is' wherever and whenever it is found; or to define what religion is taken to be in societies in societies studied in order to provisionally delimit 'religion' as an object of study. The first purpose results in 'real definitions' of religion of the 'essentialist' subtype.³ They state what the 'thing' (res) 'religion' is taken to be by indicating the traits that

¹ Hill 1973, 2

² I am grateful to Jan Snoek, Yme Kuiper and Wouter Belier for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

³ For the purposes of definition, and the types of definition that result from them, see Robinson 1968, 16-19, 153-156; Penner & Yonan 1972, 114-117; Snoek 1987, 38-39; Penner 1989, 7.

are held to constitute its nature or essence. These traits are determined by philosophical reflection on the religion(s) with which the philosopher is familiar as a believer, or by cultural association, or by study. The second purpose results in 'lexical definitions' of religion.⁴ They state what particular traits are typical of the religions that are being studied. My concern, however, is more narrowly with those 'lexical' definitions which have been constructed as tools for the analysis of religions. Because of this heuristic purpose I term them 'operational definitions', or 'working-definitions' of religion. It is hoped that they will be useful analytical tools, i.e. be heuristically fruitful.⁵

The first mode is a deductive and normative one. What religion 'is', is deduced from a normative appreciation of a paradigmatic religion,⁶ usually that of the scholar or the scholar's society.⁷ Moreover, an essential definition is usually held to be universally valid and applicable to all other religion(s). Its normative character is revealed by its use. It is used to discriminate 'religion(s)' from 'fake religion(s)' in historical data, which have a *prima facie* resemblance with the paradigmatic religion, some being accepted as 'religion' and the rest being disqualified as 'superstition', 'magic', or by some other depreciative term.⁸ These labels remove them beyond the pale of 'religion'. They qualify them as improper, inferior, immoral or false 'religions', i.e. as non-religions. These definitions are, therefore, reductionist in intention.

⁴ See Robinson (1968: 31, 35): "A lexical [or] word-thing definition is an assertion that there was among certain people a rule or custom or habit by which a certain form was used as a sign of a certain thing". "Lexical definition is a form of history. It refers to the real past. It tells what certain people meant by a certain word at a certain less or more specified time and place".

⁵ Jan Snoek pointed out to me that my use of the term 'operational definition' deviates from that in classification and definition theory. There operational definitions have diagnostic functions. They enumerate objective criteria which enable one to decide whether a certain label, e.g. 'religion', is applicable to a certain case. See Snoek 1987, 27. Snoek also holds that (these) operational definitions should not be termed 'definitions' at all because they are tools for identification. In order not to create confusion, I should perhaps have refrained from using the term 'operational definition' in the senses which I have stipulated. I might have opted for, e.g., 'heuristic definition', or, as Snoek suggested, 'empirical definition'. However, I have not done so because my colleagues in the study of religions seem to use the term 'operational definition' in the senses and for the purposes I describe here.

⁶ At times by explicit articulation, but more often by implicit assumption. That is especially so in the implicit definition of 'religion' as subjection after the Western exclusivist-monotheistic model of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which has led to the extensive use of the category 'magic' to denote historical religions, or significant portions of them that are marked by utilitarian intentions.

⁷ Which I term an ethnocentric essentialist definition. Exceptionally, an essentialist definition of 'religion' may be 'xeno-centric', when a philosopher or a scholar of religion has an intimate knowledge of a foreign religion and treats that religion as the paradigm of all religion(s).

⁸ E.g., witchcraft, sorcery, juju, fetishism, occultism, satanism, pseudo-religion, idolatry, paganism, syncretism, heresy, fundamentalism, etc. It must be kept in mind that these classifications of other religions, or of the beliefs of co-believers, are normatively inspired by the definer's view of his/her own religion or worldview. They are, therefore, integral parts of the religion or worldview of the definer. Cf. Gladigow 1988, 387, 388.

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[182] Two major modes of reductionism may be distinguished: theological reductionism and positivist reductionism. Theological reductionism reduces all other religions to non-religions on the premise that ‘salvation’ may be obtained only through one’s own religion, that religion being exclusively credited with salvific efficacy. It is the traditional position common to Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The best example is the orthodox Christian position towards other religions as expressed in the maxims *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – ‘there is no salvation outside the (Christian) church’ – and *omnes dii gentium demonia* – ‘all gods of [other] peoples are demons/-devils’. It regards other religions as ways of perdition and as the pernicious work of Satan only.

The second position reduces all religions to non-religions on the premise of an axiomatically held positivist one-tier worldview. By limiting the empirical solely to what can be felt, seen, verified and investigated with our senses and to what can be made object of investigation by the natural sciences and its instruments, positivist reductionism reduces all beliefs in the meta-physical to non-verifiable imaginative mental constructs, irrespective whether they refer to the purely meta-physical ‘spiritual’, or to the intra-physical ‘magical’. They serve many purposes in human societies, but not that of communication with the spiritual or magical.

Both theological and positivist positions, however, view all other, c.q. all, religions as merely human mental constructs for definite human needs which are explained perfectly by those needs. Orthodox Christian reductionism will, however, also add a concomitant meta-empirical explanation, that of the Adversary’s covert action perverting the human need for true revealed religion into its semblance, the historical religions of humankind⁹

The second mode is an inductive one. Its purpose is to define provisionally, but as accurately as is possible, what ‘religion’ is¹⁰ in the particular societies and histories that are to be studied, i.e. what ‘religion’ is for the believers of those religions. An operational definition is developed for delineating the object of study in its historical particularity. No universal validity and applicability to other religions is claimed for it nor is it used as a canon (‘yardstick’) for normative verdicts upon the historical religion to be studied or on any other religion. It usually is also a heuristic definition. It is proposed because it is believed it will be an instrument for fruitful research. It contains a research aim and, *in nuce*, the concepts which will serve as the analytical instruments for that research. If an operational definition is also a heuristic one, it is even more particular. Not only is its validity and applicability limited to the particular historical

⁹ Cf. also Platvoet 1985, 45-51. For a discussion of what is involved in ‘reduction’ and ‘explanation’ in science, cf. Penner & Yonan 1972: 117-122; Penner 1989: 22-23. However, the reduction of religion(s) discussed in this article is not between theories, as it is in science, but between social phenomena, religion being ‘explained away’ as non-religion by means of a theological and/or scientific argument, with the latter serving an ideological or theological purpose.

¹⁰ Not what it ‘does’, i.e. what non-religious ‘functions’ it has in a society or for individual human beings, such as legitimation, social cohesion, cosmological and other orientation, psychological security. Definitions of religion developed specifically to research these functions of (a) religion may be termed functional definitions. They are ‘essentialist definitions’ if such a function is regarded, in an a priori and axiomatic manner, as the very essence and explanation of religion. They are operational definitions if they are provisional and heuristic.

religions to which it is to be applied. It is also directed at investigating those religions from the particular slant, and in the particular mode, of a specific discipline or subdiscipline, or school, or theory.¹¹

Operational definitions of religion are constructed from data about particular religions. They consist of descriptive and analytical elements. The descriptive ones are derived from the historical study of religions as articulated or unarticulated beliefs and emotions in the heads and the ‘hearts’ of the believers, as they are expressed in their behaviour, ritual and other, in specific or non-specific forms of social organization, and in other types of visible expression such as plastic art, buildings, and landscaping. The analytical elements are derived from specific traditions of defining ‘religion’ in the academic study of religions. The original paradigm of these traditions is usually the religion of the native culture of the scholars, i.e. Western Christian religion as *emic*,¹² existentially or culturally, to these scholars. Operational definitions are, therefore, not solely derived from the object of study but also from the interaction between the data of the religion(s) studied and the *etic* scientific interests and views of the scholar, the latter being ideally and hopefully constantly corrected and reformed by the former,. The crux is the self-critical and non-normative attitude of the scholar(s), both as individuals and as a global ‘democratic community of organized skepticism’.¹³ [183] Central to their ideology is to hold even ‘established’ knowledge provisional and to never normatively impose their own views, definitions, theories and explanations upon the data studied, because data not in agreement with them may be discovered or a better theory explaining them may be developed.

The analytical elements in an operational definition of religion are, therefore, their more alien and subjective parts. They may significantly distort the descriptive elements in it and thwart the goal of an ‘objective’ representation of other religions. Normally, however, they will have been part of a long history of continual correction by their descriptive elements, for the descriptive study of other religions will have revealed features in them that could not be squared with analytical paradigms more closely conforming to the religion of the scholar or of his culture. These incompatibilities will have cause, and will continue to cause, the scholar to modify their

¹¹ However, definitions and analytical perspectives developed in one discipline may prove useful for other disciplines because of their wide(r) cross-disciplinary utility.

¹² *Emic* refers in the study of preliterate languages – and cultures – to the ‘actor perspective’, and in research of religions to the insider perspective of the believer(s). It refers to the meanings and connotations which the believers themselves attach to particular signifiers (words, gifts, cultural artifacts, specific modes of behaviour) that are regarded as ‘significant, meaningful, real, accurate, or in some other fashion [...] as appropriate by the actors themselves’ (Harris 1968: 571). Harris paired (*phon*)*emic* with (*phon*)*etic*, the latter referring to the ‘outsider’ distinctions in the research of languages ‘judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers’ (Harris 1968: 575), e.g. for regrouping or reformulating the *emic* data for scientific analysis and for presentation to the scientific community for discussion. It is the scientific perspective. Cf. also Platvoet 1982: 4-5, 29-30, 223, 326-327).

¹³ Köbben 1974: 88

heuristic definitions towards greater compatibility with the religions expressed in the lives and societies of their believers.¹⁴

Cosmologies, ideologies and the study of religions

The major force behind this constant adaptation to the object of study, away from the scholar's *emic* concept of religion as the *etic* paradigm for the analysis of the religions of humankind, is the 'ideology of objectivity' which has been cultivated as the distinctive group spirit of the academic study of religions. That attitude is rooted, on the one hand, in the Western tradition of academic independence, and on the other hand in the attitudes of an increasing independence from Western religion in scholars of religions which were fostered by the Enlightenment and subsequent processes of secularization. These were expressed in a wide range of new approaches to the religions of humankind ranging from liberal Christian inclusive theologies and the descriptive study of other religions to the positivist-[184]reductionist ideologies bent on explaining all religions as exclusively human affairs from their many functions for humans and human societies. Though that group spirit was, therefore, often bound, in various degrees, to theologically or ideologically inspired perspectives in the study of religions, it did also stimulate, in various ways and measures, a self-critical attitude in the scholars of religions. It caused them, though split into antagonistic groups, to become, to some extent, 'democratic communities of organized skepticism' for the purpose of achieving scientific (i.e. intersubjectively testable) knowledge by the means which the social institution, science, has developed for that purpose: publications and their critical review, and other forms of scholarly interaction. Those communities, Western in origin and still preponderantly Western, have become global in recent decades because the Western university model and ideal of detached knowledge¹⁵ became hegemonic in Europe's former settler and territorial colonies¹⁶ and in the rest of the world.

However, though the *etic* framework is under constant correction and modification by the descriptive elements derived from the study of religions, it must also be stated that these two elements are, or may be, informed by fundamentally different world views. Believers always see religion, analytically speaking, from the perspective of a multiple, i.e. two-¹⁷ or three-, or more

¹⁴ Cf. also Bianchi 1975: 2006; Rudolph 1985: 46-47

¹⁵ The ideal of detached knowledge is Western only by historical accident, as is shown by Pye 1989a on 'the first major, objective Japanese work on the history of religions, by Tominaga Nakamoto, who lived in the first half of the eighteenth century' (Pye 1989b, 14); that of Renate Schepens on the Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob (1599-1692) (*Trouw*, 15.9.2026); and by the various proto-histories of religions which were developed by historians and philosophers in e.g. Greek, Hellenistic, Muslim. and Renaissance societies. For the ideal of detached knowledge to take shape, definite technological and socio-structural prerequisites had to be fulfilled to a certain measure. So far, these conditions were realized best in modern Western universities.

¹⁶ On the spread of Western university traditions in Sub-Saharan Africa, cf. Platvoet 1989, 109-115.

¹⁷ Cf. Michael Hill (1975, 42-43; 1985, 108). He holds that religion always involves a 'bifurcation of the world'. Cf. also the view of Wallace (1966, 52, 83) that the 'supernatural premise', to wit 'that souls,

tier cosmology: a perceptible and one, or more, non-perceptible ones.¹⁸ The non-perceptible tiers, and the several non-perceptible ones within the perceptible world are for these believers as real as is the world we see and touch. To them, the non-perceptible ‘realities’ are manifestly present and/or active in the perceptible order, or they may be so at any moment. They therefore believe that they must entertain an active relationship with the non-perceptible in whatever form they postulate it. It is from this framework of a religious cosmology that believers as informants contribute data about (their beliefs in) the meta-empirical tier(s) in their universe, and about the meta-empirical within this world, and about their conduct of life in consequence of (their beliefs in) an ineluctable, often demanding and burdensome, relation with it.

Scholars, however, as scientists, can discuss religion only from the perspective of a one-tier cosmology, that of the empirical [185] world, because scientific research can only be conducted in and the observable world. For science rests on the control of data, and their interpretation, by the community of neutral,¹⁹ competent scholars, because only data from the perceptible realm can be subjected to scientific testing by means of verification and falsification procedures. Though scholars of religions are, therefore, required, as scientists, not to be committed to any one cosmology, whether religious or positivist, they are factually limited in their work to the perspective of the one-tier cosmology, because the non-perceptible realm(s) are not accessible to scientific investigation and all that it entails. For this reason only, and not for any ideological or theological one, can historians of religion present analyses of humankind’s religions only from the perspective of a one tier cosmology. They can find ‘religion’ only in the historical religions

supernatural beings and supernatural forces exist’, is ‘the defining characteristic of religion’. Cf. also Marett 1914, 10-11; Lowie 1924/1948, XVI; Norbeck 1961, 10-11; Norbeck 1974, 6. This is, however, correct only in the context of the historical sociology of spiritualizing. soteriological religions as they emerge after 1400 BCE. The opposition which is fundamental to it is that between the material, visible realm of ‘nature’ and ‘this world’, and the immaterial, invisible realm of the ‘supernatural’. As modern Western Christianity has developed this opposition in an even more marked way under the influence of the rise of modern natural science, the sacred profane opposition was deemed universal by even non-religious Western scholars of religions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The opposition, however, is not applicable at all to preliterate community religions. In the study of e.g. African indigenous religions, its use is distortive and misleading. For instance, the highest being in Akan traditional religion, the Creator[?]-God Nyame, who definitively came to be regarded gradually as also a ‘spiritual’ being to Akan believers, is at the same time visible to them in the sky, particularly in a thunderstorm, and touchable in the rain that pours down from it. The formulation by Worsley (1968, XXXV; 1969, 235) is more inclusive: ‘religious belief .. in some way or other ... refers to, and looks for validation in a dimension beyond the empirical-technical realm of action’.

¹⁸ I am aware that believers holding a three tier cosmology often claim a reduced perceptibility for the middle ‘hylomorphic’ tier, or say that it can be perceived under special conditions or after special training. I will stipulate below what I understand by ‘perceptible’, or ‘empirical’, and ‘non-perceptible’, or ‘meta-empirical’. The hylomorphic tier is included in the meta-empirical category in that definition .

¹⁹ In the sense of ‘metaphysical neutrality’ (Gombrich 1988, 7-9) towards anyone cosmology, theology, or ideology.

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of humankind, and can analyze them only as events in its history, and as institutions of human societies by which definite personal and societal needs, religious as well as non-religious, are met. Therefore, they describe these religions not only as they have taken shape in the belief systems in the heads of their believers and in the lives and societies of their believers. They also study them as having been put to many non-religious uses, and as having been continually shaped by these functions and uses, religious and other, and by their ecological and other settings and the historical development, if not accident, of their societies.

Different views of 'reality', therefore, underlie data, descriptions and analyses in the study of religions. One is the axiomatically held *emic* plural tier world view of the object of the study of religions, the believers. Another is the non-axiomatic *etic* one tier world view of the subject of that study, the scholars of religions. However, the history of the study of religions would be grossly misrepresented if the different interpretations of 'reality' in the study of religions were limited to these two. Actually, the non-axiomatically held, purely *etic* one tier world view of scholars is a recent development in the study of religions, even though it seems to have attained a prominent position now.²⁰ Before 1950, two other cosmologies have in fact dominated the study of religions, splitting it into two irreconcilable factions: the [186] 'positivist-reductionist' and the 'religionist'²¹ ones. The first was, and is, inspired in the study of religions by a positivist (one tier) world view held axiomatically as an ideology. Scholars of that persuasion sought, and seek, to explain religion as a purely human affair which has originated and operates without any meta-empirical agency being involved because they are held not to exist. Religion being as utterly a human affair as all the other institutions of human societies, it can, it is held, be as completely understood and explained as can the non-religious ones. As the properly religious functions of a religion are considered a priori as illusory, the explanation of religion is to be found in the study of its non-religious functions and uses, and in the ways in which religions have been shaped by their settings, historical human societies. Therefore, these scholars were hardly interested in the descriptive study of religions but all the more in the analysis of their non-religious functions and uses, and in the ways in which religions had been shaped by being seated in, i.e. conditioned and constrained by, specific non-religious contexts.

The second one was, and is, inspired by a plural tier, or religious, world view, of the non-orthodox, liberal Christian type, in which the traditional exclusive claim to salvation through Christ or the Christian Church only had been replaced by inclusive theologies. Having admitted other religions as ways of salvation into their religious world view, these scholars sought first

²⁰ In due time, I hope to publish data that will support this assertion.

²¹ These are, of course, my labels. They are devised to render explicit the extra-scientific axiomatic assumptions, of an ideological or theological nature. They may be shown to have been operative in the works of virtually all scholars of religions before 1950 (see Platvoet 1985). It must also be stressed that they are wide, and rather crude, categories, bringing out one element of methodological inadequacy only. Though I am critical of the influence of these extra-scientific values in the works of scholars of religions, these labels are in no way meant to serve as wholesale methodological denunciation of their contributions to the study of religions. Nor, inversely, to canonize the 'empirical' ones.

and foremost to describe these religions from the perspectives of their believers²² and to compare them as ‘proper’ religions in which believers interact with the truly existing and active meta-empirical ‘reality’ within and without this world. They abhorred the ‘functional’ and ‘contextual’ study of these religions by the ‘positivist’ scholars because of its reductionist drive.²³ They denounced these for reducing the one and only sui generis institution of human society, religion, bridging the perceptible and non-perceptible realms, to a mere institution of human society, of one kind with all other institutions, and to an epiphenomenon of its non-religious functions, uses and contextual *Sitz im Leben*.²⁴

The empirical study of religions²⁵ is positivist because, as a scientific enterprise, it can only operate with a one tier reality [187] concept. Though positivist, it is not reductionist, because it does not hold the positivist cosmology in an axiomatic way. It neither denies nor asserts the reality of the meta-empirical within or outside the perceptible order or its activity in it. So, it is also not religionist. It attempts to exclude all ideological, theological and other extra-scientific normative positions and intentions from the study of religions by means of self- and mutual criticism. It is restricted to the study of those data about religions that can be obtained by the procedures of the several empirical sciences which can be tested in its scholarly communities. The first aim of the empirical study of religions is to study them descriptively. That was also the aim of the religionist tradition. In the empirical study of religions, however, that aim is pursued without religionist intentions, as religions are studied only as events in human history. Their functions and uses and the influences of their contexts on them are, however, also studied, as in the reductionist tradition, but again without the reductionist frame of mind and ideological aims. As an academic discipline, the empirical study of religions evolved from liberal Christian theology. For practical and historical reasons, it continues more usually to have its academic niche in Faculties of (liberal) Theology and Departments of Religious Studies. By moving to a non-normative position in the last four decades, it is severing its umbilical cord with theology which is a normative discipline. Though its results are of primary importance for theologians and

²² Predominantly those of their literate believers. The historical-philological study of religious texts has tremendously expanded our descriptive knowledge of other religions, but for a long time mainly, if not exclusively, at the level of the articulated religious elite and their theologies. These sources presented not only a one-sided picture of historical developments in a specific religion, but often also a biased one, particularly when describing non-elitist religion in depreciative terms.

²³ They also abhorred and denounced ‘theological reductionism’ (see above, note 8). For recent defenses of the religionist approach to the study of religions, cf. Pettersson 1981, 65, van Baal 1990.

²⁴ For recent defenses of the religionist approach, cf. Pettersson 1981; van Baal 1990.

²⁵ Hill (1973, 5) makes a similar distinction between ‘religious sociology’ and ‘sociology of religion’, the first taking ‘its basic orientation and attitudes from a theological rather than a theoretical sociological source’. His discussion of the ‘three basic perspectives which the observer of religious phenomena may adopt’ (Hill 1973, 7-17) parallels my discussion of theological-reductionist, positivist-reductionist and empirical approaches to the study of religions. For the origin of religious sociology in the USA, its demise, and its recent reemergence as ‘Christian sociology’, cf. Kohn 1989.

students of (any) theology, it is questionable whether the empirical study of religions should continue in its academic cohabitation with theology.

Invisibility

Religion is a social institution.²⁶ Institutions consist of a number of representations which govern the behaviour of the members of a society in specific social relationships. Social institutions do, or may, have certain visible/material manifestations, such as the actual behaviour, the specific places (e.g. the marketplace) or buildings (f.i. the school) for such interaction, and others like [188] the dress or insignia of those interacting. However, as institutions consist primarily of representations, relationships (or networks), statuses, attitudes, norms, expectations, interests, and emotions, they are first of all mental constructions, and as such invisible. People externalize them in various behaviours, such as body and verbal language, gifts and other tokens of reciprocity, in the construction of material settings for specific types of behaviour, in dresses and insignia indicative of roles and statuses during institutional behaviour, etc. Mental constructions have also been put in writing, or in other visible symbols of a more permanent nature. Through these external manifestations the invisible social institutions, religion included, are empirically and historically real for sciences operating in the framework of a one tier cosmology, and object of empirical study, diachronic as well as synchronic, because researchable and testable data can be acquired about them.

All institutions have four elements in common: representations, social relations (or social organization), attitudes and emotions, and behaviour. I term these the four common or "material" elements of an institution.²⁷ Apart from these, each institution has a distinctive element which informs the material elements in such a way that they constitute a specific institution, which is visibly or analytically different from all other institutions. I term that element the definer or definiens. In economy, it is the producer-consumer relationship; in trade, the seller-buyer relationship; in health care, that of patient and curer; and in schooling, that of tutor and pupil; etc. I wish to emphasize again that definers are mental constructions. They consist of notions, emotions, attitudes and expectations about the role-relationships specific for a particular institution. These representations and attitudes have been internalized in the minds of the members of a society by the processes of socialization. They rule social behaviour whenever members enter into communication with each other within the networks of specific institutions.²⁸

²⁶ Religion is a social institution. In modern societies it is often marked by a high degree of institutional differentiation and visibility from both the *emic* and *etic* perspectives. In types of human society of small size with virtually no institutional differentiation, however, it can be discerned only analytically, i.e. from the *etic* perspective only. As is the case in the somewhat larger ones with only one well-developed encompassing institution (e.g. kinship) into which the other institutions have been integrated.

²⁷ Cf. Pye 1972, 11-12

²⁸ In the terms of Snoek (1987, 27) I have now introduced an operational definition of a 'social institution'. It has five 'diagnostic characters': (1) representations; (2) social relations [or organization];

[189] The three definers of 'religion'

In the many definitions of religions that have so far been proposed, three definers have been used as far as I am aware of now. They are in historical order and put at their briefest: religion is communication; religion is social cohesion; and religion is orientation.²⁹ I term 'religion as communication' the Tylorian definer. His 'rudimentary [or] minimum definition of religion' as 'belief in spiritual beings'³⁰ may be taken as paradigmatic of this longest and largest line of notions of religion, because the term 'beings', in the way he uses it, implies that they are addressable. So, communication, actual or potential, is subsumed within his definition.³¹ Acts of communications between addressable beings never occur in a social void but always within a community. Even strangers are addressed in the forms set for initiating a relationship with them, or they are not addressed because neither side wishes to enter into a relationship. Communication occurs only within the network of a social relationships, and is always governed by the rules of a specific social institution. By far the greater number of definitions of religions which have been proposed so far are in the Tylorian tradition. Some may stress the communicative behaviour, others the relationship which is the framework for those acts, and again others the typical moods, emotions, which are expressed in that communication, or the notions and attitudes by which it is ruled. With exception of Durkheim's, all definitions of religion proposed in anthropology of religions and in the comparative study of religions before 1966, were of the Tylorian type.³²

(3) attitudes and emotions; (4) behaviour; and (5) a definer specifying these characters and transforming an institution to a specific social institution.

²⁹ A fourth definer is 'religion is the manifestation of the holy'. I have omitted it because it is a Christianocentric version by religionist scholars of the belief, common to all religions, in the existence and activity of the meta-, or non-empirical in this world (cf. e.g. Schleiermacher 1799/1958, 15-16, 18, 36, 39, 101; Otto 1917; Söderblom; Heiler; Eliade; Lanczkowski 1978, 15, 40, and Schmid 1979, 33-34, 136). It is always combined with one of the three I have specified. The more usual combination is with the communication, or relationship, definer (cf. Schleiermacher 1799/1958, 37, 48-50, 58; Chantepie de la Sausaye 1887, I: 51: 'Religion [ist der] Glaube an übermenschliche Mächte und deren Verehrung'; Söderblom 1914/1922, 171; Heiler 1961, 1, 564). Eliade (1958, 1, 459) connects 'religion' to the orientation definer by defining religion as hierophany only, and expanding it to anything non-profane. He writes: 'the dialectic of hierophanies tends endlessly to reduce the spheres that are profane and eventually to abolish them'. As a result, 'to many a mystic ... the whole cosmos is itself a hierophany'. Cf. also Eliade 1962: 112, 117. Schmid (1979, 151) also combines his notion of 'religion' with the orientation definer. Cf. also Saliba 1976, 154-155 on Eliade's 'narrow and not unbiased' notion of religion. For views concordant with Eliade, though not wholly uncritical of him, cf. e.g. Allen 1978, 120-123; Barbosa da Silva 1982, 115-120, 229. For a fifth definer, 'religion as cultural order', see below note 36.

³⁰ Tylor 1871, I: 383, 424

³¹ For corroboration of this interpretation, c.f. e.g. Tylor's statement that 'the belief in spiritual beings leads [...] inevitably [...] to their active reverence and propitiation. Thus Animism [...] practically result[s] in some kind of active worship' (Tylor 1871, I: 427).

³² E.g. Robertson Smith 1889/1957, 28, 54-55, 90, 264-265; Müller 1889, 123.129, 169. Tiele 1901, 4; Söderblom 1914/1922, 171; Obbink 1920, 94-95; Obbink 1933, 9; Pinard de la Boullaye 1922-1925,

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Religion as ‘social cohesion’ is the Durkheimian definer.³³ His definition is reductionist in intent.³⁴ It aims to explain religion fully by one of its non-religious social functions, that of the social cohesion excited in thrilling collective rites.³⁵ As later analyses of e.g. the liminal phase in rites of transition have demonstrated, religions do create *communitas* in societies among its members. The study of this sociological function of religion – which is, however, not limited to religious [190] rites only – is important and has rightly been amply pursued. It may be done so by a functional heuristic definition of religion designed to research this particular area of the influence and use of religion in human societies. Though this definer has been a fruitful source of empirical knowledge of human religions, it seems not as typical of religion, nor as accurate in delimiting it, nor as fruitful in researching it, as is the Tylorian definer. Because it is a functional, and not a substantive, definition of religion, it is at once too narrow and too wide.³⁶ It is not applicable to all religious behaviour (e.g. not to private rites), and it is applicable to many secular rites, e.g. those of modern British royalty, military parades, birthday parties, (any) funerals, and rites of transition into a social body or position and of leave-taking. As far as I am aware, only Durkheim has proposed this function as the distinctive definer of religion.³⁷

II: 5; van der Leeuw 1933/1948, 9; van der Leeuw 1937, 162; Frazer 1922/1957, 65, 67; Rivers 1924, 4; Bellon 1927, 11-12; van Baal 1947, 19; van Baal 1971, 3; van Baal 1981, 5, 50; Vroklage 1949: 383; Widengren 1953/1969, 3, 8, 14, 18; Hidding 1954, 9; Hidding 1965, 55; Evans-Pritchard 1956, 144; Evans-Pritchard 1965, 3; Bleeker 1956, 11; Bleeker 1963, 51; Wach 1958/1965, 24, 29, 93; Mensching 1959, 15; Goldammer 1960, 9-10; Horton 1960, 211; van Baaren 1960a, 209; 1960b, 48; 1973, 41; van Baaren & Leertouwer 1980, 3; Goody 1961, 157; Heiler 1961, 1, 4, 561-562, 564; Spiro 1966, 96; Wallace 1966, 52, 78, 83; de Waal-Malefijt 1968, 12, 198-227; Smart 1973, 15; Hill 1973, 42-43; Mulder 1973, 7; Bianchi 1975, 33; Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi 1975, 1; Platvoet 1982, 24-30, van Beek 1982, 3; Rudolph 1985, 49; Penner 1989, 7. On Robertson Smith's notion of religion, cf. also Beidelman 1974, 53, 61; on that of Müller, cf. Sharpe 1975, 38-39; on that of Wach, cf. Flasche 1978, 173-177.

³³ Durkheim 1912, 65

³⁴ Its reductionist intent is, however, not expressed in his definition. It is apparent, however, in statements like "La réalité qu'exprime la pensée religieuse est la société" (Durkheim 1912, 616) and "La société est à ses membres ce qu'un dieu est à ces fidèles, parcequ'elle a une nature qui lui est propre" (Durkheim 1912, 134)

³⁵ Dr. Wouter Belier informs me (personal communication, 24 April 1991) that this is the second of some five or six definitions of religion proposed by Durkheim. Further studies are therefore in order. In his first definition (in Durkheim 1898) he defined religion only in terms of the sacred-profane opposition. It is a substantive definition. He added its unifying function in 1912 in order to exclude ‘magic’. That turns it into a functional definition. Cf. also van Baal 1971, 111, 119; Van Baal & van Beek 1985, 104, 112.

³⁶ In sociology of religion, definitions which comprise a wider area of study than religion only are termed euphemistically ‘inclusive’ definitions of religion and [202] opposed to ‘exclusive’ definitions of religion. In the latter, religion has a ‘firm profile’ whereas its boundaries are fluid in inclusive definitions. Cf. Hill 1985: 107-109.

³⁷ As it takes at least two instances to form a tradition, one may question whether it is correct to distinguish a Durkheimian definition tradition of religion as providing social cohesion. I have done so, however, because his definition has been widely used as a tool of analysis. It would, however, also be

‘Religion as orientation’ comes in two forms: the Geertzian one among anthropologists and sociologists who stress the cosmological function of religion;³⁸ and the Tillichian variety among those students of religion who take ‘ultimate concern’, or absolute meaning, to be the definer of religion.³⁹ The Geertzian one is a functional definition of religion with the same merits and demerits as Durkheim’s. Religions do function as cosmologies. Presenting models of, and models for, human societies, they forestall that humans are overwhelmed by ‘chaos’, the unsettling experience of severe disorientation resulting from the collective failure to perceive meaningfulness in life. That function, which has become a special preoccupation of modern western elite in the aftermath of World War II, needs to be studied. A heuristic definition of religion for that purpose is fully acceptable. But the Geertzian definer is restricted to a semeiotic approach of cultures (and religions)⁴⁰ by means of the ‘thick description’ of symbols as vehicles of meaning.⁴¹ The focus of Geertz is on the cultural function of religious representations. He

historically correct and in line with the academic division between the historical and comparative study of religions and the several social-scientific disciplines studying religion to reduce the definition traditions to two, to wit the Tylorian substantive communication tradition, and the Durkheimian/Geertzian functionalist social cohesion tradition.

³⁸ Geertz 1966, 4. I still have to sort out the history of this tradition of defining religion as cosmology. Geertz is certainly not the first scholar in this tradition, as is clear from the classic collection of anthropological studies of nine African indigenous preliterate religions by Forde (1954b), though only two of them (Douglas 1954; Griaule & Dieterlen 1954) actually are in line with the cosmological notion of religion proposed by Forde (1954: 1). Another slightly pre-Geertzian collection is Fortes & Dieterlen 1965. Cosmological notions of religion are used also by Berger (1967, 175-177) and Luckmann (1967, 49). On the notions of religion of Berger and Luckmann, cf. Hilhorst 1976, 18-21, 24-28; Hill 1985, 109, 139-142; Kehrer & Hardin 1985, 168-171. For surveys of the cosmological tradition in social anthropology, cf. Jones 1972; Kuper 1973; Keamey 1975; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976; Jackson 1985: 199-202. The ‘worldview’ theory is also used for the interpretation of “magic” by Wax & Wax (1963; 501-502). Oosten’s definer, ‘religion as cultural order’, seems a particular version of the cosmological definer useful in the structuralist tradition in cultural anthropology (Oosten 1985, 237-240).

³⁹ Tillich 1959, 7-8; Tillich 1965, 4, 6, 11; Bellah 1964, 359; Lessa & Vogl 1972a, 1; Baird 1968, 21; Baird 1972, 18; Yinger 1970, 7; Dupré 1975, 65-66; Schmid: 1980, XII; Streng 1985, 2-3 (though he also brings in the communicative definer: in religion ‘people reach beyond themselves to connect with the true and ultimate reality’); Waardenburg 1986, 22, 24, 34-35 (though he also says that it is ‘a special mark of religions . . . to mediate knowledge about [meta-empirical] realities, respectively to be able to enter into communication with those realities’ (Waardenburg 1986, 19). Pye (1972, 11-12) toned down the Tillichian definer to “those aspects of human existence which are of fundamental importance to men”.

⁴⁰ Man, in his view, is ‘an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun’ (Geertz 1973: 5). Those mental webs must be interpreted, not explained. His intention is descriptive. He aims to gain access to the conceptual worlds of humans in other cultures in order ‘that we can, in some extended sense, converse with them’ (Geertz 1975, 24; also 1983a).

⁴¹ Hofstee 1986, 72-73

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leaves many other aspects of religion unconsidered.⁴² Moreover, cosmologies need not be religious, as we know since Comte, Marx, Darwin, Freud, Russell, and Huxley.

[191] More objections must be raised against the Tillichian variety which restricts religions to systems of absolute signification. It was developed by the German-American systematic theologian, Paul Tillich. It reflects the peculiar conditions of its origin. The absolute character which is common only to the three so-called ‘world religions’ is transferred to ‘religion’ on the basis of the shift from exclusive to inclusive theologies⁴³ in order to cope with the severe crisis in orientation, or cosmology,⁴⁴ which faced Christian intellectual elite, particularly the highly philosophically trained liberal Protestant theologians, in their confrontation with the rise of National Socialism, World War II, Auschwitz, exile, the Cold War, the existentialism of Sartre and Camus proclaiming the radical absurdity of life, the ‘loss’ of the colonies, and the death of God theologies. Though the Tillichian definer might be legitimately used as a heuristic definition for research into the religions with absolute claims and teachings of a highly schooled elite facing extreme disorientation, it seems unfit as an operational definition for the greater part of humankind’s religions and religiosity: the preliterate religions and all folk religion within the major religions, for a number of reasons. They do not hold, proclaim, and impose absolute or ultimate notions. They are inarticulate, vague, varied, adoptive, and adaptive. Their believers do not usually take their own religion to be better or more true than those of other societies. They regard it as merely their own religion, and as such as just one religion among many. They lack the socio-structural conditions for absolute certitude: the power, economical, social, political, cultural, and mental, of an elite. They have no use – no world to convert – and no need for it. They feel at home and at ease in their inarticulate complex system of relationships with their gods, ancestors, souls, amulets, medicines, gnomes and witches. Apart from the fact that the Tillichian variety of the orientation definer ‘extrapolates from their [users’] own personal experience’⁴⁵ and needs,⁴⁶ that extrapolation is also a normative one: ‘it assumes that *homo religiosus* is the essential definition of man’.⁴⁷

⁴² Hofstee 1986, 80

⁴³ E.g. Tillich 1963

⁴⁴ Cf. Russell (1972, 278) on the ‘ultimate terror of the universe’ being faced by (what he terms) ‘deepest theism, like that of Kierkegaard or Tillich, and [...] deepest atheism, like that of Sartre or Camus’ (quoted in Kuiper 1986, 57). That ‘ultimate terror’, and its cure, religion, is also a major inspiration of Eliade, as it is in van Baal (1972: 61-78, 100, 118-128; 1981: 254, 314; 1990: 54-55).

⁴⁵ Helfner 1968, 3

⁴⁶ It attempts ‘to study one’s own existential problems by means of the religion of other peoples’ (Kippenberg 1983, 11; my translation).

⁴⁷ Helfner 1968, 3, *pace* Baird 1968, 24. The religionist bias of this group of definitions is also apparent from the term ‘ultimate’ in the *definiens*, which, say Penner & Yonan (1972, 128-131), is incapable of specification and causes the *definiens* to be wider than the *definiendum* (‘religion’). As this is a *definiens* ‘of [...] incurable obscurity’, which is definable only in terms of ‘religion’, ‘it leaves us with a *definiendum* that is beyond definition’ and thus meaningless as a term. Though the scholars defending Tillichian definitions thus violate all the rules of definition, they achieve by it their religious, ‘anti-reductionist’ aim, which is that religion cannot be defined, reduced, or explained, because it is *sui generis*.

[192] Non-verifiable/non-falsifiable commerce

It is clear from the foregoing that I wish to propose that we use an operational definition of the traditional, 'exclusive', or substantive Tylorian type. Such a definition seems to have the best fit with my field of studies, the preliterate religions, and with most other religions of humankind, as these have a 'personalist'⁴⁸ structure. Being 'personalist'," such an operational definition of religion should deliver tools for the analysis of preliterate religions in terms of community and communication.⁴⁹ As a heuristic definition designed for fruitful research, it should contain a number of micro-sociological instruments which enable one to analyze religious behaviour as postulated social commerce, or interaction, within networks of postulated institutionalized role-relationships, ruled by the representations peculiar to this social institution, religion, which have been internalized by the believers. Such behaviours must however not only be analyzed as ruled by roles. They must also be situated in their various contexts: biographical, historical, ecological, economical, socio-structural, political, etc. In short, they must be subjected, like any other institutional behaviour, to network-, process-, and context-analysis.⁵⁰

Religion, as a social institution, however, has a peculiarity which marks it off from all other social institutions. Only religion is marked by a twofold invisibility. Not only is it, like all institutions of human society, a mental construct and as such for the greater part invisible. It alone also has a second and typical 'invisibility', of an inherently different kind, and by which it is constituted: the believers interact, not only with each other, but, they believe, with beings that cannot be seen, or require the believer's eye to be 'seen'.⁵¹ We may term it religion's meta- or intra-invisibility. As those beings are not visible for everyone, believers and non-believers, they may, or may not, be mere mental constructs. The 'interaction' of the believers with them is, therefore, from the empirical point of view,⁵² a postulated one, the actual reality of which can neither be verified nor falsified. It cannot be conclusively proven to be true or false before a metaphysically neutral agnostic forum of competent scholars.

[193] All believers, however, sincerely believe that those postulated invisible beings do exist outside and/or within the perceptible order. They believe also that these beings are active in it, or have been, or may be active in it. They are believed to interfere in human life and in the natural world around humans. And that they wish that these humans be in communion and community with them, in the prescribed manner, and by the usual means of human commerce: verbal

The implied referent of Tillichian definition of religion is the sacred or ultimate as transcendent reality (Penner & Yonan 1972, 132).

⁴⁸ From *persona*, mask (in ancient drama); actor playing a role; addressable person.

⁴⁹ My argumentation is restricted to this type of religion.

⁵⁰ Cf. Platvoet 1982, 29-35, and their application in Platvoet 1982, 84-201; 1983a.

⁵¹ Cf. above footnote 16 above on the postulated visibility and materiality of 'spiritual' beings in preliterate religions

⁵² Or non-axiomatic positivist point of view to which science is perforce restricted by the nature of its procedures.

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address, gifts, and the observance of respect rules towards them. The believers, therefore, believe that they have relationships of reciprocity with them, and must maintain these by phatic and emphatic forms of communication. They believe that they can communicate with them: that their addresses are heard and understood, and their gifts are accepted and their observances acceptable. They also believe in communication from these beings, most dramatically when they are believed to take possession of one or several of their fellow believers for the purpose of direct encounter and dialogue. But also by other means of revelation: oracles, dreams, and visions.

If an operational definition is to promote the empirical study of religions, it should define religion only as verifiable events in, and parts of, historical human societies. By such a definition, knowledge may be developed about the religions of humankind which is verifiable and falsifiable, because it can be tested and criticized. That knowledge should be based on data that have been, and may be, tested for their reliability. Moreover, an empirical definition should give rise to interpretations that may be scrutinized for correctness and range of applicability. As all the ‘material’ elements of the social institution ‘religion’ – representations, actions, social organization, and attitudes and emotions⁵³ – are verifiable, even though they are for the greater part invisible mental constructs, the definition of the definer, communication, or more precisely of its terminus ad quem of the communication, and of the community maintained by it, is crucial.

In the definition of the communication definer, two courses have been pursued in the past. Religionists did not qualify the definer,⁵⁴ thereby asserting the ontological reality of the terminus ad quem and of the community and communion between believers [194] and the beings which the faithful believe to exist and to affect their lives. Thereby they introduced a metaphysical statement into their definition of religion.

Other students did qualify it, for methodological or ideological reasons, by e.g. ‘belief in [spiritual beings]’,⁵⁵ ‘culturally postulated [superhuman beings]’,⁵⁶ ‘[a reality] which ... cannot be verified or falsified’.⁵⁷ Such qualifications reduce the definer to elements in the empirical reality: representations, attitudes, emotions, actions, organization with reference to meta-empirical beings who are believed to exist and to be active in the empirical realm and upon whom the believers believe they are dependent; and with reference to a postulated communion and

⁵³ Cf. Pye 1972, 11-12

⁵⁴ Cf. Bleeker’s definition: ‘religion is the relationship of man to a higher reality’ (Bleeker 1956, 11). Instead of qualifying the definer, religionists qualified the *terminus ad quem*, using terms like ‘bovenmenscheijk’ (‘above the human [realm]’ (Tiele 1901, 4), ‘bovenaardsch’ (‘above the terrestrial [realm]’ (Bellon 1927, 11-12), ‘higher’ (Bleeker 1956, 11), [an] ‘other’ [reality than this one] (Mulder 1973: 7). They are all toned-down versions of the qualifications employed in that other major stream of religionist definition which uses ‘the manifestation of the holy’ definer in the tradition of Rudolph Otto of the holy as *das ganz Andere*. As these adjectives state that the *terminus ad quem* is ‘greater in stature and power than man’, they are religious statements about it and not mere statements of it as being beyond the visible order and outside the scope of scientific scrutiny. For examples of the latter, see next the paragraph.

⁵⁵ Tylor 1871, I: 383, 424

⁵⁶ Spiro 1966, 96

⁵⁷ van Baal 1981, 5

community between the believers and those beings of their faith. Other terms by which the trans-visible, or sub-visible, or intra-visible status of the postulated beings or (addressable) reality have been indicated are 'supernatural', 'spiritual', 'meta-physical', 'extra-human', etc.

Now, of all these further definers of the communication definer, the one proposed by van Baal seems to me to have the tightest fit with the data and the widest applicability. It opposes neatly that which can be perceived by all because it is within the visible, physical, and historical-cultural (inclusive the mental or psychical) realm to that which is outside it, or present in it in ways that cannot be perceived by ordinary sight, or the other senses, or their technological extensions. It opposes that which can be subjected to scientific investigation to the non-verifiable/non-falsifiable 'reality' which cannot be subjected to scientific scrutiny by the procedures of verification, or testing by a neutral competent community, and falsification. It opposes that which may be the object of science to that which can be only the object of faith, and puts them in mutually exclusive provinces.⁵⁸ It may also prove to have a universal applicability, to religions with a personalist as well as a non-personalist structure and those that combine both structures.

If a heuristic definition of religion of the communication type is to foster research of religious processes as institutional behaviour in the framework of postulated reciprocal relationships, [195] or networks, it should define 'religion' both as processes of postulated social interaction at specific moments in time, and as systems of postulated relationships between believers and the beings of their faiths. It should define religion both as event ('religion'), and as a network of reciprocal relationships by which a religious event is ruled ('a religion').

'Religion' may then be defined as any behaviour which believers interpret as communication, direct or indirect,⁵⁹ between themselves and beings whose existence and activity cannot be

⁵⁸ As a by-product, this definer saves faith from destruction by science. But it also robs it from any support it might expect from that side. Perhaps for stating such opinions, van Baaren once publicly called me an undercover defender of religion. To refute that accusation is one of the aims of this article. I hope to have made clear that as a scholar I only aspire to be a dispassionate observer, describer and analyst of religion. It must, however, also be stated that van Baal has developed this definer in order to make room in the social sciences for the position that religion is no less rational an option than is positivism. In the most recent of his three 'messages' (van Baal 1972, 1985, 1990), Van Baal asserts that scholars of religions have 'no right to deny *a priori* the possibility that an extra-terrestrial reality exists which is beyond his ken' (van Baal 1990, 3, 37), and that he, like Söderblom, Oto, and James, has explicitly acknowledged "the possibility of a real contact with the Mystery" (van Baal 1990, 18). He now however urges scholars to study religion religiously (van Baal 1990, 1-4, 17-18, 36-37, 55, 56, 68). Natural sciences reveal such an amazing technology in e.g. the human eye, in the evolution of life on this planet and in the cultural history of the religions of men, that they must have been led by a mysterious 'invisible hand' (van Baal 1990, 5-15, 20-37). Scholars [of religions] should not treat its revelations 'as a mere fabrications of the human mind' (van Baal 1990, 4). They must accept that 'belief in the existence and the presence of the Mystery is not an option but a compelling necessity' (van Baal 1990, 67).

⁵⁹ Direct communication is ritual communication. Indirect communication is the extra-ritual one of the observances for the sake of the relationships to be maintained.

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verified or falsified but whom the believers believe to exist and to be active, directly or indirectly,⁶⁰ in their lives and environment. And 'a religion' may be defined as the network of reciprocal relationships which a believer, or a group of believers, believes to exist between him, her or itself and the non-verifiable/non-falsifiable beings which they believe to exist and to be active in their lives.

This two-pronged operational definition may also be formulated in the shape of the enumeration definition of Pye: Religion consists of notions, attitudes and emotions, behaviour and social organization in respect of beings, the existence and activity of which cannot be verified or falsified but whom the believers believe to exist and to be active in their lives. This reformulation shows that the definer contains a descriptive and an analytical element. The descriptive one is derived from the religion of the believers: 'in respect of beings ... whom the believers believe to exist and to be active in their lives'. The analytical element is devised by scholarly argument in a specific tradition of definition: '[beings,] the existence and activity of which cannot be verified or falsified'. This reformulation of the Pye definition has two advantages. It enables one to study the relative shifts in emphasis in the four material elements in the historical religions and in the analyses of students of religion. Secondly, whereas my double-pronged operational definition can only be applied to religions with a personalist, or postulated communication, structure, the Pye definition may also be formulated in such a way that it can serve as a tool for the analysis of religions in which no postulated communication is found. If such non-personalist religions are to be [196] studied, the descriptive element need only be replaced by: 'in respect of a reality ... which the faithful believe to exist and to determine or influence their lives or future destinies'. The two descriptive elements can also be intertwined for the analysis of religions, such as 'Hinduism'⁶¹ in which personalist and impersonalist elements are found to intermingle'.⁶² It then might run: Religions consists of notions, attitudes and emotions, behaviour and social organization in respect of beings and/or a reality, the existence and activity of which can neither be verified nor falsified but which the faithful believe to exist and to be active in their lives and/or to determine their future destinies.

Operational definitions are tools for analysis. As many types of analysis are in order in so complex a subject as are the historical religions of humankind, we need a whole tool kit full of them. They may be of the substantive or the functional type, or even a combination of these two types. Those which I have proposed are of the substantive type. By adding the analytical element 'context analysis', the first one proposed does also permit a measure of functional analysis.

In conclusion

I am aware that in proposing this definer, I am also defining myself, a Western scholar of the late 20th century. I am taking the definer which I propose to be the distinctive element of

⁶⁰ Highest beings may be believed to be virtually inactive and to serve as backdrop of the ritual between believers and the intermediate and lower unseen beings. The primary function of the highest being is usually a protological one: all that exists takes its origin from it.

⁶¹ On 'Hinduism' as a Western and neo-Vedanta construct, cf. Fitzgerald 1990.

⁶² E.g. the combination of *bhakti* theistic practices with those inspired by the belief in *karma/samsara*.

religions, holding, as I do, that the meta-empirical beings of religions, and the communication of believers with them can neither be verified nor falsified. The analysis of definitions of religion is mainly the study of the scholars who have proposed or used them. But it is more than the study of their idiosyncrasies. It reveals shifts in paradigms. The study of religions in faculties of theology and departments of religious studies was born from the momentous shift from an exclusive to an inclusive theological position. The empirical study of religions emerged after 1960 from an equally momentous shift, from an ideological or theological to a non-axiomatic use of science. I hope that the study of religions will flourish on it.

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