

Psychology, Philosophy, Theology, Epistemology—Some Reflections

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In the following paper I shall stress some points of view that are both trivial and controversial: the implication of the researcher's own world-view for his research; the relationship between theory and *empiri*.

In point of fact, general questions concerning the formation of knowledge, its epistemological propositions and social functions, so much discussed in the humanities and social sciences, have had little impact upon the history of religion, where the theoretical debate seems to remain more specific, more bound to the discipline (or to different disciplines), and where names like Thomas Kuhn, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault etc. are seldom adduced (see for instance *Science of Religion*, ed. Honko 1979). In the polarization between "positivists" vindicating the notion that theories are abstracted from "reality" and "relativists" maintaining that "reality" is selected and formed according to theories, most historians of religion belong in practice to the first camp, and many belong so exclusively that they do not even acknowledge the problem itself.

The historian of religion is not concerned with metaphysics, but with faith in its human and cultural manifestations. The researcher' own atheistic or religious commitment has no bearing on the result of the investigation, *nota bene* provided that he adheres to strictly empirical principles. Is this *credo* not only a necessary ideal, but also a true description of research? Is an uncomplicated belief in its possible realisation a strength or a hindrance in the pursuit of a relative objectivity that might be attainable outside the predictions of natural sciences? Does the historian of religion have no metaphysical involvement in the material under investigation? Is it without interest whether he is a materialist or a devout religious person, whether he is a believer or non-believer in the physical reality of the gods and spirits he describes, and in the actual efficacy of the sacrifices and other rituals in which he partakes?

Let us take some examples. In his well-known books on the psychology of religion Prof. Hjalmar Sundén tells us that the “experiences” of spirits, gods or God are formed and provoked by frames of reference acquired earlier and suddenly actualized in certain moments of “rôle identification”. From the standpoint of common sense, this means that gods and spirits are not real, that they do not have the same ontological status as let us say “experienced”/“perceived” chairs and tables, that they do not exist outside the experiencing subject, but in his inner vision. “In other words just fantasy, imagination, illusion,” some university students exclaim negatively when they meet this part of their curriculum, thinking that the originator of the theory is an atheist, who wants to explain away religion. From personal acquaintance I know that Prof. Sundén regards himself as a genuine Lutheran, and I assume that the explanation is not to be found in a schizophrenic contradiction between faith and science, but in liberal Protestant theology.

In the Kantian perspective (Schleiermacher, Söderblom, Otto, Heiler, Tillich etc.) all human reality is subjective, an “inner vision”; time and space, unity and plurality, cause and effect are *Anschauungen* and “categories” within the experiencing subject, through the principles of which the subject organizes his world; the ultimate reality, the Being itself, God, is not of the world of phenomena (*Erscheinungen*) and cannot thus be understood in the forms of the human world; *cognitions/perceptions* (*Erscheinungen/Gegenstände/Phenomena*) have no intelligible extra-mental object (noumenon/*Ding an sich*), since neither unity-plurality, nor extension, nor duration would be applicable; accordingly, God does not reveal himself through *perception*, but through *emotion*, by the “feeling of absolute dependence”, through “the state of being ultimately concerned”. On the pure philosophical level it would be a pseudo-question to ask if certain phenomena are real or not.

Independent of Sundén’s actual philosophical conviction, it is obvious that contradictory assumptions about reality contrasting the naïve realism of positivism with idealism, may by their consequences easily blend together in studies on religion. It might also be added that Sundén follows a normal, traditional strategy of academic writing, whereby—as far as I know—he never states the philosophical premise of his psychology of religion.

If one regards Sundén’s ‘rôle psychology’ as an exposition of both Protestant theology and general psychology, it is tempting to contrast it with a counterpart within the Roman Catholic literature on the psychology of religion, Jean Lhermitte’s *Vrais et faux possédés* (1956). The author was a neurologist, a member of the French Académie Nationale de Médecine

and associated with the Carmelite Order and the book is provided with the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* stamps. The title is significant; *vrais* and *faux* are to be understood literally, as the differentiation between true possession caused by real demons, and false possession caused by mental illness, in which imagined demons are part of the pathological picture. Psychiatric and neurological knowledge is used to distinguish between transcendental and psychopathological etiology, as true possession is thought of as a case for the exorcist of the church and false possession as a case for the psychiatrist of the mental hospital. To the unbeliever it is an extraordinary diagnostic procedure which, epistemologically, might be compared with some Protestant attempts to differentiate between sick and sound religion.

The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has had its philosophical foundation in St. Thomas Aquinas since the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII in 1879. In principle this still holds true, but in practice this is more evident of the period before 1965. As the philosophical concepts of the discipline of history of religion became established through formative debates and polemics in the first half of this century, I here deliberately identify Roman Catholic philosophy and theology with its official state previous to Vatican II.

In their basic assumptions about reality liberal Protestantism and Catholicism are contrary to each other. In the Aristotelian-Thomistic system "ontology" precedes "gnoseology" and is the teaching of "that which exists", the being as being (*ens secundum quod ens*). The forms are not, as in Kantian philosophy, immanent in the subject, but in the objects of the "outside" world; they are the fundamental constituents of all existing "things" (*entia, substantia*); in the act of knowing the human subject "abstracts" the "form" of the being and receives an "analogous" and intelligible "image" of the extra-mental object, obtains, in short a conceptual knowledge of its "essence".

The transitoriness of the material world—and the possibility of acquiring lasting knowledge in a world of becoming—is as in Aristotle understood by the two corresponding pairs of concepts, expressing the static and the dynamic aspect of reality: *form* and *matter*, *potency* and *act*. All change (of forms, "transformation") is the transition from potency to act. Matter is the potentiality of form (to change) and form is the actuality of matter.

With an additional closely corresponding pair of concepts Aquinas altered Aristotle's mechanistic system (*prima causa*, the unmoved mover) into a theocentric system: the concepts of *essence* and *existence*. Essence is *what* a being is, existence that it is. Existence is not one quality among others, but, Aquinas says, a miracle. Everything that comes into existence does so by immediate act of God. God is *esse* (i.e. *actus purus*; essence and

existence are not twofold in God), all other beings have *esse*. He bestows existence at every transition from potentiality to actuality, creates his creation at each moment of time, is both transcendent and immanent, beginner and upholder of everything existent.

The spiritual world of angels, demons (fallen angels) and departed souls, the "pure intelligences", the "spiritual substances", differ from other beings, in that they are not *composita*, as they have form but not matter.

The Thomistic world is rational and 'real' and the human being can through the intellect meet the grace of revelation.

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Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* and Berkeley's *esse est percipi*, or the scholastic *scio, aliquid esse*? What comes first, emotion or cognition? The awareness of the very stream of thinking, or the object of the thinking process? Is it possible to think, without thinking something? Are the objects of the "outer" world first "conceptualized" and the ego subsequently "realized" as a unity in its structural relationship to the objects, or the opposite? Do emotions produce objects, or do objects provoke emotions? Is the human world real or not?

What comes first, *The Divinity* or *The Holy*? The religious feeling, or the object of the feeling? The substance or the accident in scholastic language? The inner or the outer world? Kant or Thomas?

These questions can never be answered. But philosophies and theologies provide the answer. The Protestant-Kantian, subjective, idealistic and emotionalistic in one way, and the Roman Catholic-Thomistic, 'realistic' ('objective') and intellectualistic in the other.

Thus Nathan Söderblom, in his famous ERE-article:

Holiness is the great word in religion; it is even more essential than the notion of God. Real religion may exist without a definite conception of divinity, but there is no real religion without a distinction between holy and profane. The attaching of undue importance to the conception of divinity has often led to the exclusion from the realm of religion of (1) phenomena at the primitive stage, as being magic, although they are characteristically religious; and of (2) Buddhism and other higher forms of salvation and piety which do not involve a belief in God. The only sure test is holiness. From the first, holiness constitutes the most essential feature of the divine in a religious sense. The idea of God without the conception of the holy is not religion (F. Schleiermacher, *Reden über die Religion*, Berlin 1799). Not the mere existence of the divinity, but its *mana*, its power, its holiness, is what religion involves. This is nowhere more obvious than in India, where the men of religion, through their art of acquiring holy power, became dangerous rivals of the gods, who, in order to maintain something of their religious authority, were obliged to adopt ascetic holiness themselves (*śat. Brāhm.* ii. 2. 4, ix. 1. 6, 1 ff.). The definition of piety (subjective religion) runs thus: 'Religious is the man to whom something is holy.' The holy inspires awe (religio).

The original idea of holiness seems to have been somewhat indeterminate, and applied to individual things and beings [...] (Söderblom 1913, 731).

Söderblom, with his sensitivity to his time, his flexibility of mind and his conspicuous learning, is of course to be seen as one of the founders of the “modern” attitude towards religions within liberal Protestantism. With the same right he may be viewed as the logical outcome of the Schleiermachiean theology, as a representative of the new philosophy of mission (the ‘fulfilment doctrine’; Sharpe 1975, 163), as the given answer to the inherent atheism of the evolutionary anthropology of religion, as the antipode of the ‘realistic’ apologetical endeavours within the Roman Catholic history of religion (Anthropos), as well as the defence of the church in an age of “science” and secularism, a defence rather by harmonizing inclusivity than antagonistic exclusivity, possible through the pure subjective position.

What Söderblom offers is not an empirical insight but a religious value to the history of religion.

The same is even more obvious in Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, published in 1917.¹ The book is written like a poetical grammar of the Irrational with strongly literary, one might even say liturgical qualities. It has been widely read (44th edition 1979) and has more than most other books served as a manual of faith for intellectual Protestants. Its well-known main categories are in themselves very emotionally charged and suggestive: *das Rationale als Prädikat an einem Irrationalen*, *das ‘Kreaturgefühl’ als Reflex des numinosen Objekt-gefühls im Selbstgefühl*, *das Numinose*, *das ‘Ganz andere’*, *das mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, *horrendum*, *energicum*, *mirum*, *augustum* etc.

Religion, according to Otto, had its beginning in *awe* (Scheu), in the numinous *Urschauer*, the *stupor*, the feeling of ‘*Gänsehaut*’ and ‘*völlig auf den Mund geschlagen sein*’. This original feeling has no connection whatsoever with morality. It is a quality *sui generis*, irreducible to anything else and can only be described by analogy. Through the incitements and stimuli of the “outer objects” the awe-experience externalizes itself into the outside world, where “something” is permeated with the numinous feeling of being “wholly other”, and in the next stage is rationalized into concepts of souls, ghosts, spirits, gods. The ‘creature-feeling’, again, is an emotion, which like a shadow follows the awe-experience, projects into the numinous object and reflects to the subject, now as a consciousness of the numen and *eine Abwertung des Subjekts hinsichtlich seiner selbst*.

¹ Otto had already 1909 developed his basic views in *Kantisch-Fries’sche Religionsphilosophie und ihre Anwendung auf die Theolo-*

gie. For the connection between Söderblom and Otto see Edsman 1966, 24–25.

This kind of psychology and history of religion was unacceptable to Catholics of traditional or official persuasion. The philosopher and psychologist Joseph Geysler, a well-known expert on Aristotle and the medieval philosophy, published in 1921 a booklet *Intellekt oder Gemüt?*, where he analyzed Otto's theory of knowledge from an Aristotelian point of view and very lucidly demonstrated that Otto's emotionalist psychology is far from the common sense position of general psychology. For instance:

Ein Gefühl kann gewiss auf ein „Objekt ausser uns“ gerichtet sein. Dass aber dieses Objekt „ausser uns“ existiere, das können wir vorstellen und denken, jedoch nicht „fühlen“ (Geysler 1977, 312).

Indirectly, Geysler's critique elucidates the dilemma of all idealism: the difficulty of being consistent. Otto applies the Kantian categories to the reality (contents) of religion, but not to the reality of "ordinary life". They refer to the religious conceptions and concepts which grew out of emotion, not to the "things" of the natural world. It is religion that is an "inner world", of which it is possible to gain knowledge only by experience and without perceiving in the ordinary meaning of the word.

Geysler cannot agree. To him religious reality exists outside the human being and the way to religious knowledge is in principle the same as all other acts of knowing:

Kein Gefühl entsteht in uns ohne eine Ursache. In dieser Ursache hat es darum auch sein intentionales Objekt. Aber diese Ursache selbst kommt uns oft nur dumpf zum Bewusstsein und tritt daher hinter der Deutlichkeit der erlebten Gefühlsreaktion völlig zurück. Zugleich sucht sich unser Ich aber doch in der Regel ein ihm einigermaßen deutliches Objekt für seinen Gefühlszustand. In Erfüllung dieses Triebes findet es dann dieses Objekt nicht selten in bestimmten schon von ihm besessenen Wahrnehmungen, Vorstellungen oder Zuständen. Manchmal aber phantasiert und erdenkt es sich auch ein Objekt hinzu. Durch dasselbe wird dann wieder rückwärts das Gefühl gesteigert oder sonstwie modifiziert. Dieses phantasierende Vorstellen ist jener Vorgang den Otto als die nachträgliche Rationalisierung eines vorausgegangenen irrationalen Erlebnisses bezeichnet. So etwas kommt in unserem Bewusstsein vor. Doch berechtigt das nicht dazu, in das „irrationale“, d. h. emotionale Erlebnis selbst und als solches ein Bewusstsein hineinzulegen, das seiner Natur nach gar nicht Gefühl sein kann, sondern Vorstellen und Wissen ist. Das ist das nach meiner Ansicht prinzipiell Fehlerhafte an der Darlegung Ottos vom Erfassen des mysterium durch das menschliche Bewusstsein (ibid., 317–318).

Pater Wilhelm Schmidt—the founder of the Roman Catholic school of the history of religion, the so-called Anthropos School or the Vienna School—indeed reacted strongly against Otto's *Das Heilige*, wrote a book directed against Otto which turned all of Otto's theses upside down: *Menschheitswege zum Gotterkennen. Rationale, Irrationale, Superrationale: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und religionspsychologische Untersuchung* (1923).

Non-evolution, the central place of the Supreme Being (das Höchste Wesen, God), the objective validity and moral quality of early man's religion are emphasized and long quotations are abstracted from the first volume of Schmidt's later monumental *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* and from his, by then, famous handbook on dogmatics and apologetics *Die Uroffenbarung als Anfang der Offenbarung Gottes* (1911). Holiness is—from the beginning—the attribute of the Supreme Being.²

In the point of intersection between Otto's and Schmidt's psychology and history of religion the fundamental difference between Protestant and Catholic teaching emerges perhaps more clearly than in any other context.

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Such questions as whether the human world is subjective or objective, whether the subject "creates" an internal world or in an "analogous" way "registers" or "records" an external reality are, of course, as far beyond all *empiri* as is the physical existence or non-existence of spiritual beings (or God). But these religious, non-religious, philosophical and epistemological propositions, which are void and meaningless from the point of view of *empiri*, necessarily condition our orientation in the world, as well as the methodology and *empiri* of research.

The phenomenological school of the history of religion³ developed from, and was made possible by, liberal Protestant theology. In the Kantian perspective, the actual contents of alien religion could be denied and interpreted into the subjective idealist scheme of the interpreter's own religion. Religion, but not religions, *Wesen*, but not *Ercheinungsformen*, essence, but not externals, evidenced of God. Religion was something *sui generis* not to be reduced to anything else. Reductionism became the most pejorative word in the discipline. The very interpretation could be taken as a proof of God's existence (as in Söderblom's case, Andrae 1931, 328).

To illustrate the ideo-historical background of the discipline in theology, mission and adaptation to the scienticism of the secularized environment is no criticism but an explanation of the social formation of the ideas and necessary for a deeper understanding of the phenomenological paradigm. Now, it can be maintained that it was precisely the subjective perspective, which, by allowing or even requiring unbiased study of other religions,

² See also Schmidt 1930. Bornemann 1974 and Pajak 1978 elucidate Schmidt's shifting position towards revelation. For the implication of Thomism in the history of religion see Drobin 1979, 186–218.

³ "The phenomenological school" here includes authors such as G. van der Leeuw, F. Heiler, C. J. Bleeker, etc., and excludes

authors such as P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, R. Pettazzoni, G. Widengren and Å. Hultkrantz, who use the term phenomenology without the Kantian (-Husserlian) implication. See further, Pettersson and Åkerberg 1981 and Waardenburg 1972. Compare also the discussion in Temenos, vol. 9, 1973, between P. Kvaerne and W. C. Smith.

made a science of religion possible. This would be true as far as it is possible to speak about *one* scientific perspective. Phenomenology (or comparative religion within the phenomenological tradition) has its merits in description, in *Verstehen*, in the emphatic understanding of the individual religious actor, and has contributed greatly to the knowledge of man's manifold spiritual worlds. Problems arise when it comes to explanation; and it should be borne in mind that the borderline between explanation and description is fluid, that explanatory ideas always "colour" description. Here the religio-centric attitude of the paradigm (but not necessarily of the conscious mind of the individual researcher) conflicts with research traditions within psychology and sociology, which are secular at the very roots of their development.

Let us consider social anthropology, a discipline which also studies religion. It might be said that here is a very natural "division of labour", that for social anthropology the goal is the understanding of society by comprehending the unconscious social network manifested in beliefs and rituals, while for history of religion the goal is the understanding of religion by conceiving its socio-cultural setting. This sounds simple but might under the surface hide epistemological propositions less harmoniously related to each other.

The philosophical premises of social anthropology go back to Marx, Durkheim and the *année sociologique* school. The central idea, taken from Marx, but by Durkheim used with another intent and in another context is the notion that the consciousness of the individual is a social product (Firth 1972; Zeitlin 1968, 234–280). This means that the categories of thinking, perceptions and values in the individual are determined by the individual's social existence, his relations to others; that the social tradition is reproduced and repeated in the individual as is language in the individual speaker. The society is not the sum of its individuals, is not an abstraction confronting the individual, but the opposite. The individual is an "abstraction", a variable of the determining constant—the society. Via British functionalism, French structuralism and up to modern cognitive studies this basic thought is constitutive.

There is a close connection and an obvious opposition between Protestant phenomenology and Durkheimian sociology. Both adhere to Kant. To the phenomenologist the categories of time, space, class, number, cause etc. are immanent in the subject (the individual mind), by which it structures its world, *and* beyond which it experiences—uniquely, independently and self-subsistently—the ultimate and undivided Reality. To the anthropological sociologist, however, the categories of duration, extension, causation, classification etc. are immanent in the society, through the principles

by which the society as an organic whole bears and moulds its members into the social unity. The society, not the individual, is unique, independent and self-subsistent. Religion is a power of the utmost importance through which the society expresses itself:

For a long time it has been known that the first systems of representations with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time that it is a speculation upon divine things. If philosophy and the sciences were born of religion, it is because religion began by taking the place of the sciences and philosophy. But it has been less frequently noticed that religion has not confined itself to enriching the human intellect, formed beforehand, with a certain number of ideas; it has contributed to forming the intellect itself. Men owe to it not only a good part of the substance of their knowledge, but also the form in which this knowledge has been elaborated.

At the roots of all our judgements there are a certain number of essential ideas which dominate all our intellectual life; they are what philosophers since Aristotle have called the categories of the understanding: ideas of time, space, class, number, cause, substance, personality, etc. They correspond to the most universal properties of things. They are like the solid frame which encloses all thought; this does not seem to be able to liberate itself from them without destroying itself, for it seems that we cannot think of objects that are not in time and space, which have no number, etc. Other ideas are contingent and unsteady; we can conceive of their being unknown to a man, a society or an epoch; but these others appear to be nearly inseparable from the normal working of the intellect. They are like the framework of the intelligence. Now when primitive religious beliefs are systematically analysed, the principal categories are naturally found. They are born in religion and of religion; they are a product of religious thought. This is a statement that we are going to have occasion to make many times in the course of this work.

This remark has some interest of itself already, but here is what gives it its real importance.

The general conclusion of the book which the reader has before him is that religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So if categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they too should be social affairs and the product of collective thought (Durkheim 1976, 9-10).

Different societies categorize reality differently. Socially determined variance is the constant of human reality. Society is, as is repeatedly stressed by Durkheim, something irreducible, something *sui generis* (ibid. 16, 418). Whereas in the one system we have religion (or God), in the other system we have Society.

Methodological conflicts between historians of religion and social anthropologists are *legio*. The historian of religion declares that the social anthro-

pologist, who analyses religion in terms of social organisation, has neither the right understanding of religion as a phenomenon *sui generis*, nor the right understanding of the individual in religious life; that the approach of the social anthropologist is *reductionistic* and thus never can reach the very core of religion. The social anthropologist, again, states that the historian of religion illegitimately isolates religion from the wider concept of culture, and accordingly fails to see the meaning of religion in the network of social organisation and identification; that the historian of religion does not have a *holistic* approach, which to the social anthropologist is the essential prerequisite for a deeper understanding.

In other words, each party accuses the other of reductionism, and the words reductionism and holism have an ideological charge. In both cases epistemology and theory are mostly mistaken for *empiri*. Each perspective is, of course, governed by world view and intention and is completely legitimate (compare Sacrifice, eds. Bourdillon and Fortes 1980 and Drobin 1981).

In social anthropology there is a built-in conflict between political world views, which obviously also includes historians of religion: the respective views of Durkheim and Marx. To Durkheim society itself is the constant and is a homogenous, harmonious and homeostatic organism; to Marx the "mode of production", the shifting socio-economic conditions between groups, or classes, is the constant; the one model stresses harmony and non-change, the other disharmony and change. Now whether indigenous culture, and by analogy religion, is a great value *per se*, or an obstacle to development and justice, is finally a political judgement on a scale from conservatism to socialism, which might support an interest in segregation as well as in assimilation (compare Gluckman 1975 and Myrdal 1968).

With these short reflections I should like to emphasize that the history of religion necessarily has a social function, be it religious or non-religious. Some questions that are experienced as problems of *empiri* might on closer consideration be expressions of conscious world views, of loyalties, or of such unconscious views as are merely part of the terminological and verbalistic tradition of the discipline (this one or others); the paradigm of handbooks by which each discipline introduces itself to the student. It is, of course, not to be expected, nor even to be hoped, that history of religion should refer to a body of people with the same outlook on the world and the cosmos. It will remain as fragmented as society is elsewhere. Too strong a belief in objectivity, actual or pretended, might produce subjectivity of either a naïve or a hypocritical kind.

Statements about human and social reality are mostly true or false from a

certain point of view. Objectivity in a deeper sense must be multi-dimensional and complex. Both the object beheld and the beholder must be taken into consideration. Ideally, there should be (a) knowledge of the material (which cannot but be unsatisfactory, as "material" always is a "cut", a "bracketing", in a wider reality); (b) knowledge of the system of thought, the intention, that structured the presentation of the material; (c) comparison with other, different and similar, presentations of material of the same type; (d) some knowledge of one's own intention.

This ideal, which can never be fully realized, might be compared with optics. One photographic angle never provides a "true" picture. One must go around the object to obtain additional perspectives.

Philosophies and theologies are explicit logical systems. They can be studied in the same manner as mathematical propositions and their consequences. Religions are implicit world views. They can be studied only through implicit world views.

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