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Religion as a Form of Meaning

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How does one identify certain social appearances as religion? That is the question one has to start with.

For a person of faith, this question may be meaningless. Such a person can say what he believes and abide by that. He may dispute whether calling it "religion" benefits him at all. He may even reject the designation, seeing it as classifying phenomena in a way that places him in a category with things he would reject as not worth believing. The idea of religion thus seems to be a cultural one, an idea that calls for a certain tolerance.

However, for those who do not believe what they might like to signify with the term "religion," the notion has its problems and limitations. And then there are those who might wish to communicate about religion without having to commit to a faith of their own. And those who wish to problematize the notion, or at least distinguish it from other ideas. Neither "ontological" nor "analytical" solutions are of any help these days. In the ontological tradition, no one should have a problem with this, for what that tradition holds to be religion emerges out of the essence of religion. If any mistakes were made, one would merely have to recognize them and clean them up—an attitude that itself approximates faith. By contrast, the analytical thinker claims he is free to determine the scope of his own thought. For him, only propositions can be true, not ideas. However, he is confronted with having to limit arbitrariness (a methodological concession), a

problem that cannot be resolved (least of all "empirically"). If the ontologist is too close to religion, the analytic thinker is too far away from it. The worst thing to do would be to look for a (practical) solution somewhere in "the middle." These two solutions are unusable by us, leaving us without a principle to convey.

If looking for more concrete answers, one can differentiate between sociological (Emile Durkheim) and phenomenological ones (Rudolf Otto).[1] At present, however, we are not interested in their content but in how they are derived.

Durkheim views religion as a moral—and thus a social—fact.[2] Through morality and religion, society makes itself the transcendence that God, whose facticity is now disputed, can no longer offer.

As a moral fact, religion is defined in two ways: by a moment of desire (*désir*), which appraises values, and by a moment of sanction that limits what is permitted (*sacré*). We can see that morality—and along with it, religion—emerges in a twofold process of expansion and contraction. It is based on a type of self-dissolution also linked to forms that operate as a unit, as a stabilized tension. These forms command our attention in the face of the unbearable possibility that their unity might again be dissolved into distinction.* On this basis as well, religious forms are developed by further distinguishing between sacred and profane. While morality is defined by a distinction in which both sides claim one another, religion is characterized by a relationship of exclusion. In each of these cases, the aim is to understand society as a comprehensive system. This is also true of religion if one does not stop at the sacred as such but instead proceeds with the distinction between sacred and profane. Society thus distinguishes religion by marking off its domain as sacred against everything that cannot be signified the same way. Yet Durkheim does not see the form of religion in this distinction itself. Instead, he interrogates the domain of the sacred for specific religious forms (keep this in mind, because this is the point where we part ways with Durkheim).

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  * *Differenz* in Luhmann's work is in many respects equivalent to *Unterscheidung* (usually rendered as *distinction*), but *Unterscheidung* tends to highlight the operation, while *Differenz* signifies the separation (i.e., "difference") the operation establishes. Whereas *Differenz* connotes a dividing line (closely following George Spencer-Brown's usage), with overtones of Derrida's *différance*, *Unterscheidung* is closer to the sense of *form* in the distinction between *form* and *medium*.—Trans.

Something similar is at work in Max Weber's sociology of religion. Weber avoids defining the essence of religion, saying he is merely interested in "the conditions and effects of a certain type of communal action."[3] (Here he is only saying that one has to observe what people think religion is, rather than committing ourselves to an answer.) The problem for Weber was how human action could be given a cultural meaning. A related problem for him was how other orders of life, such as the economy or eroticism, might construct meaning in each of their respective domains. Religion itself assumes a distinction between everyday and extraordinary occurrences. It finds that the extraordinary ones need forms that give the world additional religious meanings, producing a need to rationalize these excesses.[4] Georg Simmel, too, starts with a distinction between *religious* and *religioid*—a distinction that makes it possible for religion to develop enhanced forms.[5] René Girard's theory of religion is also structured around expansion and contraction. It assumes desire itself is implicated in a conflict of imitation, hence activating religious prohibitions that appear to be religion because they are restrictive.[6] The conflict of imitation itself, the dangerous paradox that people fight over the same desires, has to be represented symbolically. The imitation takes place in the form of a sacrifice intended to redeem something else.

In formulating this list (which is certainly not comprehensive), I am not merely surveying a few well-known ideas in the sociology of religion. Rather, I am still trying to make progress in answering the question of what lets us recognize religion. And in the cases examined there appears to be a specific dynamic at work: there are expansions that call for limitation and limits that make possible expansion. Hence, it would not be absurd when looking at religion to think about money as well. And that mysterious symbolic identity setting culture off against the spread of "materialism" would be termed "society."

Both Durkheim and Simmel use a more circumscribed idea of religion in which not everything sacred and every "religioid" relation to social life can be viewed as religion. For Durkheim, religion only emerges when faith becomes systematized. For Simmel, it only emerges in a clear, objectified consciousness of form, capable of critical judgment (but also subject to possible doubts). This distinction is significant and remains so, particularly in research on the evolution of religion, on how more demanding forms arise that (at first) seem improbable. The distinction, however, has

been rejected or even forgotten in the more recent sociological research on the idea of religion.[7] And more recent religious developments in this century cannot clearly be distinguished as religions. Nor can they be seen as establishing new forms of the sacred that are somehow free of religion.

While sociological approaches try hard to stay impartial about religious belief—and Durkheim explains this by examining primitive religions with no concept of divinity or mysteries—the phenomenological search for ideas uses the exact opposite approach. Phenomenology attempts to define religion by describing how meaningful content appears religious, that is, "holy."[8] It assumes it is possible to have direct access to the "thing itself," a type of access that cannot be relativized by social conditions.[9] The difficulty is how to get from there to the temporality and historicity of religion. (The way that Husserl analyzed the relationship of temporality to consciousness is simply not adequate in this case.)

Determining what is holy (or numinous) leads to a paradox if it becomes something binding for the observer. What is holy attracts us, leaving us awestruck. It exercises a horrifying fascination on us. At the same time, there are subtle differences one has to respect. Even if we are presupposing a god-oriented religion, the *intention* of the god is not to spread fear and terror but rather his holy essence. What is more, the deity is not the fear-arousing event itself; he is merely *within it*.[10] In each case, it has to be accepted that a unity is at work (even if it is a paradoxical one). Salvation lies in danger, redemption in sin. Since the eighteenth century, the term "sublime" has been used to avoid conflict with a religion domesticated by theologians and their "good god." Whatever the case, paradox appears in the form of the holy.

It is striking that the transcendental theory underlying Husserl's phenomenology is simply overlooked in Schütz's social phenomenology, which does not even ask what the costs of doing without it would be. What Schütz is giving up is the super-distinction of empirical versus transcendental, as well as the analysis of consciousness (declared transcendental), that intentional processing of consciousness by which Husserl pointed out the unity of self-reference (*noēsis*) and other-reference (*noēma*). It no longer lets us hear Heidegger's warnings about reductive analyses that are anthropological, psychological, or even biological.[11] Instead, the observer is merely being asked to stay "attuned."[12] But what it misses out on is the justification for universality found in the transcendentality of conscious-

ness, that possibility of making statements that are valid for *every* empirical consciousness. Now there may be good reasons to do without such universality, (precisely) from the viewpoint of sociologists but also from that of a language-oriented philosopher such as Jürgen Habermas. But it should not by any means lead people to repress the theory problem in favor of scrutinizing phenomena. The paradox of the holy is both the beginning and end of analysis, leaving us with the same problem, of how an observer can distinguish religion in a way that is valid for other observers and that could be distinguished—which is our main aim here (!)—from simple attitudes of faith.

In every respect, the traditional idea of religion, an idea sociology also uses, maintains a reference to one's personal existence.[13] But if the scientific tradition does not wish be implausible or incomprehensible, it has to be linked to what otherwise (and elsewhere) is said about humanity. Or at least it has to retain some contact with it. This "humanistic" tradition is nonetheless endangered when it changes what it wishes to understand as "humanity," as well as when it has to deal with a number of very different exemplars of the category. And when forming such ideas, it is difficult to do justice to every single human being.

If, however, one questions this humanistic definition of *religion*, then one has to question the reduction of religion to a phenomenon of consciousness even more. Consciousness serves to externalize (hence the term "phenomenon") the results of neurobiological operations, thus introducing the distinction between other- and auto-reference to our understanding of human experience and activity. Yet even religion needs to ask about the meaning of this basic distinction or be able to grasp its unity as a source of its own production of meaning. Religion is not simply reflection performed by consciousness, because that would mean turning the "self" of consciousness into an "object" and treating it as a thing, with terms such as *soul*, *spirit*, and *person*. Religion cannot be adequately understood according to the schemas of consciousness (subject/object, observer/object) because it is located on both sides of the distinction between self- and other-reference.

The strong focus on humanity is likely why the classical sociology of religion does not deal with communication (or only in a very external sense). This deficit (assuming it is one) can provide a starting place for a new description of what newer sociological theories of religion should do.