

Praenotandum:

This contribution was published in:

Jan G. Platvoet & Arie L. Molendijk (eds.) 1999, *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts & Contests*. Leiden: Brill, 245-266.

The page numbers of the original publication are indicated between square brackets and are set in bold.

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TO DEFINE OR NOT TO DEFINE: THE PROBLEM OF THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

This contribution to a collective volume on the problem of how to define religion is conceived from the perspective of the Comparative Study of Religions (*Vergelijkende Godsdienstwetenschap*), a discipline traditional in the Dutch Faculties of (*duplex ordo*, or non-confessional)¹ Theology in the Universities of Leiden, Groningen, Utrecht and Amsterdam. It aims to study the religions of humankind systematically by comparing the findings of the other disciplines of the ‘Science of Religion’ (*godsdienstwetenschap*) conglomerate. They are more in particular those of the several disciplines of the History of Religions (*godsdienstgeschiedenis*),² [246] the Anthropology of Religions,³ and, to a

¹ *I.e.*, not tied to the theology of a particular Christian church. A law, promulgated in 1876, introduced the so called *duplex ordo* into the Faculties of Theology of the then three State Universities of Leiden, Groningen and Utrecht. The (then municipal) University of Amsterdam followed suit. The law separated ‘academic’ from ‘confessional’, or church-tied, theology, *i.e.* that of the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (‘Dutch Reformed Church’), the former ‘Public’ (or State) Church of the Netherlands. It actually meant that these faculties were reduced to the four or five chairs of theology (*godgeleerdheid*, divinity), to which professors were appointed by the ‘Crown’ (actually the Minister of Internal Affairs) to teach courses in the ten subjects deemed to belong to ‘Science of Religion’ (*godsdienstwetenschap*) disciplines and, therefore, to have a neutral and scientific character. They were: the Encyclopaedia of Divinity; the History of the Doctrine about God; the General History of Religions; the History of the Religion of Israel; the History of Christianity; the Literature of Israel and Early Christianity; the Exegesis of the Old and New Testaments; the History of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion; Philosophy of Religion; and Ethical Philosophy (article 42 of Law no. 102, promulgated on 28 April 1876, by which public ‘higher’ [*i.e.* secondary and tertiary] education in the Netherlands was ‘ordered’). In addition, ‘one or more’ (usually two) professors were appointed to each faculty by the NH Church to teach Dogmatic and Pastoral Theology, Homiletics, and other subjects deemed to be tied to the confessional theology (actually: theologies) of the NH Church. Although their salaries were paid for by the State (art. 104) and they were entitled to take part in the ceremonial functions of the University (art. 105), they were not part of the Faculty of Divinity as such, but formed an adjunct to it with a distinctly inferior status. Cf. also Platvoet 1998a.

² *Godsdienstgeschiedenis*, taken as the historical and philological study of particular religions. Traditionally the religions studied were, apart from Christianity, mainly the ‘living religions’ of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and the ‘dead religions’ of ancient Mesopotamia, Israel, Egypt, Greece and Rome. ‘History of Religions’ is, therefore, not to be understood here in the way Eliade (1949, 1958) used it as a label for his comparative and systematic study of the religions of humankind.

³ In particular as the ethnographic study of particular preliterate religions by participant observation, or of folk religion, *e.g.* pilgrimage, spirit possession and ritual healing, in local cult groups in literate religions.

lesser degree, also those of the Sociology of Religion, the Psychology of Religion, and others. In its first two phases (roughly 1870-1900 and 1900-1960), Dutch students of the Comparative Study of Religions studied these findings in order to develop knowledge – of a type which was often presumed to be universally valid – about the human phenomenon of ‘religion’ for use in (Western) Philosophy of Religion and/or (liberal Christian) academic theologies.⁴ A ‘paradigm shift’ occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a result of which Dutch Comparative Study of Religions in its third phase (c. 1960-now) serves mainly to develop critical reflexive methodologies for a secular and agnostic study of the religions of humankind. It researches them as data in the human cultural and social history only on the basis of an approach termed ‘methodological agnosticism’ or ‘metaphysical neutralism’.⁵

[247] In this contribution, I propose to deal firstly with the problem of whether ‘religion’ can actually be defined. Are not the religions of men so diverse, and are they not each such polymorph, poly-semantic and poly-functional phenomena, that it is an illusion to conceive that they will ever, collectively or singly, be adequately reflected in a definition acceptable to all scholars of religions, let alone one that is unambiguously accepted as universally valid for the whole of human religious history in the full diachronic depth of at least 100.000 years and its world wide synchronic diversity? My answer is twofold. Firstly, that such a definition must indeed be deemed to be extremely unlikely, if not downright impossible. Secondly, however, that definition also has more modest uses which may turn definitions of religion, that have shed this universalist ambition, into quite useful tools in the academic study of religions. In the second section, I shall address the question of why, if a definition of religion turned out to be merely a

⁴ Since its inception in Leiden in 1877, as the General History of Religions (*De geschiedenis der godsdiensten in het algemeen*), this branch of the Dutch ‘Science of Religion’ (*godsdienstwetenschap*) has mainly attempted to discover general patterns in the religions of mankind, either by studying them in their diachronic development (e.g. Tiele 1873, 1874a, 1874b, 1897/1899; Platvoet 1993) or by classifying and systematising their so called ‘phenomena’ (cf. Chantepie de la Saussaye 1887/1889, I: 42-172) and applying to them the *Wesensschau*, or eidetic vision (cf. Van der Leeuw 1933: 638-641, 646-648; 1948: 4-8; Bleeker 1956: 6-7, 17, 34, 72) in order to detect their ‘nature’ or ‘essence’. Though freed, by a *fictio iuris* (cf. note 1), from the need to conform to the confessional theologies of the NH Church, the Comparative Religion and Phenomenologies of Religion of Tiele, Chantepie, Kristensen, Van der Leeuw, H.Th. Obbink, H.W. Obbink, Bleeker, and Hidding – and even of Van Baaren before 1960 –, were all inspired by a liberal Christian theology (cf. Platvoet 1998a; 1998b: 339-341). An exception to this rule was Hendrik Kraemer, Professor of the History of Religions at Leiden University from 1938 to 1948, whose theological position was a militant neo-orthodoxy (cf. Platvoet 1998a: 135-138). Fokke Sierksma, Senior Lecturer in the Comparative Study of Religions at Leiden University from 1953 to 1974, and Professor of the General History of Religions from 1974 to 1977, was another exception. His position was a post-Christian religious one, be it one which was outspokenly anti-Christian (cf. Platvoet 1998b: 335-339). Virtually all Dutch phenomenologies, therefore, were actually in ‘close harmony’ with the several liberal Christian academic theologies of their manifestly Protestant faculties, and/or of the modalities of the NH Church and the other minor Protestant denominations, with which their faculties were informally or formally allied. Cf. Platvoet 1998a, 1998b.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Van Baaren & Drijvers 1973; Platvoet 1998b: 341-349. To scholars of religions in other faculties, the assertion that the academic study of religions is restricted to their manifestations in the history of cultures and societies may seem curious, because it is superfluous. This is not the case, however, in a Dutch Faculty of Theology, however academic.

useful research tool, one should bother to define ‘religion’ at all. Can one not better dispense with it altogether? My answer will be that one may indeed well dispense with it, but that, despite its very modest usefulness, it would still be unwise to do so. In my third section, I shall discuss these modest uses of definitions of religion, as well as their strategic implications. In the fourth and last section, I shall discuss the operational, or instrumental, definition of ‘religion’ which I have developed for my particular line of studies as an illustration of the purposes which a definition of religion may serve in the academic study of religions.

Is ‘religion’ definable?

The following arguments may be adduced to contend that no universally valid definition of religion can ever be constructed. The one I have already briefly touched on above contends that the religions of humankind are diachronically and synchronically so diverse, and that single religions consist in the activation of symbol systems so dense and complex, that the full range of their cognitive meanings and emotional, attitudinal, normative, social, political, etc. functions, in rituals as well as in societies, can never be completely explicated.⁶ [248] Religions are, thus, so polymorph in their diversity, so poly-semantic in the meanings of their symbol systems, so polyvalent in the messages of their ritual practices, and so poly-functional in their operation in human societies, that it is highly unlikely that a definition of religion will ever be constructed which will adequately express, in clear and concise terms, what religions have always, and everywhere, had in common, and will always have in common, that differentiates⁷ them unequivocally from everything that is not ‘religion’. A universally valid definition would have to produce a perfect, and perfectly matching *adequatio mentis et rei*, ‘congruence of mind and thing’, in everyone in whatever time, past, present, and future, and in whatever society, culture and language. It seems highly unrealistic to expect this to be achieved in the foreseeable future for the group of cultural phenomena that we loosely refer to by the terms ‘religion’ and ‘religions’.

There are two more arguments against the possibility of there ever being a universally valid definition of religion. One is the likelihood of the development of new religions of a very different kind in the (near) future. An analysis of the dynamics of man’s religious past shows that religions have been shaped to a large degree by extra-religious, ‘contextual’

⁶ Dense symbol systems are the products of what Gellner (1988: 42-62) has termed ‘multistranded thought’. They are used especially in ritual communication, the social one between humans as well as the religious one between believers and their putatively addressable beings of a meta-testable kind. They induce deferential behaviour in humans and are resistant to reflection. Cf. Platvoet (1995b) on the role of symbols in ritual behaviour.

⁷ Definition’ is from the Latin verb *de-finire*, to stake out something in order to demarcate its *finis*, boundary, which separates conceptually that which is being ‘defined’ from that which it is different and must, therefore, not be included. Cf. Platvoet 1990, 1994 on what authors have so far regarded as the *differentia specifica* of ‘religion’: that specific differentiating element or quality by which particular complexes of human notions,

factors. These have not only shaped the economic, social, political, cultural development of human societies, but also their religious one. They are a society's various kinds of technologies: for the production of food; for the manufacture of instruments and other useful articles; for improving mobility and communication; and for storing material and mental products. They are also a society's demographic size; its institutional organisation, or lack of it; its degree of literacy and intellectual development; and the range and intensity of its communication, internal and external, etc.⁸ The newest types of religions – which have emerged in Western [249] societies in the past two centuries, and more recently in those parts of the rest of the world which have likewise been strongly affected by the forces of modernisation and globalisation – foreshadow the very different shapes, kinds, functions and sizes which some religions will take in the coming decades because of the fundamental transformations of modern societies.⁹ The fact that we may reasonably expect the shapes, contents and functions of at least some religions to be very different from the those of religions of the past, precludes and vitiates the very possibility of a universally valid, trans-temporal definition of religion.

The other argument concerns the problem of whether the term 'religion' can be applied to the other 'religions' of humankind. As is well known, 'religion' is a very modern, Western term, born and bred in rapidly modernising societies, in which institutional differentiation has reduced religion in the past three or four centuries from a pervasive cosmology and a largely public affair to a matter of private persuasion and individual practice. Churches were once 'natural', unobtrusive, cradle-to-grave affairs, and as completely co-extensive with Western societies as religion is in any preliterate society. They have now been 'reduced' to their original format (in the Roman Empire of the first three centuries CE), that of voluntary associations of believers, except that they were then growing and are now quickly dwindling. In our highly differentiated societies, the churches, other religious associations, and religion itself, have become distinct institutions, as have the non-religious institutions.

One of the forces by which this fast and vast process of institutional differentiation was set in motion, and to a large measure sustained, in Western societies was the European colonial expansion of the past five centuries, mercantile (1425-1885), and territorial (1885-[250]1960). Apart from providing the monetary wealth for these processes of insti-

attitudes, behaviours, institutions, etc. are deemed to constitute (a) 'religion'.

⁸ Cf. Platvoet 1993: 231-243 on socio-economic history shaping the history of religions. I distinguish six periods in the general history of human societies, correlated to six types of religions. The most recent one seems to anticipate the shapes, sizes and functions of human religions in the near future.

⁹ I am thinking here, in particular, of worldwide industrialisation, demographic growth – a phenomenon of truly apocalyptic proportions and implications –, urbanisation, the worldwide spread of literacy and *éducation permanente*, the absolute growth of prosperity, the increase of relative deprivation, the destabilisation and transformation of traditional societies and cultures, and the exponential growth of communication, transportation and, in particular, information. It should however be remembered that the intensity with which these 'forces' impinge upon different parts of the globe, or on different sections of particular societies, differ considerably; and also that there is no mechanistic correlation between these 'forces' and the new shapes of religions.

tutional differentiation, Europe's colonial expansion confronted Western societies cognitively with man's other cultures and 'religions'. Although they were most often misperceived as at least quaint and strange, and more often as downright barbarous, cruel, savage and primitive by our prejudiced, and often bigoted minds, the increasing amount of information gathered on them has gradually forced us to re-conceive them, in the course of two centuries (1750-1950), from the superstitious idolatry of deluded pagans to co-religions worthy of our respect.

By the interaction of these two processes, Westerners laboured under the delusion that 'religion' could always be well differentiated from 'non-religion', not only at home but also abroad, and that its trans-temporal and trans-local 'nature', or 'essence' could easily be established. Which they proceeded to do in Western terms. Today's Science of Religions, however, has established that there is no, or at most a rudimentary and incidental, institutional separation and demarcation between the religious and non-religious spheres in many non-Western societies, both in the past and the present. In them, religion merges with, even dissolves into, its non-religious elements, and as a result, it has usually a very low, or even no visibility at all, for Westerners. Consequently, religion is not conceived in most societies as separate from e.g. kinship, modes of production, or the social and political order of a society, or indeed its warfare, genocide, peace and prosperity. Nor do these societies usually have a concept and a term for it by which to express the distinctiveness of 'religion' from everything non-religious.

The basic conditions for a universally valid definition of 'religion' – the material one that religion is distinct from 'non-religion' in all societies, and the formal one that humans everywhere possess a concept for it in their heads and a term for it in their languages – are consequently absent in all but a few societies. In those, however, that do possess some measure of institutional differentiation, as well as concepts and terms for 'religion', these share little in common with their Western counterparts and with each other. Although 'religion', therefore, has been virtually a universal phenomenon in all societies throughout history so far, it can be shown to have existed in most societies and periods of history only analytically, by us applying to them our modern Western concepts – and occasionally, when our own stock was deficient, a few concepts, such [251] as totem and taboo, borrowed from other cultures. These serve as our heuristic devices, but at the price of considerable Westernisation, i.e. severe misrepresentation.

The study of the religions of humankind by Western scholars has been a tortuous one because the fundamental preconception of religion as categorically distinct from everything non-religious. It caused the study of religions to be burdened by Western-Christian dichotomies, such as 'reality' being conceptually divided into the 'spiritual' and the 'material', the 'natural' and the 'supernatural', the sacred, or holy, and the profane, the empirical and the meta-empirical, all of them reified into distinct realms. These dichotomies developed in response to modern Copernican cosmology and Newtonian physics, which pervasively moulded Western thought, the Western Christian thought included, and thereby provided the foundation for a distinctly irreligious worldview, the one-tier-only cosmology of

modern Western positivism.¹⁰ The modern Western one- and two-tier cosmological constructs are absent from, alien to, and refuted as universal by, the greater part of the history of religions of humankind.

The foregoing arguments expose the idea of a universally valid definition of 'religion' as a recent Western idiosyncrasy. It cannot serve as the paradigm for an explanation of the religious history of humankind, but must itself be explained as a contingent development in that history. Its apparent sensibility for Westerners, scholars and others alike, and their use of it seem one of the several forms of Western imperialism, from the mercantile, colonial and religious ones of the past to the financial, technological, and academic ones of the present.

Whilst definitions of religion claiming to be universally valid, continue to be constructed, most scholars of the Comparative Study of Religions would nowadays concur that the chances of one of them being accepted as such by the scholarly community, are extremely dim. Nor do these scholars deem the construction of such a definition to be desirable. On the contrary, past instances have taught them to be suspicious of them, because in virtually all earlier examples motives other than scientific ones were shown to underpin at least part of their inspiration, if not to be their entire foundation. Even so, the history of the discipline also shows that even ideologically [252] inspired definitions of 'religion' have made their own contributions both to the study of the religions of humankind and to the debate about the most acceptable theories on how to 'explain' them. The academic community should, therefore, not ban any definitions of religion, but instead discuss and test them.

Are definitions of religion dispensable?

One might translate the foregoing argument into the scholastic dictum: *ad impossibile nemo tenetur*: if a 'proper', *i.e.* universally valid, definition of religion is not possible, then it may, or should be dispensed with altogether. I beg to differ, for definitions of 'religion' – and of all the other concepts that serve important purposes in the academic study of religions – serve other, more modest and realistic purposes. I will discuss these below. But I will first examine another, stronger, argument for dispensing with definitions of religions.

The argument is derived from the actual practice of much, if not most, historical, ethnographic, sociological, psychological, comparative and other research into religions. Most scholars of religions do not develop a definition of religion. Nor do they borrow one from their more reflectively and theoretically inclined colleagues. In publications, they do not elucidate their understanding of 'religion', nor of other central concepts. This may, and often does, present difficulties when one is confronted with a high incidence of unexplained technical terms. Or when some 'common place' words, like 'religion' and 'ritual', are used in senses patently different from their 'ordinary' ('natural language') meanings,

¹⁰ Cf. Platvoet 1990: 183-187

and yet remain unexplained as to their precise (technical, theoretical, or hypothetical) meaning for the author. The student is then left to grope laboriously for an understanding from hints strewn throughout the text and from what is implied, often darkly, in the argumentation. Such mystifications, moreover, constitute an effective status enhancement strategy that is much-used among scholars, but is clearly detrimental to ongoing critical discussion.

Despite all this, many of these ‘non-defining’ scholars can be shown to have contributed in important ways to the body of received knowledge, which constitutes the modern Science of Religions. The pre-reflective, diffuse and imprecise meaning of ‘religion’, as it is commonly understood by the ‘ordinary’ speakers of Western languages, has often [253] provided scholars of religions with a mainly inarticulate and implicit, but still fairly adequate and effective, conceptual apparatus for their research, and likewise sufficed for their readers for grasping the outcome of that research. Despite being thoroughly marked by the history of Western religion(s), it was usually well enough adapted, in subtle ways, to the distinctive idiom of the religion studied to render attractive results thanks to the scholar’s intensive familiarisation with that religion and close insights into its peculiarities. It might even be influenced, in submerged ways, by some of the theoretical developments in the study of religions in general.

These attractive results have been gained more often in ‘substantive’ – or descriptive – analyses of religions than in functional – or explanatory – ones. The purpose of the former is the accurate and objective representation of the ‘contents’ of religions by philological, historical or ethnographical research. These disciplines study in particular their symbol systems – the dense complexes of meanings, values, norms, attitudes and emotions conveyed by perceptible means in communication events between addressable persons – as the believers employ them in rituals. These are used by believers for the purpose of their (putative) commerce with (postulated) meta-empirical beings;¹¹ for the expression of their inarticulate, or articulate, religious cosmologies – the [254] beliefs concerning the consti-

¹¹ The adjectives ‘putative’, ‘postulated’, and their synonyms ‘non-verifiable/non-falsifiable’, ‘non-empirical’, ‘meta-empirical’, ‘metaphysical’, ‘meta-testable’, ‘spiritual’, ‘religious’, ‘mystical’ (as used by Lévy-Bruhl [1966: 31, 54sq.] in his ‘law of mystical participation’ and Evans-Pritchard [1937: 12, *passim*] in his study of Zande ‘magic’, oracles and witchcraft beliefs), ‘supernatural’, ‘magical’ – a term still used, unfortunately, by many scholars –, etc., are used here without normative intent or implications. They are not meant to deny or contest – neither explicitly nor by innuendo – the truth claims of the believers in respect of the ‘reality’ of the meta-empirical; nor to affirm or support them. They are used in order to represent the empirical, researchable part of the behaviour and belief complexes which believers practise in their ‘wider world’, which is ‘natural’ to them by cultural conditioning (*i.e.* religious training) and perceived by them as ‘self-evidently’ deeper than, and different from, the perceptible one which the empirical sciences (can only) investigate. Their religious beliefs as well as their claims about the reality and truth of the meta- and infra-empirical, and their reports of their experiences of its reality or power or operation, are all part of the perceptible (cultural, historical, social, psychological) realities which the several empirical disciplines of the Science of Religions (can) investigate. They must be represented by them as accurately and faithfully, in their full psychological, cultural, cosmological and other force and meaning, as their culturally conditioned means and methods allow. Agnostic scholars of religions are constrained by the limits which empirical science imposes upon the object matter of their research. They need to keep in mind, therefore, that their representation of the ‘reality’ experienced by believers may only be a partial one.

tution of this world, the ‘destined course’ of its ‘history’, the ‘proper’ order of society, and the meaning of life, death, and afterlife for its members – in myths, rituals, and doctrines; for celebrating the happy, and for coping with the unhappy accidents of life; and for the reflective and competitive articulation of doctrines in religions with a scriptural tradition for the purpose of the discussion of the cognitive elements of their beliefs. Descriptive studies often rely, in quite effective ways, on the inarticulate and intuitive grasp of what ‘religion’ ‘is’. The Western, or Westernised, researcher has that intuition in common with his or her readership: Western(ized) fellow scholars and the ‘general public’. He, or she, often shares it also nowadays, to a greater or smaller degree, with the community of believers he or she is studying, because that society has often been subjected to strong, Westernising influences through the colonisation of the past and the globalisation of the present.¹² In this way, descriptive students have often achieved quite attractive ‘translations’ – descriptions in Western idiom – of other religions with, at first sight, fairly low distortion rates. Because of their common sense appeal, such descriptions have often gone unchecked, and more especially so when the research is highly specialist, or the religion happened to be researched by only one, or very few, researchers.

The need to clarify terms, concepts and theories is much more pressing, however, in research into the functions into religion(s) for the purpose of explaining religion, because it is more technical, theoretical and hypothetical, and has a much stronger universalising bent and intent. It needs, therefore, more, and more explicit, validation, and deserves more rigorous testing and criticism. Even here, however, one finds that well-written, reflective essays, sporting a literary style and using other strategies of persuasion, do contribute, in however limited ways, to the development of lines of theoretical thought and theories of explanation.¹³

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The uses of definitions of religion

A universally valid definition of religion is, most likely, unattainable. Important work in Science of Religion has been, and may be, done without clarifying the precise meaning in which the term is used. Scholars may, therefore, dispense with defining religion. In addition, one will never be able to define religion completely unambiguously and unequivocally. Moreover, one will be able to use it only as a research instrument of restricted usefulness. Even so, it is definitively to be urged and to be promoted that religion be ‘defined’. In addition to the general purpose of ‘definition’, i.e. the clarification of the precise meaning in which a term is used, defining ‘religion’ – and other concepts central to the aca-

¹² This is, of course, only one side of the coin. Westernisation and globalisation also provoke numerous processes of the ‘invention of tradition’ by which identities, that were formerly inarticulate and implicit in a society’s culture, are competitively articulated in order to resist the identities of the wider units which are being imposed upon them as a part their incorporation into those wider units. Cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1993; Beyer 1994; for an example, cf. Platvoet 1991.

¹³ Cf. Ter Borg’s contribution to this volume.

demic study of religions – is in practice distinctly helpful, however modest that help may be, for the four reasons: (1) to safeguard the diversity of the religions of humankind; (2) to throw into relief the epistemological problems implicit in the ‘translation’ of other religions into our Western cultural categories; (3) to face the problem of the public intelligibility of functional explanations of religion(s); and (4) to point out the three specific uses to which ‘operational’ – or instrumental – definitions of religion may be put: heuristic, analytical, and explanatory. I discuss them briefly in this order.

(1) The peculiarities of ‘religion’, discovered in other religions by past and current descriptive research, require the constant reformulation of the Western concepts of ‘religion’ in such a way that they gradually become ever more neutral instruments for elucidating, and safeguarding, the huge diversity of ‘religion’ in the religions of humankind. The more definitions of religions are de-Westernised, the better they will also serve as useful ‘operational definitions’ for descriptive and comparative research into (the ‘other’) religions, the peculiarities of which they will safeguard only in as far as the reform of our Western terms and concepts will allow. The purpose of the development of an ‘operational definition’ is, therefore, first of all to adapt it to the specific traits and marks of a particular other religion, or several other religions, as far as the Western concept of religion will permit, in order that it may fruitfully serve the heuristic, analytical and explanatory research purposes in the study of that religion or of those, or similar religions, for which it has been developed. Though [256] intended and developed primarily for a more accurate study of non-Western religions, such definitions in addition often prove also useful for opening up new research perspectives in the study of Western religions.

(2) The second use to which reformed definitions may be put, is as instrument for translating the peculiarities of another religion (or religions) [as] accurately [as is possible] into terms understandable to Western[ized] scholars, students and the general public by clarifying what marks they have in common with Western religions and where, and how, they differ from them in significant ways. By reformulating the Western concept of religion in terms derived from other religions which are very, or even radically, different from traditional Western religion, the epistemological problem of translation is addressed. The process exposes both the Western origin of the concept of religion and its limited capacities for the adequate expression of the different traits proper to non-Western religions. The result is a slow and laborious process of a progressive, though most likely always partial, de-Westernization of the concept ‘religion’ and its gradual transformation into a more neutral, more technical, less Western instrument of research by a theoretical development by which the concept of ‘religion’ becomes a more ‘trans-*emic*’, i.e. more *etic*,¹⁴ tool of analysis capable of revealing what religions have in common and how they differ without in-

¹⁴*Emic* refers to meanings that are significant to actors in a culture; *etic* to those significant to observers studying *emic* meaning systems. They are mostly the technical concepts that scholars needs for ordering, translating, analysing, comparing and discussing *emic* meaning systems.

roducing the peculiarities of a particular religion, or type of religion, into the description and explanation of other religions, or into those of the human religions as a collective phenomenon.

(3) The diversity of religions must not only be described as accurately as we possibly can by using our poor, because Western, instruments. It must also be explained, however tentatively and partially, by research into the formative and constraining effects of the ecological, cultural, historical, and other factors and ‘forces’ at work in the societies in which particular religions, or types of religions, developed; and by studying the diverse functions, religious and ‘secular’ [257] (a Western notion!), which religions had in them. The first is done by means of the morphological analysis of religions and the outline of the history of the morphology of the religions of humankind; the second is the functional explanation of religion and the religions.

The intelligibility of morphological analyses presents no greater problems than that of descriptive studies of the single religions, because they stay close to the religions studied, although they must needs incorporate the results of additional research into the entire social and cultural ‘contexts’, or settings, of religions; or even into those of the long term religious history of humankind. Many religions, however, cannot be studied apart from their contexts, and in isolation from their ‘secular’ functions, ecological, economical, political, legal, military, socio-structural, psychological, therapeutic, etc. The comparative morphology of religions, therefore, seems to emerge fairly ‘naturally’ from the fact that most religions can be studied only in, and through, their wider social and cultural settings. The aim is to study the constraints which these settings impose upon the shifts in the shapes of religions as cultural creations, and to chart the historical processes of the transformations of their contents once certain constraints have been removed by major changes in the contexts of particular religions. The constraints are always a very complex set of varied and variable conditions, and the transformations are historical, and thus unique, contingent and non-repeatable. This should caution scholars to exercise great restraint in the development of predictive explanatory theory about the large scale or long term development of the religious history of mankind, in any of its regional arenas, and even for any particular religion.

Functionalist explanations of religion have been pursued by sceptics of the metaphysical truth claims of religions since the time of early Greek philosophers, historians and playwrights. It has not been marked by caution and restraint but by bold, ideologically inspired leaps from the study of one of the many functions of human religions to the total explanation of ‘religion as such’, *i.e.* of any and all religion.

This process involved them, first of all, in the theoretical reduction of religion to one all-explanatory function. That was political and economical oppression for Voltaire and Marx; the commemoration of the dead for Euhèmeros, Spencer and Tylor; and the need for explanation for humans endowed with only a primitive rationality, or even with ‘primitive stupidity’ (*Urdummheit*), or living in a [258] closed society, for Comte, Tylor, Frazer,

Preusz¹⁵, and Horton.¹⁶ It was primitive pre-logical mentality and mystical participation for Lévy-Bruhl;¹⁷ the psychologically debilitating effects of a patriarchal religion founded upon the phylogenetically transmitted guilt about a mythical primeval patricide for Freud; and social cohesion for Durkheim. Orientation and ultimate meaning have been selected by the many scholars of religions in the social sciences as well as in Philosophy of Religion, who promote a cosmological, or comprehensive, system of meanings approach to religion; and euonic drive by Prozesky.¹⁸ As was the smothering of the debilitating fear of death by authors from Statius¹⁹ to Hume and ter Borg,²⁰ or other such functions.

Secondly, inherent in the functionalist explanation is a myopic view of religion(s). They are studied from one perspective only, as purely and merely political, sociological, psychological, psychiatric, intellectual or other cultural phenomena, or as restricted to only one mentality or mode of thought. Thereby religions are conceived, represented and analysed as political, sociological, psychological, etc., phenomena only. In addition, politics, sociology, etc., are conceived as, and equated with, 'religion' as reduced by stipulation to that one function.²¹

The result is, thirdly, considerable conceptual and terminological confusion, especially at the 'natural language' level, because preoccupation with the total explanation of religion on the basis of one of the many functions of religions has disastrous consequences for the general intelligibility of their use of the concept of religion. The traditional concept of 'religion', having first been reduced to one 'secular' function only, is then widened by the same stipulation so as to include also every non-religious institution or domain serving the function by which religion is explained. Thus all those institutions or domains which have none of the traits which are commonly associated in modern Western languages with the term of 'religion', but [259] share with it only that one non-religious function, are presented as 'religion'. The inclusion of what is traditionally not religion into 'religion' by a new stipulation results in a concept of 'religion' that is fundamentally different from, and often quite alien to, religion as conceived in the traditional, 'substantive' way in the normal parlance of modern Western languages.²² The protagonists of the explanation of religion by one of its functions have euphemistically termed their approach an 'inclusive' and strategically downgraded the traditional approach, in which 'religion' is limited to beliefs and practices relative to postulated non-empirical realms, by labelling it the 'exclusive' one.²³

¹⁵ Cf. van Baal 1971: 75-77

¹⁶ On this 'intellectualist' explanation, cf. e.g. Morris 1987: 94-106, 300-301, 304-309

¹⁷ Cf. Lévy-Bruhl 1967 (original French edition 1910)

¹⁸ Prozesky 1984

¹⁹ *Primos in orbe deos fecit timor*, 'fear created the first gods in the world' (Publius Popinius Statius [45-96 CE], *Thebais* 3: 661).

²⁰ Ter Borg 1991: 87-89; and in this volume

²¹ Cf. Ter Borg in this volume: 'Functional definitions are exclusive. Everything except a certain function is excluded. [... A]ny institution might, under certain conditions, be called religious'.

²² Cf. again Ter Borg's contribution to this volume

²³ Cf. e.g. Hill 1973: 243-245

Fourthly, by thus reducing the traditional concept of religion to one of its non-religious functions; by simultaneously expanding this alien and severely reduced concept of 'religion' with all non-religious phenomena with which it shares that one function; and by labelling as 'religion' what is usually not perceived as religion in ordinary parlance, the concept of 'religion' is stipulated in ways that create high, and at times insurmountable, barriers to the public intelligibility of the use of the term 'religion' by these scholars. These barriers are not only cognitive – in as far as reductive approaches create fuzzy and confusing concepts of religion by expanding religion with 'non-religion' –, but also, and at times intensely, emotional. That is the case when these scholars reduce the complex and dense historical realities of religions to only one of its many functions – which is always one of its numerous non-religious²⁴ functions – and declare that one function to be the total and final, and scientifically valid explanation of them all. Thereby they enter into a straight cosmological confrontation, of an axiomatic kind, with believers, for they present that 'explanation' then as a direct refutation of the truth claims concerning the meta-, intra-, or infra-empirical realms, beings, forces, powers, influences, events, or laws, which believers hold as the core of their religion. The history of the 'war' between 'science' and religious faith in Western societies in the past two centuries amply documents the intensity of the emotions engendered by that debate.

[260] Such reductive 'functionalist'²⁵ explanations, therefore, face great problems in the public intelligibility of their concepts of religion. More modest uses of the explanatory approach can, however, be integrated quite well into operational definitions of the 'substantive' kind and may be of help towards removing the misunderstandings and unhelpful emotional resistance that these approaches have created. This is necessary, because despite their ideological drive, explanatory studies of religion have contributed much to the study of religions in general. But it is also true that they have never contributed that which they were intended to contribute, namely a successful reductive explanation of religion acceptable to the neutral, not ideologically, or theologically, committed scholars.

(4) The general purpose of a definition of 'religion' is to clarify the precise meaning in which a scholar uses the term when communicating his findings to the scholarly community for critical testing, and to the general public for information. For these purposes, a scholar sets out what the meaning of the term 'religion' is for him in a nominal definition of religion, of either the lexical, regulative, or stipulating kind.²⁶ In addition, however, because 'religion' is the most central concept in the study of religions, it is helpful also to develop clarifying definitions of religion as explicit instruments of research, i.e. as operational definitions. As such they may serve heuristic, analytical, and explanatory functions.

²⁴ In the traditional, substantive meaning of the word.

²⁵ My use of 'functionalist' does not, of course, refer to the 'functionalism' of e.g. Malinowski in the history of British Social Anthropology, even though his functionalism was also 'functionalist' in my meaning: the alleged sufficient scientific explanation of religion by one of its 'secular' functions.

²⁶ Cf. Adriaanse in this volume

The most important of these three purposes is the heuristic one. Its function is to indicate where in a particular research situation 'religion' may be found and what its main traits are in order that it may be made visible, even revealed. Its heuristic use, therefore, is a particular application of the general, clarifying function of the definition of religion. Its task is nearest to the one formerly assigned to the essentialist definitions of religion: it is developed in order to indicate the peculiarities of 'religion' in particular (types of) religions. An operational definition of religion cannot be used, therefore, as one that is *a priori* and universally valid, nor for explaining religion [261] as such. It is rather an instrument to facilitate research into the particular varieties of the religions of humankind.

It is also explicitly meant as a provisional and constantly corrigible definition. It will definitively remain a Western definition of 'religion', but one that has been adapted to the peculiarities of other religions on the basis of our present knowledge of them. Its success in reforming Western concepts of 'religion' represents the progress made so far towards accommodating the distinctive traits of the other religions. Further research into the particularities of other religions will contradict some of the still too Western elements of the present operational definitions. Further theoretical reflection will permit their further reformulation and assist in the accommodation of the corrections. Because it is provisional, explicitly corrigible, and tailored to suit as closely as is possible the particularities of specific non-Western (types of) religions, an operational definition of religion will not easily be prey to ethnocentric or xenocentric extrapolation. It will not easily succumb to the temptation to declare some trait of the Western, or of some particular non-Western religion, or type of religion, as crucial to religion as such, and as universally valid.

In addition to rendering religion visible in a specific cultural context by means of a Western concept of 'religion', reformed in order to accommodate the particularities of some, or several, historical non-Western religions or types of religions, an operational definition of religion may be designed for analytical and explanatory purposes, of the 'substantive' as well as of the 'functional' type, and even – to some extent – for both, as I will show in the next section. Such an operational definition should contain *in nuce* a theory, or hypothesis, of what 'religion' substantively is, and/or functionally does, in a specific historical, preferably non-Western religion, or in a specific historical group, or type, of non-Western religions, and even, but much more hesitantly and hypothetically, in the religions of humankind as a historical collectivity; and it should specify the means for investigating it. It should be designed as a research instrument for finding and explicating the traits postulated by the theory, and for testing that theory. In brief, it should be made operational, i.e. instrumental, for specific research goals. As the religions are diverse and complex, and the disciplines and research aims many, it will be quite normal and legitimate to develop numerous operational definitions of religion.

[262]

An operational definition of religion

The operational definition of ‘religion’ which I propose is an instrument for the ethnographical, historical and comparative study of the religions of humankind – e.g. the cross-cultural study of spirit possession rituals – in primarily a substantive or descriptive way, and secondarily in several functional ways as well. Being designed mainly for substantive research into the ‘contents’ and the morphology of religions, it stays close to the traditional, or ‘exclusive’, or ‘common’ understanding of religion. For that reason, and because it is an operational definition, it is by ‘nature’, so to speak, unfit to claim any explanatory force as a reductive theory of religion. It is merely a fairly modest and traditional research tool that must prove, and improve, its qualities in mainly substantive research. In as far it is helpful in morphological and functional analyses, it may, and does, create certain explanations of a very limited kind which do not prejudice their possibly trans-empirical truth, but does lay bare actual morphological constraints on particular religions, and their social, psychological and other functions and correlations, without reducing them, or ‘religion as such’, to any one of them.²⁷

The operational definition which I propose defines ‘religion’ as putative (or if that is too offensive: ‘spiritual’ or ‘mystical’) communication of believers with postulated (or meta-empirical, non-verifiable/non-falsifiable, or ‘supernatural’) beings. It defines religion first of all as a (postulated) communication event between the believers as empirical persons and the putative ‘unseen beings’ whom the believers accept as real persons. But no communication event is possible without an institutional context governing it. I, therefore, propose a two-pronged operational definition of ‘religion’: one of ‘religion’ as the (postulated) communicative event, and the other of ‘religion’ as the (postulated) institution, by which that (putative) communication is ordered and within which it operates. ‘Religion’, then, is the postulated commerce of believers with mainly putatively addressable and responsive beings in a postulated meta-empirical community.²⁸

[263] That is the theory. It gives three instruments of analysis: process-analysis, network analysis, and context analysis. The first is the analysis of the ritual communication events. In the network analysis, the relationships are studied which believers presume to exist between them, and the beings to whom they address their communication (and from whom they expect to receive some kind of response). This network of postulated pre-existing relationships serves as the social ‘field’ for the (putative) religious communication in the postulated communicative events. In the context analysis, the wider religious, social and other settings of a religious communication event are analysed. This operational definition invites, in particular, the analysis of religious ritual behaviour of the case historical

²⁷ For an instructive example of the type of strictly (limited) historical, sociological, and other explanation which I advocate, cf. Evans-Pritchard 1956: 313, 320.

²⁸ For more extensive discussions of this proposal, cf. Platvoet 1990 and 1994. I add the qualification ‘mainly’ to indicate that the commerce, postulated by believers, is in some religions not, or not only, with putatively addressable beings.

type. It tries to explicate what adherents themselves believe in respect of the community, or network, of which they believe themselves to be part, and with what postulated meta-empirical ‘beings’ (e.g. God, gods, ancestors, souls, witches, imps), or ‘things’ (e.g. ‘medicines’, charms, oracles), or forces (e.g. witchcraft), or qualities (e.g. sacredness, pollution), or laws (e.g. *karma*) they are confronted. It discerns what relationships of hierarchy and/or reciprocity are postulated to obtain between them. It describes what messages are believed to be sent, or to be exchanged – e.g. in spirit possession rituals – between some of those involved in such a meta-empirical web of relationships; of what phases the communication process consists, and the types of communication practised, etc.; as well as the religious and secular functions of such behaviour. The latter demands a great variety of approaches. In the case of spirit possession rituals, for instance, these approaches range from neurobiology and the psychology of ASCs (altered states of consciousness) to political sociology, gender analysis, and the study of marginalisation and modernisation, etc.²⁹

In conclusion

Modern Science of Religions in the Netherlands cultivates a thorough epistemological modesty and relativism. It is highly sceptical of the degree of ‘objectivity’ it can achieve in the representation and explanation of religions on several grounds. One is the wide scope [264] of its study of religions, in space as well as in time, which has made it aware of the amazing complexity and diversity of its object of study. Another is its awareness, instilled by the post-modern critique of an earlier naive objectivism, that our knowledge about other religions is inherently a culturally-conditioned appropriation and reconstruction of another cultural reality which can never constitute a perfectly accurate representation of that other reality. That is so for two reasons: the inherent poverty of the (qualitative) means at our disposal for acquiring ‘objective knowledge’ about the religions of man; and the problems of the proof of statements in matters of history, which cannot normally be falsified, because history is not repeatable.

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²⁹ For instances of application of these instruments to spirit possession rituals, cf. Platvoet 1983, 1995a, 1999; ter Haar & Platvoet 1989.

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