

State of the Art

Towards Classifying Religious Phenomena

Robert B Crotty
University of South Australia

One of the persistent problems in Religion Studies is the classification and organisation of religious phenomena.

Phenomena such as myth, ritual, belief statements, sacred persons, sacred space and so on have been variously organised in so far as religion scholars have organised them according to a phenomenological method. This method sees its task as reconstructing the meaningful organisation of experience, thereby understanding the religious structure (Waardenburg, 1978). My proposal is therefore to establish a broad but adequate descriptive analysis of religion within the context of human culture and to classify religious phenomena within such an analysis.

Human Culture

Culture means the total shared way of life of any given human group. It is made up substantially by that group's modes of thinking, acting, feeling, valuing. Cultural expression takes the form of artefacts, clothing, technology and such non-material output as language, law, re-

ligion, art. Clifford Geertz describes culture as

An historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life. (1973:89)

Culture however is not something static. It is always growing and developing. In order to clarify this, it is helpful to introduce the concept of tradition (Szacki, 1969). Tradition can have several meanings, but its essential meaning is the attitude of any given generation to its own past, which attitude may amount to either approval or disapproval of its cultural heritage. The current generation either identifies with its predecessors, the 'ancestors', from whom the heritage is deemed to have derived, or dissociates itself from them. The present generation of a given group can select a certain aspect of the cultural heritage and evaluate it, reform it or adjust it to its present needs. In the hands of each group, therefore, culture becomes malleable. A group inherits

a way of life and then adapts that way of life to its present circumstances.

Culture is human, dependent on human consciousness and memory. Without human beings there could be no such thing as culture. Conversely, humans are essentially incomplete animals. They complete themselves through culture and, indeed, through particular forms of culture.

Culture consists basically of a system of symbols. A symbol can be anything - object, colour, sound, smell, style of clothing, story and so forth. The meanings of symbols are derived from and determined by those who use them, the human beings of the group. Symbols do not speak for themselves. The colour red means what the group decides the colour red to mean.

What does culture offer to the human being? The human individual has a need for order. To make sense of the universe, self and others the individual within the group requires a direction, a purpose, an ability to perceive meaning. All cultural activity takes place in the context of this type of 'world'-construction.

In order to survive, both individuals and the group must adapt to the present cultural heritage. Once the cultural heritage has been accepted, the individual may choose to adapt it. However, the group acts to retain its cultural heritage with the same tenacity as the individual displays in maintaining personal, physical life. Hence there is always an element of continuity about culture.

In general, it is the universal need for order, accompanied by the universal capacities generated by human biology, psychology and geophysical context that give rise to so-called 'cultural universals'.

Kluckhohn writes:

Every society's patterns for living must provide approved and sanctioned ways for deal-

ing with such universal circumstances as the existence of two sexes; the helplessness of infants, the need for satisfaction of the elementary biological requirements such as food, warmth, and sex; the presence of individuals of different ages and of differing physical and other capacities. The basic similarities in human biology the world over are vastly more massive than the variations. Equally, there are certain necessities in social life for this kind of animal, regardless of where that life is carried on or in what culture. Cooperation to acquire subsistence and for other ends requires a certain minimum of reciprocal behaviour, of a standard system of communication, and, indeed, of mutually accepted values. The facts of human biology and of human gregariousness supply, therefore, certain invariant points of reference from which cross-cultural comparisons can start without begging questions that are themselves at issue. (1973: 520-521)

The capacities of the human group are activated and directed by a culture and this culture itself can be affected substantially by subsequent human experience and non-recurrent historical events. Tradition will shape and reshape the cultural totality in response to ongoing human need. Diversity will remain with universalism.

Religious Culture

Religion is a cultural pattern or a cultural system. Like all culture it is, at base, a meaning-seeking activity. Like all culture it consists of a system of symbols. The symbols can be tabulated by the observer, principally myths and rituals but including objects, natural phenomena, clothing and so forth. For those observers who study a religion from outside, the symbols must be learned. What for example is the meaning of a serpent? For the Canaanite religion it was the symbol of fertility, for ancient Greek religion it was

the symbol of healing, for ancient Hebrew religion it was the symbol of evil, for some Aboriginal Australian religions it is the symbol of creativity. The symbol must be learned and, indeed, the whole gamut of symbolism must be learned.

But religion, seen as religious culture, must be appreciated in its vital function of attaining order. We have seen that culture, in general, bestows order and human beings depend upon their symbol systems for viability. Should there be the remotest indication that these symbol systems might not prove able to cope with human experience, for example the experience of death and dying, then anxiety is aroused. Human beings, accordingly, find themselves pitted against chaos, ultimate lack of interpretability. Culture, everyday culture, allows human beings to bestow order on human experience, to explain historical events, to solve problems of identity and destiny. However there are certain points where chaos could reassert itself. Insuperable ignorance, the experience of suffering and the problem of evil with the concomitant problem of cosmic injustice can threaten an ordered world and threaten the interpretability of human experience. At this point there is need for religious culture. The religious person construes the world and self in terms of an ultimate focus that will provide the subject with ultimate order. Ultimacy is a focus, a symbol of order and meaning. It is not a thing in itself. The religious cultural system provides values that deeply affect human conduct and which fuse with and reciprocally reinforce an ultimate world view, a basic conception of the meaning of the universe and the human condition. Religion directs the human's life-direction towards a cosmic order. It is more precisely within the process of recitation of myth and performance

of ritual, the core symbols of religion, that the fusion of ultimate focus or Ultimacy and life-direction is effected.

In poststructuralist terminology there is a range of religious discourses and an individual can actively select religious positionings. However, it needs to be stressed that the religious individual is motivated by a universal capacity for ultimate ordering and ultimate meaning. An intense emotional stress is generated within all humans as they perceive the need to bridge the gap between an existential now, the actual social and political human condition, and an ideal future state. The universal capacity is humanly generated; its fulfilment is culturally effected.

This comparison between religious culture and what could be called everyday or secular culture indicates the complexity of social life. In the first instance human beings have access to a variable number of cultural systems. Perhaps they may live their life within the one culture, being aware of that single possibility for human order. In the one group, religious and secular cultures could overlap or perhaps individuals have access to several and so they can choose. The result may be a choice of one with rejection of others, a dual system in which the individual oscillates from one to another or a hybrid system in which the individual selects elements from two or more to form a personal cultural system. The complexity becomes more obvious when there is access to many religious systems. In western society the secular culture has become disengaged from the religious culture. Each has its separate existence, with lines of demarcation more or less firmly laid down. A variety of forms of interaction is therefore possible. Awareness of a variety of religious cultures at once raises the issue of relativism (Hick, 1981, 1983; Trigg,

1983). Obviously there are differences and disagreements between rival religious symbol systems. There are competing discourses. Disagreements can relate to belief symbols and to practical symbols. Some of the disagreements can be relegated to historical differences of opinion: Jesus died on the cross (Christianity) as against Jesus did not actually die on the cross (Islam). Historical evidence could reconcile such disagreements but they are not of vital importance in comparing rival cultural systems. Other disagreements, on the surface more substantial, are really quasi-historical: reincarnation is possible (Hinduism); reincarnation is impossible (Christianity). Once again the disagreement does not touch the essence of the symbol system.

Where religious cultures do differ substantially is in their ways of symbolising the ultimate focus and relating to it. The symbolic conception of the focus and its mode of relationship to the human subject would have been determined by unique life experiences and unique historical events. The ultimate focus could thereby take the variant symbolic forms of Allah, Nirvana, the Dreaming.

At this point a significant distinction needs to be drawn between Ultimacy in itself and Ultimacy as humanly constructed within a particular religious group. Ultimacy in itself is the perceived ultimate order of things. It is not an object, not a divine noumenal reality. It is neither capable of validation nor disproof since it is outside of the human order, becoming part of human awareness in terms of sets of concepts which structure cognitive consciousness. Ultimacy as humanly constructed will be as unique as the experience of the founding group and the unique experiences of others who, by

means of tradition, will hand on the religious culture.

Religion devolves from the experience generated by confrontation with the religious cultural discourse (in a poststructuralist sense). In point of fact there are many discourses and individuals are free, at least potentially, to select at will. I will now concentrate on the religious experience and on the predictability of choice whereby individuals tend to choose from the discourses along predetermined lines.

Mediation

The religious experience means overcoming a fundamental alienation between human flux and ultimate ordering. Humans have a cultural ability to bridge that gap. When the bridging occurs to an individual's satisfaction the experience is profound and has been variously described. Some recent attempts at definition have been *soteria* and soteriological effectiveness. I prefer a more neutral, less theological term, mediation.

Why are choices from the discourse so predictable that individuals often end up adhering to one or other of the world religions (within allowable limits of deviation) or a religious surrogate (Marxism, Humanism, Existentialism etc.)? The answer is that the discourse not only presents the possibilities, it also imposes an authority, a requirement to choose in this way and not that. That authority may be associated with other cultural features such as 'race', local environment, schooling etc. Individuals are confronted in the discourse with a ready-made discourse pattern which is given plausibility by a 'founder', who has authority in the group. The choice comes as a package, ready made and authorised.

Sometimes this 'founder' is a person, whether historical or legendary, and sometimes the 'founder' is a myth/ritual process. In reality there is little difference since the founder-person takes on a mythical form anyway. The 'founder' does not establish a religious culture *ab initio* but adapts an existing religion, since while religions may have birthdates, religion has none that is known. It may be that humankind and religion are coeval.

Let us take the example of Islam and its founder, Muhammad. Muhammad did not come from a neutral, non-religious background. The religious cultural discourse to which he had access included elements of tribal religion, Judaism and Christianity, in what proportion is a matter of conjecture. At a certain moment he underwent a profound religious experience. From infinite, possible permutations he made an individual and new choice. He fashioned a new, ultimate focus. He at once experienced the resolution of his own alienation. While his personal situation was stabilised the question was open as to whether that experience could be replicated. If not, then this individual religious culture would be aborted.

I would now propose that the question of replication is the most vital element in the establishment of a religion. Can the founding experience have a successor? Can the founding mediation be experienced by others? 'Founders' are like artists. Many people have profound experiences of life, nature, human relationships. These experiences are usually incommensurable and incommunicable. The artist is that gifted individual who is able to use a medium - whether it be words, paint, musical sound - to communicate an original experience. The religious 'founder' is the person (or group) who has undergone mediation and is able

to establish a mediatorial system which can convey the original religious experience. Sometimes the person or group disappear and the experience is thereafter conveyed by a myth and ritual process or a text. At other times the individual or individuals remain personally identified with the system.

The mediatorial system is the organising framework of religious phenomena. Its mechanism produces a religious experience, considered to be comparable to an original mediation experience. The same mechanism also establishes a social structure, a group of like-minded people who share the experience and are stratified accordingly. The format of the mechanism is structured by a myth and ritual process. The entire system and the concomitant group are safeguarded by a code of ethical practice, a catalogue of ordered beliefs and, in literate societies, a text.

The Mediatorial System

All religious cultures offer the possibility of some form of contact with an ultimate focus. Contact is primarily effected in the ambient of myth and ritual, the purpose of which is to establish a privileged (although not exclusive) area where such interaction can effectively take place. There is the need for sacred expertise, derived from tradition or in other ways, whereby the symbol of the ultimate focus can be activated in the myth and ritual context. In this way a religious community can experience a 'theophany', a replication of the primordial mediation experience, in legitimately organised ritual. A theophany indicates that the mediatorial system is functional. Mythical descriptions of the primordial theophany of a particular religious culture may include the mediatory intervention of a cen-

tral figure - a founder, a culture hero, Ur-mensch, the First King. There will be a corresponding construct, in the social structure of an historically identifiable community, designating sacral personages who continue the role of those figures. It is here that sacral kingship, priesthood and prophetism find their niche.

The two main constants in the religious construct are the symbolised ultimate focus, as presented particularly in and through the principal myth and ritual, and the presently existing human community. The human community is stratified, in its religious institutions and societal structures, according to the posture it adopts before the ultimate focus. That posture presumes that mediation has been effected. Differentiation of such structures is vindicated and perpetuated by sacred tradition and sacred ritual, but these are open to reconstruction should the basic posture change. The aim of these religious communities is to achieve contact with the ultimate focus. There is a need to make contact and ensure its continuance.

Depending upon the community's symbolic forms and its resultant view of the world order, the gulf between the ultimate order of things and the human order will be more or less wide. From the side of divinity the gulf can be partially bridged by symbolic hypostatisations, intermediary foci, such as divine messengers, and from the side of the human community by sacred personages who, de-

pending upon the social structure of the community, can fulfil either a personal or communal role (within a fixed office), such as a divine king or a *bodhisattva*.

In short, a religious community takes up a particular stance or posture before a symbol which it regards as the manifestation of Ultimacy. In so doing, it aims to achieve mediation and contact from which it will derive ultimate meaning.

The history of religions however gives instances not only of this indirect mediatorial system but of another which could be termed an 'immediate system' which is more or less identifiable with what most scholars would term the mystical religious tradition. Mysticism describes a consistent pattern of immediate union with the ultimate focus without recourse to an intervening system or institution. It is quite possible, however, for mysticism to become institutionalised.

An analysis of the symbols of various religious groups demonstrates a fundamental distinction. There are two possible systems whereby a religious group can achieve ultimate order. Various terms have been used by those who have perceived the distinction. So, Smart refers to numinous and the mystical structures (1968); King distinguishes between symbols of relationship and symbols of identification (1954). I prefer the indirect-mediatorial system and the immediate-mediatorial system. Comparing the two models of religious culture we have the following:

Indirect-mediatorial system

Ultimate focus



Intermediary symbolic foci

(*Theophany*)

Human mediators

Community ↑

Immediate-mediatorial system

Ultimate focus



Community

There are sufficient examples to show that one model can be commuted into the other. Each stands at the end-point of a continuum. Charismatic and millenarian movements within established indirect-mediatorial religions can be transformed into immediate-mediatorial systems. The evolution of Mahayana Buddhism from more ancient Buddhist sects, is an example of the reverse process. The immediate-mediatorial system is simply a short-circuited version of the indirect-mediatorial system. When, for some reason, confidence is lost in the ability of an indirect-mediatorial system, where the established focus is on the way to becoming a *deus otiosus* or functionless focus, it is possible for the short-circuiting to take place. But the community associated with an immediate-mediatorial system is less stable and structured than its counterpart and there will always be the tendency for the reforming of an indirect-mediatorial system. What sociologists have designated as a "church" are stable forms of one or other system, supported by a plausibility structure. Transition states of the two systems, lacking plausibility structures, are what have been described as "sects", "cults" and so on.

In the indirect-mediatorial model the ultimate focus is symbolised as a Supreme Being - an Allah, an "abba, a Zeus - and there is, from both sides, the human and the divine, a mediation set up so that the community can come into contact with this symbol. In the immediate-mediatorial model the ultimate focus is less clearly defined and impersonal. An immediate contact is made between individuals and an undifferentiated perception of the ultimate focus.

In confrontation with experience, individuals find that their relationship with being is both immanent and transcendent.

They are not the world and yet they are part of the world. The human mind structure can be determined by the preponderance of one or other of these two fundamental aspects of experience. To each of them there corresponds a certain type of religion, a configuration of religious culture. When the experiential relationship is of a transcendent type then the ultimate focus assumes the symbolic form of a Supreme Being, a symbol of totality, differentiated from the human and natural orders. When the immanent emphasis is dominant then there will be a tendency towards the immediate type, with no clear distinction between natural and supernatural, human and non-human. Human beings will be confronted with one or other emphasis within a particular religious cultural discourse.

Classification and Organisation

It is against the backdrop of the two mediatorial systems that I find the phenomena of religion satisfactorily classified and organised. Religious experience must stand out as the dominant phenomenon in any religious culture. It is central, a replication of the founding "event". Its replication is vital for the perseverance of the religious system and the replication is achieved by the recitation of myth (and other supporting sacred stories) and the performance of ritual. In symbiotic relationship myth and ritual bring the past into the present. This coalescence of myth, ritual and experience is explicated in belief statements, summarised for believers in symbols and protected in literate societies by sacred texts.

However, the religious phenomenon does not exist apart from a human community. The community is structured in

so far as it takes up a posture vis-à-vis its ultimate focus. This social structure thereby achieves a religious status and an ethical mode of behaviour required within the community also achieves a religious status.

In conclusion, religious experience retains its central and unique role in any particular religious system. The other religious phenomena, while retaining their individuality and uniqueness, can be organised and described comparatively against the broad configuration of the particular mediatorial system to which they pertain.

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Dissertation Abstract

Living in the Margins: the Interpretive Edge of Intentional Christian Communities (a Hermeneutical and Educational Exploration)

Terry Veling
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This work engages a conversation between hermeneutics, theology and the educational praxis of intentional Christian communities. Its interest lies with small communities which are located in Western, middle-class cultures and, among these, with communities that have adapted a critical distance from 'mainstream' church life.

I explore three hermeneutical 'approaches' and the insights they bring to the intentional life of intentional communities. *Dialogical hermeneutics* highlights

the operative force of tradition in our lives, such that tradition always effectively shapes who we are even as we shape the ways tradition is becoming. It leans toward a 'trusting hermeneutic' for the sake of a tradition's ongoing life and conversation in the course of history, fearing that too much suspicion would kill the conversation. *Exilic hermeneutics* highlights the need to take into account the distortions, power structures and inherent ambiguities present in any historical tradition. It leans toward a 'suspicious herme-

neutic' for the sake of those voices that have been suppressed, silenced or excluded, fearing that too much trust would lead us unwittingly into structures of power and domination.

These two interpretive postures reflect a central tension experienced by members of marginal communities. Such experience lies suspended 'on the edge of a tradition' in which marginal communities feel both the need to belong and the impossibility of belonging. I propose that this state of suspension between trust (belonging) and suspicion (non-belonging) can be redeemed as a creative juncture for hermeneutical engagement. *Marginal her-*

meneutics is what happens when the twin events of belonging and non-belonging, faith and doubt, the written and the unwritten, presence and absence - when these 'unresolved two' burst into life in the thin, interpretive edge that both joins and separates them. It merges the language of trust with the language of suspicion, and leans transformatively into the language of possibility, of new writing in the margins. The interpretive space of 'the margins' is a creative, productive, vital site of receptive and critical engagement with a tradition's enriching and distorting effects, and with our own contemporary questions and concerns.