

9. M. Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism", pp.106-107.
10. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 204-205.
11. Ibid., p.211.
12. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963), p.xiii.
13. See Wayne Proudfoot, "Religion and Reduction", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 37 (Fall-Winter 1981-82), pp.13-25.
14. M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), p.18.
15. M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.205. Italics added.
16. Ibid., p.28.

**Beyond Religious Symbols and Insight:
Understanding Religious Life as Processes of Valuation**

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A continuing central question in the comparative study of religion is how to understand the nature of religious life in light of both the ultimate claims made by religious people and the differences in concrete religious forms found in human history. To analyze the quality and nature of "ultimacy", scholars of religious life have called attention to the character of holiness or sacredness, the importance of ethical and obligatory social behavior, the need for a special state of consciousness, and the use of symbolic forms (myths and rituals). However, the identification of the nature of religion with only one or two of these important aspects found in religious life has made difficult an understanding of both the ultimate quality and significant differences in the religious claims about the nature and means for attaining that ultimacy.

As an example of this difficulty, let us look at two prominent contemporary interpreters of the nature of religion, who develop quite different understandings of the unique character of religion. Mircea Eliade focuses on the power of religious symbols to provide existential meaning. He writes:

Religion is the paradigmatic solution for every existential crisis. It is the paradigmatic solution not only because it can be indefinitely repeated, but also because it is believed to have a transcendental origin and hence is valorized as a revelation received from an *other*, transhuman world. The religious solution not only resolves the crisis but at the same time makes existence "open" to values that are no longer contingent or particular, thus enabling man to transcend personal situations and finally gain access to the world of the spirit.¹

Every religious act, by the simple fact that it is *religious*, is endowed with a meaning which, in the last instance, is "symbolic" since it refers to supernatural values or beings.²

Keiji Nishitani, however, focuses on the deceptive character found in the ordinary mode of thinking and getting meaning, calling

for a radical doubt in the ability of conventional self-consciousness to expose the ultimate reality of life. He affirms:

The unique and characteristic mark of religion can be seen as the existential exposure of the problematic contained in the ordinary mode of self-being.³

The unique characteristic of the religious way of life . . . comes to this: in religion one persistently pushes ahead in a direction where doubt becomes a reality of the self and makes itself really present to the self.⁴

Eliade and Nishitani have significantly different understandings of what religion is at its core. In this essay we will examine their views on (1) the nature of ultimate reality that is available through religious expression, and (2) the means by which people can be aware of the ultimate reality. In doing so we recognize several common concerns which are handled in significantly different ways in their understandings of religion. Then we will suggest a theoretical framework for understanding religion as processes of valuation (in the most comprehensive and deepest sense) that recognizes these two approaches as different existential processes of such valuation. The goal of this study is to show that if we take the claims of each scholar seriously, we cannot give a general description of all religious life from either of these perspectives because there are not only superficial, but fundamental, differences between them; and one description cannot account for the claims in the other. By affirming that each is a way by which human self-consciousness structures superlative value, however, we can compare the most important aspects of each process as they structure the nature and conditions of human ultimate valuation.

The Nature of Ultimate Reality

Both Eliade and Nishitani have a common concern to interpret religious life in relation to an ultimate context of self-conscious awareness. Each recognizes that religious advocates perceive themselves as being conscious of ultimate reality as distinguished from conventional or secular reality; however, each describes the nature of ultimate reality differently. The differences in their grasp of the nature of ultimate reality — that which is the ontological object of religious awareness — influences, and is influenced by, their general understandings of self-consciousness and of the means whereby conventional self-consciousness is transformed to reflect that ultimate reality.

For Eliade, the ultimate reality is expressed by the term "sacred". The sacred reality is a distinctive mode of being that is manifested at special times, places and in special ritual and verbal forms. The difference between sacred and profane, along with the recognition

of the ability of the sacred to be manifested in profane forms, is expressed when Eliade writes:

The Sacred is qualitatively different from the profane; yet it may manifest itself no matter how or where in the profane world because of its power of turning any natural object into a paradox by means of a hierophony (it ceases to be itself, as a natural object, though in appearance it remains unchanged).⁵

Eliade analyzes the nature of the sacred in relation to self-consciousness by using such phrases as "modality of the Sacred" and the "sacred mode of being". He uses the concept of the sacred mode of being in two contexts: to designate the clear dichotomy between the sacred and profane modes of existential awareness, and to indicate that the sacred modality is a paradoxical unification of all opposites. In regard to the first, the conditioned world is contrasted with the unconditioned; time is contrasted with eternity; differentiation is contrasted with unity. For example, Eliade says in *The Sacred and the Profane*:

The ideal of humanity that the primitive wishes to attain he sets on a superhuman plane. This means . . . [that] one does not become a complete man until one has passed beyond, in a sense abolished, "natural" humanity.⁶

The distinction between the sacred and profane modes of being is emphasized in comments about the decisively different experience of the sacred mode of experience in contrast to the profane. The distinctive experience of changing from one mode of being to another is described in the symbolism of ascent on a staircase as follows:

The staircase is pre-eminently the symbol of the passage from one mode of being to another. The ontological mutation can take place only by the rite of passage; and, indeed, birth, initiation, sexuality, marriage and death constitute, in traditional societies, so many rites of passage. Modality can be changed only as a consequence of a rupture — and this releases ambivalent feelings of fear and of joy, or attraction and repulsion. That is why the mountain or stairs symbolizes not only, as we have seen, access to the Sacred — the pre-eminent "breaking of the plane" — but also death.⁷

This same transcendent sense is identified with a state of consciousness in the description of a yogin who, in the state of *samadhi* obtains a consciousness of freedom and exists nowhere in the cosmos. The yogic consciousness of freedom is a mode of being that is inaccessible to the natural, profane, level of existence.⁸

The superhuman plane, however, is not some reality "above

the world". It is itself an existential situation:

The *sacred* and *profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history. In the last analysis, the *sacred* and *profane* modes of being depend upon the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos.⁹

Even though the world of the gods is opposite to conventional human sensitivity, it is necessary for, and intrinsic to, a person's profound sense of "being". While Eliade holds that only a few people, religious specialists, actually interiorize this mode of being in a personal and conscious way, all people have access to this dimension of life through myth and symbols. The ontological significance of this is summed up when he makes the following claim:

... The essential human condition precedes the actual human condition, ... the decisive deed took place before us, and even before our parents: that decisive deed having been done by the mythic Ancestor (Adam in the Judeo-Christian context). Better still, man is obliged to return to the actions of this Ancestor, either to confront or else repeat them; in short, never to forget them, whatever way he may choose to perform this *regressus ad originem*. Never to forget the essential being that was, in effect, to make it present, to re-live it.¹⁰

The essential human condition precedes the historical concrete event, and therefore, for Eliade, historicism — which stresses innovation — distorts an understanding of the sources of value.

The appearance of the sacred in a human situation is intrinsically paradoxical in three ways: it unifies two radically different modes of being; it is the cosmic ordering of one's life combined with a freeing from the conventional order of everyday sensibilities; and it identifies a particular historical symbol with a universal and eternal image.¹¹ As he noted in an essay on method:

Perhaps the most important function of religious symbolism ... is its capacity for expressing paradoxical situations, or certain structures of ultimate reality, otherwise quite inexpressible.¹²

The exposition of these structures of ultimate reality is the main hermeneutical concern for Eliade.

Nishitani expresses the nature of ultimate reality as the "field of emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). Such reality is not an eternal essence that is prior to the phenomenal world; rather it is the interpenetration of all existing things. In his words,

Emptiness is the field on which an essential encounter can take place between entities normally taken to be distinctly related, even at enmity with each other, no

less than between those that are most closely related.¹³

Only on the field of *śūnyatā* can the totality of things, each of which is absolutely unique and an absolute center of all things at the same time, be gathered into one.¹⁴

For Nishitani, who is strongly influenced by the Buddhist notion of emptiness (with its connotation of the "interdependent co-origination" of all existing things), the ultimate reality is not a transcendent reality that manifests itself by special sacred forms or in repeated divine or primordial ancestral actions. All forms are interrelated because they do not have self-existing essences; they are empty of such presumed essences. He summarizes the non-substantial essential encounter in the field of emptiness by saying:

Being is only being if it is one with emptiness. Everything that stands on its own home-ground only on the field of emptiness, where it is itself in its own suchness. Even when we speak of things reappearing in their substance, we mean only a substantiality that emerges from a unity with emptiness. On the field of emptiness, substantiality is an absolutely non-substantial substantiality.¹⁵

This emptiness is not sheer nihilism, but a mode of being that denies that the "what" (the nature) of a thing is defined by an eternal essential substance known by reason, an idea, or a religious myth.

"Emptiness" is the basic field in which the affirmative and negative are possible at all. In emphasizing that true being is empty of representations, while providing the "home-ground" of all phenomena, he explains:

At the elemental source where being appears as one with emptiness, the home-ground of being, emptiness appears as one with being. We speak of an elemental source, but this does not mean some point recessed behind the thing that we see with our eyes and think of with our minds. The source is as close as can be, 'within hand', of the things themselves. ... To say that being makes its appearance as something in unison with emptiness at bottom — or that on the field of emptiness each thing that becomes manifest according to its own mode of being — means that everything that showed its Form of dispersion and dissolution in nihility is once more restored to being.¹⁶

At this point we should already note that the "field of emptiness" is a quality of consciousness which contributes a certain character to the arising and dissipation of existence. The emptiness which Nishitani talks about is not a *nilium*. Rather it is a continual emptying of the self-centred grasp of personality and attachments to things.¹⁷

The interplay between the affirmative and negative aspects

in emptiness is perceived only when one realizes that it requires a complete negation of any abstraction of emptiness as well as of any notion of being-in-itself. This is a radical kind of negativity which seeks to plumb the very depths of a notion of emptiness by negating even "emptiness" as a notion. Only by negating the particular forms of one's experience can one get beyond the negation itself to a sense that there is an intrinsic relatedness between all things. One must pass through the nihilism of nihilistic existentialism, which, according to Nishitani, in simply negating essences, judges life to be absurd. He claims that once a person passes through the claim of absolute negativity as the opposite of a universal essence (i.e., "being-in-itself"), then one does not perceive life as absurd when confronted with non-being; nor need a person develop his or her ego strength as a superman or wonder woman. Rather, a new "mode of being" (nonattaching to being-in-itself) takes form as one moves through the depth of nihilism.

The deep realization of the emptiness of everything, says Nishitani, makes it possible to penetrate the ontological reality of all particular things while at the same time affirming the relative reality of particular things in existence. Emptiness, as an ontological term, should not be seen as an indicator of something outside of the perceived world in a one-to-one correlation with any universal idea. To perceive the nature of emptiness — in distinction to the notion of "emptiness" — a person must avoid identifying this term with some presumed substance or principle. As soon as emptiness is identified simply either as the subject, or as a reality outside of the self, it is no longer the root source for both subjective and objective experience.

The effort to avoid both an absolute nihilism and a simply negative pole of an essentialism is matched only by the intensity with which Nishitani affirms that one must perceive the relationships between particular things while they, at the same time, maintain their particularity. He said that from the standpoint of emptiness,

... all things are in a process of becoming master and servant to one another. In this system, each thing is itself in not being itself, and is not itself in being itself. Its being is illusion in its truth and truth in its illusion. This may sound strange the first time one hears it, but in fact it enables us for the first time to conceive of a *force* which, since ancient times, has gone by the name of 'nature' (*physis*).¹⁸

If one were not to assume this intrinsic relatedness through the "ground of emptiness", Nishitani is ready to admit, something would exist in-itself, namely, when it is separate from everything outside of itself. In the everyday conventional subject-object awareness, the identification of something-in-itself is significant because it excludes what is not-itself. This results in a total lack of being able

to perceive the nature of anything outside of oneself, and finally ends up in a chaotic awareness. Only on the field of emptiness, Nishitani continues, "where being is seen as being-sive-nothingness, nothingness-sive-being, is it possible for each to be itself with every other, and so, too, for each not to be itself with every other?"¹⁹

The result of perceiving the world from this standpoint is that the *uniqueness* of a thing requires that it is situated as the root center of all other things. The relationship that particular unique things have with each other while being essentially interrelated is one of interpenetration. When a particular thing recognizes its basic character as "no-self nature", it recognizes that its being is one with emptiness; by letting go of its own "self" it becomes a participant in the center of all other unique particulars. From the standpoint of emptiness, then, a thing "is" in terms of its own "selfhood" when it both is subordinate to all other things and at the same time becomes the center for all other things.

Since the field of emptiness is also identified as the field of interpenetration, all things manifest their own reality when they have let go of grasping after some unique essence of themselves and realize their own absolute selfhood in complete interrelatedness. The mode of being which is the genuine "suchness" of a thing is that it cannot be identified simply with either the subject or the object; rather something really "is" when it is identical with itself and at the same time with other things. All things in the world, then, are seen to be interrelated. To be interrelated means being both the centre and the supportive aspect of, or subordinate to, another thing at the same time. The absolute interdependency that one thing has with another for its own unique selfhood is expressed by the term "circuminstantial". This "circuminstantial" interpenetration should not be conceived as an "objective cosmic principle". Nishitani explains this notion when he writes:

Each thing in its being enters into the home-ground of every other thing [and the circuminstantial system itself] is not itself and yet precisely as such (namely, as located on the field of *śūnyatā* [emptiness]) never ceases to be itself, is nothing other than the *force* that links all things together into one.²⁰

This web of circuminstantial interpenetration is a "mode of being"; such a mode of being, Nishitani affirms, "is the mode of being of things as they are in themselves, their non-objective, 'middle' mode of being as the selfness that they are".²¹ The ultimate reality at the depth of self-consciousness, then, pervades all particular things; it is not a different plane of reality which breaks into the profane world.

In both these positions, the authors call attention to the extraordinary character of ultimate reality, called "the sacred" or "the field of emptiness", by contrast to "the profane" and "the

standpoint of the ego" respectively. At the same time there is a significant difference in the way each scholar perceives the character and function of the ultimate reality in religious awareness. For Eliade, religious consciousness affirms the sacred reality as an eternal, primordial transhuman world, which is ontologically different from the particular, actual (profane) world. For Nishitani, religious consciousness affirms the ultimate reality that is radical "emptiness" — empty of an eternal, self-substantial essence — which is not ontologically different from the particularity of all continually changing things in existence. Emptiness is the "home-ground" of all phenomena; however, (as will be elaborated in the next section) most people become self-conscious from the "standpoint of the ego", rather than the standpoint of the "field of emptiness", and thus fear change, painfully grasping after some projected eternal transcendent reality.

Processes for Actualizing the Ultimate Reality (Highest Value)

As we have seen, both Eliade and Nishitani emphasize that the awareness of ultimate reality is a special (religious) mode of consciousness. While they have a common concern to show this extraordinary character of human consciousness, they explain the process of consciousness transformation in quite different ways. These basically different means of ultimate transformation are crucial for an understanding of the nature of religious life. For Eliade, religious consciousness requires symbolization that duplicates the divine actions or eternal sacred forms (paradigms). For Nishitani, the negation of all identification between an ego-identity and any ideal, symbolic re-presentation of a presumed eternal essence (so that one can open the horizon of emptiness) is a necessary process for living in a religious consciousness.

The descriptions of these different processes for actualizing ultimate reality in human self-consciousness stand in tension with one another. Eliade's view requires the use of special symbols — images, words or gestures — to duplicate the sacred realm in the profane world; Nishitani's perspective regards the identification of a (religious) symbol with a sacred, ontologically distinct, realm to be an ego-based perspective, and calls for a radical negation of such identification in order to actualize the interpenetration of all actualities in the "field of emptiness".

The importance of a symbolic process in human life for Eliade is seen when he says, "Human existence attains completion through a series of 'passage rites', in short, by successive initiations".²² The existential character of religious awareness through participation in symbolic transformation is made clear when Eliade says:

Only in so far as man himself becomes a symbol are all systems and all anthropo-cosmic experiences possible, and indeed in this case his own life is considerably enriched

and enlarged. Man no longer feels himself to be an "air-tight" fragment, but a living cosmos open to all the other living cosmoses by which he is surrounded.²³

Even the highest state of consciousness for the classical yogi is understood by Eliade as recovering an original situation enriched by dimensions of freedom and transconsciousness. The yogi "reintegrates the original completeness after having established a new and paradoxical mode of being — *consciousness of freedom*. . . ."²⁴ It is this paradigmatic structure of reintegration and freedom which gives symbolic experiences religious value because it manifests a sacred modality of experience. A symbolic form is not always a myth. Concepts, ritual actions, and concrete imagery are of religious value when they express a mode of being that at the same time transforms a person into an eternal, sacred situation.²⁵

The symbolic process whereby people participate in a paradigmatic experience is central to Eliade's understanding of the universal concept of religion. Religious symbols are the basic vehicle both for any person to transform his or her life and for the historian of religion to perceive the nature of religious life. Religious symbols signify a modality of the real when people are sensitive to meanings that move beyond the level of immediate experience.

The essentially paradoxical nature of the transformative character, however, is — as we pointed out before — the fact that religious behaviour both establishes a cosmos in which to live and, at the same time, is a "rupture of plane" that abolishes the deficiencies and conditionness of existence. Eliade describes this rupture of plane in two kinds of religious contexts. The first of these is the symbolic and ritual forms of religious behavior. The other is the freedom from any form, as found in classical yoga.

Eliade sums up the power of a religious symbol to break through profane existence to another plane of reality when he says:

The symbol not only makes the world "open" but also helps religious man to attain to the universal. For it is through symbols that man finds his way out of his particular situation and "opens himself" to the general and the individual. Symbols awaken individual experience and transmute it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world.²⁶

In this context symbols allow human beings to live paradoxically in a human, conditioned existence and at the same time share in a trans-human life, a divine or cosmic life. Through the symbolic homologization of various planes, human beings communicate with different dimensions of existence and transcend any one of them by uniting all of them. By reevaluating conventional existence within the symbolism of an essential paradigm, human beings extend themselves while at the same time become conscious of their deepest and innermost being. Symbols reveal the world as "a living totality"

when the symbolic "word" is understood through an immediate intuition.²⁷ Even for modern non-religious society, symbols perform a spiritual act in signifying a paradigmatic mode of being. Or, as Eliade says, "all that essential and indescribable part of man that is called *imagination* dwells in realms of symbolism and still lives upon archaic myths and theologies".²⁸

A key term for the transformative character which creates a cosmos is "homologization". Through religious symbols and rites various levels (planes, dimensions) of existence are unified and assimilated with each other.²⁹ The term "homologize", for Eliade, can mean in general to assimilate or to identify one meaning with another or one symbol with another. Our focus here, however, will be on his use of the term "homologization" to depict a basic technique for religious people to change their existential situations. Participation in a paradigmatic image symbolically integrates various dimensions of one's being,³⁰ for example, a person's particular personality and divine being. As pointed out before, a person's paradigmatic existential situation has a "trans-human structure";³¹ it is particular and cosmic simultaneously. The homologization process is one in which a person values his or her activity as an expression of divine (cosmic) action. For example, marriage is given a profound value through its symbolization as a divine marriage between Heaven and Earth.

How is it that symbols create a cosmos that includes different dimensions of experience? Eliade's answer is that some homologies "seem to force themselves on the mind spontaneously, as, for example, the homology between the eye and the sun".³² Other symbols seem to pull together different experiences that have common characteristics; for example, in the symbolism of sacrifice according to the ancient Indian text *Aitareya Brahmana*, the initiate and a new-born infant have common characteristics of newness and life which are consequent to being in a state of immobility and a dark enclosure.³³ Other homologies presuppose a more developed system of micro-macrocosmic correspondences. Even if a particular religious person is not conscious of all the correspondences, Eliade maintains that the structure is implied in a particular symbol. In all cases, however, the symbolism is a means of making clear a person's deepest identity including one's social and sacred status.³⁴ Homologization, thus, is a religious process that creates a self-consciousness of value by identification with eternal reality through a symbol. The symbols provide both the force and the particular form for integrating contradictory aspects of one's experience as well as of different levels of reality.

As pointed out above, both Eliade and Nishitani recognize that without a deeper awareness than is commonly experienced, a person will be caught in the overwhelming sense of transience and meaninglessness. However, for Nishitani, the key for attaining a fulfilling perspective is not the personal symbolic action that creates meaning by duplicating the sacred eternal pattern; rather, it is full

awareness of the manner of our fleeting existence. Full awareness requires a break-through in the field of consciousness so that one no longer is aware of a separate ego which is presumably to be fulfilled. To see the world in representations, or through a subject-object awareness, is only one — and a limited — way of being-in-existence. It is a self-centered way of being. Nishitani explains the peculiarity of this way of being by commenting, "Ego becomes a mode of being of the self closed up within itself. In other words, ego means self in a state of self-attachment".³⁵ To recognize that we participate in different modes of becoming by means of different modes of consciousness is a basic step in seeing the self within the horizon of "fundamental nothingness". Thus, his brief, but revealing, statement on the power of knowing is not surprising: "Knowing always contains a sort of transcendence over what is known".³⁶

While all of life is transient, and human beings encounter the reality of non-being at each step, it is only in religion, says Nishitani, that human beings reach a deepening of the perception of their transience so that they see nothingness manifest in their own being. In Zen this awareness is called "stepping back to come to the self".³⁷ Nishitani explains such a moment of conversion when he writes:

The fundamental conversion in life is occasioned by the opening of the horizon of nihility at the ground of life. It is nothing less than a conversion from the self-centered (or man-centered) mode of being, which always asks what use things have for us (or for man), to an attitude that asks for what *purpose* we ourselves (or man) exist.³⁸

This awareness must be more than an intellectual comprehension of reality; it has to be a total realization in spirit, soul and body.

The ontological character of such a transformation is made clear when Nishitani says that placing our self in the horizon of emptiness is "the reality realizing itself in our awareness".³⁹ He elaborates this notion by commenting:

The real perception of reality is our real mode of being itself and constitutes the realness that is the true reality of our existence. This perception of reality can constitute the realness of our existence because it comes into being in unison with the self-realization of reality itself.⁴⁰

In this context he proposes to answer the question of "What is Religion?" by "tracing the process of the real pursuit of true reality".⁴¹ Such a religious insight requires direct penetration into reality, which means that one has to let go of the assumption that the reality of what is perceived is composed of something other than what the perceiver is. The common reality in both, according to Nishitani, is that both of them are empty of any substantial essential being. No essence or anything else can stand ontologically independent of anything else.

To perceive emptiness requires converting one's consciousness to the place of emptiness, and thereby stopping the ego-identification with the particular forms of things as if they had independent essential being. It is to accept that while one is thinking, perceiving, and feeling, one recognizes the lack of selfhood in oneself and in all other things. To let go of either absolute subjectivity or absolute objectivity is to transcend the conventional standpoint. Therefore, in "emptiness" the human recognition of nonbeing is not a threat-producing anxiety of an ego-centered consciousness. Nor is it a threat to a person trying to transcend the limitations of a finite self.

In converting to the standpoint of emptiness there is a release from the assumption that the self-transcendence is a particular act or a series of acts to become something — as suggested in the mythic approach to self-transcendence. It is the recognition that one already is a particular entity while at the same time transcending that particularity. The shift to a process of knowing designated as the "standpoint of emptiness" is a shift from a mode of constructive consciousness that is fundamentally an "act of designation" — designating, or separating one thing from another — to the negation of substantiation and specification of one thing over against another. This is to know, for example, that the true selfness of fire is non-fire, or that the selfness of a tree is "no tree". What we perceive, then, is that the selfhood of any particular thing is known by its context, and that there is no self-identifying essence that separates it from all other things.

The key activity in this quest is the shift out of everyday consciousness to an intuitive identity with the nothingness that is at the root of the field of "being". In the everyday consciousness which objectifies our experience, we rarely are in contact with ourselves, only with images of ourselves. Similarly we are not in contact with things in the world, but our ego-based response to them. While all things, ego and feelings are relatively real, he continues, "they are not present in their true reality but only in the form of representation".⁴²

To shift out of everyday consciousness a person must experience "Great Doubt". This kind of deep probing of the empty-self is quite different from a common awareness of the transience and uncertainty of existence experienced by many people. Nishitani describes the uncovering of the nothingness as the foundation of oneself and all things as the "Great Doubt"; it is a self-awareness more fundamental than ego-consciousness:

Only when the self breaks through the field of consciousness, the field of *beings*, and stands on the ground of nihility is it able to achieve a subjectivity that can in no way be objectivized. This is the elemental realization that reaches deeper than self-consciousness.⁴³

Such an awareness of nothingness appears as inevitable when

a person probes deeply into the transience of life; the person becomes a mass of doubt. Here Nishitani is cautious to warn the reader that this realization of the nothingness at the foundation of both subjectivity and objectivity is not the total annihilation of them; it is, however, the death of the "ego" understood as the illusory, self-centered attachment to the self-image. This kind of self-awareness is a fundamental existential conversion, which Nishitani claims is "a radical transformation, a fundamental reorientation, in the human way of being and valuing".⁴⁴

In this brief comparison, we see that Eliade and Nishitani have significantly different understandings of the means for ultimate transformation. The means are reciprocally related to their understandings of the nature of ultimate reality. While both affirm that the universal reality is known in particular moments of consciousness, for Eliade the religious consciousness is a "rupture" of the profane world by the sacred world, and known through a repetition, a re-presentation, of the sacred in specific symbols. The use of sacred symbols make possible a "homologization" of the sacred and profane realms. In contrast, Nishitani calls for a shift away from an ego-consciousness, which defines the world through mental-emotional representations or images, to an awareness of "the field of emptiness". This is a direct penetration into the interrelation of all things or events, and requires a negation of ego-images and images of reality — even "emptiness" as an image or idea.

A Theoretical Framework that Includes "Mythic" and "Empty" Consciousness:

The historian/phenomenologist of religion needs to have a theoretical framework for understanding the nature of religion expressed by Mircea Eliade and Keiji Nishitani (as well as by other scholars who emphasize ethical obligations, or the awareness of an awesome Holy Presence).⁴⁵ Theoretical explanations that view religious life only as either (1) symbolic expressions of the sacred, or (2) emptying consciousness as the core religious awareness are one-sided. A theoretical framework is needed to allow each of these types of religious expression to manifest its own mode of structuring the religious intentionality, while providing a general definition of religion broad enough to include quite divergent or even conflicting concrete contents of religious life. Such a framework should, at the same time, be instructive about the similarities and differences of the *religious* character of the phenomena.

The theoretical framework suggested in this paper identifies the core intentionality of religious life as a comprehensive and deep-structured re-valuation of self-consciousness in response to "what-is", i.e. ultimate reality. The process of such valuation is experienced by religious advocates as "the means of ultimate transformation" because it grows out of a foundational human

experience that the elemental problematic of the human condition is overcome by a realization (implemented by specific behavior) of ultimate truth. The primary function of religious life, we suggest, is its valorizing, or valuing, power which is experienced by the practitioner as transforming the quality of the practitioner's life. The determining force of "ultimacy" in *ultimate* evaluations — in distinction to non-ultimate evaluations — is its all-encompassing character. This orders one's life at the most fundamental level, and thus has a perceived ontological significance. The all-encompassing character is itself a thrust toward a level of sensibility higher and deeper than any other, and it carries human intentionality to its most comprehensive level.

The ultimate valuing self-consciousness combines with various kinds of cultural forces in the expression of religious life. The process of ultimate valorization is a complex human act in which personal identity, social relationships and attitudes are reordered in light of a sense that one lives in an ultimate (infinite) context. While the ultimate character of religious life has been a part of the traditional concern in the history of religions, it has usually been expressed as a recognition of an essence;⁴⁶ here our concern is with the observable dynamics of realizing the ultimate dimension. In the act of giving value — or valorizing — human beings structure their sense of being-in-existence. The act of giving value is perceived as an ontological act because it determines the manner in which one recognizes and thereby "actualizes" one's existence. It establishes the selective process whereby a person determines not only what is important in existence, but what could be, and especially ought to be, in existence.

Where the level of self-consciousness directs attention to the ultimate context of existence, there will be a quest for optimum integration-interaction. The effort to integrate oneself and interact with one's social and physical environment necessitates defining (1) a sensed problematic of existence, (2) a sensitivity to an ultimate solution, and (3) a means — which can be human or trans-human or both — whereby the solution can be achieved. In defining these three elements of self-consciousness, assessments are made which are then reinforced by one's experiences. Various value-processes help to construct different contexts in which people perceive the nature of life and decide life-alternatives. These processes provide the strategies and structures by which one defines oneself and others.

As manifested in processes of ultimate valuation, then, the ultimate dimension is not conceived as an eternal essence, or a universal abstraction having one particular content. The "ultimate context" is a formal concept which indicates that this dynamics of valorization pertains to the most comprehensive human awareness. The religious importance of this dynamics is that religious advocates claim that it provides the source for the most important transformation in existence — a transformation that has been expressed as a change

from spiritual death to life, from radical ignorance to enlightenment, and from self-destructive behaviour to fully-functioning individuals.

If, as the above discussion indicates, the ultimate dimension of life is available to the investigator through a recognition of its power to achieve a perceived ontological transformation, it is crucial to be attentive to different mechanisms of value-formation found in various modes of awareness and behavior. Different processes formulate or structure value according to different modes of human awareness and behavior, such as symbolic meaning (e.g., Eliade), social moral responsibility, feelings of personality integration, or aesthetic attitudes (e.g., Nishitani). Different processes do not simply produce different forms or images of some common universal ultimate value. Rather, basic differences in religious options result from the dominant position of one process in a religious expression, say, a myth or sacrament, by comparison to the dominant role of another process in another expression, say, meditation on "emptiness" in Zen. The process of creating a religious community through myth and ritual provides a quite different valorization process (with its concentration on the value of symbolic meaning) by comparison to the process that achieves spiritual freedom through a spiritual discipline that seeks release from all mental-emotional fabrication of images or ideas, including myths and sacred words.

By exploring different processes through which the ultimate dimension of life is actualized in concrete forms, we can see that particular religious traditions are complexes of interacting processes organized with reference to one or a couple of dominant processes. "Religion" as a general term is a composite, or "umbrella", term for overlapping but also distinct ways of being (or becoming) religious. What is common to all these ways is their function described formally as a "process of ultimate transformation". One can refer to common general features of religious life: for example, it expresses an ultimate dimension; it seeks a solution to the fundamental problematic in life, its expression is by nature ambiguous (both exposing reality and hiding it in concrete forms); and it stands in the tension of manifesting simultaneously the immediate present and the infinite. However, these features are high-level abstractions which can be justified only by an appeal to concrete data that, we suggest, get their most important features of religious intentionality by their participation in one or another valuation process.

The analyses of religious life given by Eliade and Nishitani given above represent two different processes of ultimate valuation. In religious life dominated by a myth-ritual process, the ultimate dimension is a sacred (divine) act which exposes an eternal structure in human life. This act is said to have happened at the beginning of the world or at some special, sacred event in history, and is repeated periodically to re-establish order in an arbitrary and meaningless world. The basic problem is meaningless, which is rectified by the symbolic representation of divine reality, who gives form to chaotic

existence through divine acts. The symbolic process, as evidenced in the repetition of sacred stories or sacraments, gives *form* to what is otherwise chaos; it is through the sacred form that the person and the community identify themselves and "become alive". They feel alive because the Sacred, a valorizing sensitivity revealed by special words and acts, motivates them.

In the religious orientation which stresses emptying one's consciousness of ego-attachment — as explained by Nishitani — the ultimate dimension is recognized as already being within the individual, but hidden by illusions that people produce. The ultimate reality, whose non-substantiality is sometimes expressed by the term "emptiness", is realized in a state of awareness that releases one from experienced bondage to a presumed original world-formation, from feeling totally dependent on the sacred realm, and from living according to essential or natural laws of existence. The central problematic is not chaos or inherent impotence; it is illusion, defined as being aware of oneself and life predominantly in terms of conventional expectations which are ingendered by attachment to physical and social forms. It is a shift predominantly in aesthetic sensitivity.

In recognizing different processes of ultimate transformation we suggest that the past concern to define the study of religion primarily in terms of only one mode of valorization — symbolic meaning, extraordinary feelings, ethical obligations or mystical (aesthetic) awareness — is too narrow. To identify the religious function of all human data with only one or another of the valorization processes is misleading. To say, for example, that all religious life is understood when one perceives the meaning of sacred symbols is to reduce the dynamics of religion to a structure determined by rules of meaning.

More basic to religious life than meaning or a special state of consciousness per se is the urge for exposing the most comprehensive value through processes of valuation — each of which processes uses a mode of evaluative experience dominated by meaning, feeling, moral responsibility or states of consciousness. In exposing the most comprehensive value, people are participating in what they perceive as an ontological transformation since this is an experience and expression of what-is, and it is a release from the conditions of existence as limiting and destructive forces. A theoretical framework that recognizes different processes of ultimate valuation with the self-conscious structuring of "what-is" is able to recognize both the claim of ultimacy and the particular valuational structures that form quite different religious claims about the nature of ultimate reality, the problematic human condition and the means to attain the fullest well-being possible (salvation, liberation).

Notes

1. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by W.R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1959), p.210.
2. "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism" found in M. Eliade and J.M. Kitagawa, eds, *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1959), p.95.
3. *Religion and Nothingness*, trans by J. Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p.15.
4. *Ibid.*, p.18.
5. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by R. Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward), p.30.
6. p.187; see also *Patterns*, pp.xii, 1 and 12.
7. M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. by P. Mairet (New York: Harper, 1960), p.116.
8. M. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. by W.R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958) Bollingen Series LVI, pp.99-100.
9. *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp.14-15. See also pp.180-81.
10. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, pp.54-55.
11. Eliade says that the paradoxical aim is "the unification of two contrary principles" in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, p.150. The importance of the dialectic between the sacred and profane levels of being in Eliade's writing has been pointed out by several scholars. See, for example, T. Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), especially chapters 1 and 4; D. Rasmussen, "Mircea Eliade: Structural hermeneutics and Philosophy", *Philosophy Today*, Vol.12, No.2/4 (Summer 1968), pp.138-47; and D. Allen, "Mircea Eliade's Phenomenological Analyses of Religious Experience", *Journal of Religion*, Vol.52 (1972), pp.170-86.
12. "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism", p.101.
13. *Religion and Nothingness*, p.102.
14. *Ibid.*, p.146.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.124-5.
16. *Ibid.*, pp.123.
17. See K. Nishitani, "Nihility and Sunyata", Chapter 3 of *Religion and Nothingness*. For another useful examination of negativity in certain Buddhist and Western formulations see Masao Abe, "Non-being and Mu: the Metaphysical Nature of Negativity in the East and West", *Religious Studies* 11:2 (June 1975), pp.181-192.
18. *Religion and Nothingness*, p.149.
19. *Ibid.*, p.150.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*

22. *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.181.
23. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p.455.
24. *Yoga*, p.100.
25. *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp.209-210.
26. *Ibid.*, p.211; see also *Yoga*, pp.167 and 212.
27. "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism", p.98.
28. *Images and Symbols*, p.19.
29. The term homologization is used also to express cultural assimilation of foreign symbols, practices and rites, e.g., *Yoga*, pp.108, 109, 112, 113, 143; however, we will restrict our discussion to the assimilation of different symbolic meanings.
30. See *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.197; and *Yoga*, pp.113, 120.
31. *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.166.
32. *Ibid.*, p.168.
33. See *Yoga*, p.110.
34. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p.451.
35. *Religion and Nothingness*, p.14.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, p.4.
38. *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.
39. *Ibid.*, p.5.
40. *Ibid.*, p.6.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, p.10.
43. *Ibid.*, pp.16-17.
44. *Ibid.*, p.55.
45. For other structures of religious awareness and behavior, see F.J. Streng, "Three approaches to Authentic Existence: Christian, Confucian and Buddhist", *Philosophy East and West* XXXII/2 (1982), pp.15-44; and F.J. Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, 3rd ed., (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1985).
46. J. Wach, R. Otto, and M. Eliade go beyond a pure typology and assume that religion expresses a universal religious essence. See also R. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

**Missiology, Methodology and
the Study of New Religious Movements**

Garry W. Trompf

Missiology is a legitimate field of enquiry, because unless time is spent in reflecting on the nature and effects of missions, and indeed on whether the missionary influence of Christianity is to be welcomed, one cannot understand a good part of modern world history (and a part which is to do with large masses of people, not just a coterie of headline-rating policy-makers).¹ Do missiologists have a near-consensus methodology, however, and is it important to establish their activity as a scientific discipline? This paper intends to go some way towards answering these questions, yet to do so only by focussing on a manageable issue. I have chosen as a springboard for discussion the typology of (socio-)religious movements within the history of Christianity, because the problem of describing 'new developments' which have emerged within or on the fringes of the Christian fold (since New Testament times) nicely illustrates the tension between (a) the use of a vocabulary and interpretation which suits the needs of the believing community, and (b) the adoption of verbiage and analytical categories to satisfy the requirements of science. A big conundrum to be faced, after all, is whether missiology is a discipline which has been expected, if not designed from the start specifically to serve the *ekklesia katholika* and not to rate among the special 'social sciences' (so-called). A consideration of the terminologies both missiologists and social scientists can employ to analyze religious movements will help unravel this puzzle, which has everything to do with the issue of missiology's methodological bases.

It is strange to imagine that the terminologies we use to describe social movements have an 'archaeology', and that we have to dig carefully if we are to gauge the amounts of prejudice or distortion they carry as remainders/reminders from the past.² English words and phrases we use to describe religious movements and tendencies in particular all seem to come naturally out of a 'contemporary usage' — out of the twentieth century vocabularies which are yours and mine — but in fact each has some intriguing background history, in many cases reaching beyond the centuries in which the English language now familiar to us took its shape. If all that an 'archaeological' investigation would reveal, of course, was that words change their