

Science of Religion
Studies in Methodology

*Proceedings
of the Study Conference of the
International Association for the History
of Religions, held in Turku, Finland
August 27-31, 1973*

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The photographs in this book were printed
with the financial support of UNESCO

ISBN: 90-279-7782-8

Jacket design: Jurriaan Schrofer

© 1979, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, The Netherlands

Printed in Great Britain

Preface

This volume contains the proceedings of the study conference of the International Association for the History of Religions on 'Methodology of the Science of Religion' held in Turku, Finland, August 27-31, 1973. The Finnish Society for the Study of Comparative Religion, a member society in the I. A. H. R., was responsible for the organization of the conference. I would like to express my thanks to the Committee of the Society for their interest and support. My special thanks are due to my colleagues on the Organizing Committee of the Conference, Haralds Biezais (vice-chairman, Turku), Åke Hultkrantz (Stockholm), Juha Pentikäinen (Helsinki), Helmer Ringgren (Uppsala) and Eric J. Sharpe (Lancaster), whose expertise was of great assistance. The practical arrangements for the conference were taken care of by an efficient team of junior staff, mainly drawn from the Department of Comparative Religion and Folklore at the University of Turku. The able secretary of the conference, Aili Nenola-Kallio, devoted a great deal of time to the correspondence and preparations necessary. I would like to express my warm thanks to all of these staff.

It was my task to edit the proceedings of the conference into some kind of documentation of those methodological questions which dominated the conference and have been to the forefront in comparative religion in general. The papers of the eighteen main speakers and thirtyone commentators, together with the summaries of the subsequent discussions, printed in this book should achieve this purpose, and also represent the results of highly successful cooperation. A complete list of all the participants can be found in the report on the technical arrangements for the conference in *Temenos* 9, Turku 1974, pp. 15-24. The good atmosphere which prevailed during the conference was the result of the contributions of all the participants.

The editing of this book, and in particular of the taped discussions,

would not have been possible without grants from the Finnish Ministry of Education, the University of Turku Foundation, and the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History. Unesco had made a grant towards the costs of the conference. My sincere thanks are also due to Gun Herranen, who gave unstinting assistance in the various stages of the preparation of the manuscript, Keith Battarbee, who prepared the summaries of the discussions and carried out the translations necessary, and my wife Märta Honko, who helped me with the name-index.

Finally I should like to thank Jacques Waardenburg, Editor of the Religion and Reason series, who invested much time in compiling the subject index, and the representative of the publisher, A. J. van Vliet, for encouragement and cooperation.

Turku, November 1978

LAURI HONKO

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I wrote an article on 'Some remarks on the religious terminology of the Ancient Egyptians'. Starting out from the observation by S. Morenz that the Egyptian language lacks words for the notions 'religion', 'piety', and 'belief', I consulted the German-Egyptian part of the famous *Wörterbuch der ägyptische Sprache*. This led me to some interesting conclusions: on the one hand it appeared that the Ancient Egyptians had not yet reached the level of sophistication on which we are living, thinking and talking about the religions of the world. On the other hand one learns to detect the religious terms in which the typical Egyptian religious consciousness expressed itself. I sometimes wonder whether the adherents of the religions which we are studying would recognize their belief in the picture which we present them. This means that the true evaluation of methods would be to retain only those methods which let religious people themselves testify their faith. In conclusion I offer a variant of the saying by Rousseau, 'retournons à la nature', namely: retournons à la philologie et à l'histoire.

Commentary by Walter H. Capps

In the 'Epistle to the Reader', in the introductory portion of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1671-1687), the English philosopher, John Locke, offered the following commentary on the state of corporate intelligence in his time: 'The commonwealth of learning is not at this time without masterbuilders, whose mighty designs in advancing the sciences will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity; but everyone must not hope to be a Boyle or a Sydenham, and in an age that produces such masters as the great Huygenius and the incomparable Mr. Newton, with some other of that strain, 't is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing ground a little and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge.'

Having introduced my subject with Locke's almost iconoclastic statement, I run the risk, I know, of creating the expectation that my contention will pertain to the rubbish that has accumulated in the study of religion. But this is neither my suggestion nor my insinuation. Nor

do I want to say in straightforward, simple fashion that the pathway to knowledge in *Religionswissenschaft* has been cluttered by the grand, all-encompassing, systematic thought patterns of the prominent master builders. Of course, this is always partially true, whether one is talking about the history of sciences, philosophy, or religion. But there is a significant second side to the issue which should not be overlooked. Though some of the master builders' substantive contentions have become obsolete, and though the systematic configurations of their thought patterns have become unfashionable, the grand theories will always be looked upon as being monumental. Whatever else they did, they helped put a subject in focus. They also gave design, shape, and direction to an emerging field of studies. These large stylistic constructive contributions must always be appreciated even in times when intellectual interests move in other directions. For not until after the visionary stage has been accomplished does it dawn on anyone that something like Locke's critical, reflexive measure is the next necessary step.

Thus, acknowledging the greatness of the master builders, one must contend nevertheless that it is appropriate to be involved in the more menial tasks of 'clearing the ground a little'. Religious studies cannot progress simply by adding theory to theory or by piling one systematic-configurative account upon another. Nor are large advances to be found in restricting oneself to issues and questions internal to the science of religion, or even in negotiating the casual border hostilities between, say, the history, phenomenology, and philosophy of religion. Similarly, it can no longer suffice to take all prime constructive cues from developments within other fields and disciplines. This, as we know, has been a dominant pathway to knowledge in the field. 'Evolutionism', for example, loomed large in other fields and disciplines; gradually 'evolutionism' came to loom large too in the science of religion. Phenomenology came to loom in other fields and disciplines; true to form, phenomenology found its way into the science of religion. 'High gods', 'sky gods', and astral myths gained prominence in certain areas of the study of religion; then, progressively, their influence became pervasive. Recently, structuralism has become a major component of a variety of fields and disciplines; gradually, more and more, and even dramatically, structuralism has become prominent in the science of religion. And this pattern will continue as long as the stimulus-and-response syndrome continues as a chief source of creativity.

No matter how well such enterprises are embarked upon, the fact remains that the science of religion is ripe for ground-clearing, for it is not always clear about its conceptual basis. More specifically, the science of religion is unsure of its second-order tradition. I shall cite some examples: When one studies philosophy, he is introduced not only to long-standing philosophical issues, but to philosophers and to philosophical schools. To study philosophy is to engage in philosophical reflection and to learn to find one's way into the reflections of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Russell, Wittgenstein, and the others. The same is true, too, in psychology. In studying psychology, one is introduced to problems and issues that belong to the field, and he is also forced to become acquainted with the history and theory of psychology. And this implies knowing one's way into Freud, Jung, Adler, Rank, Erikson, Sullivan, Maslow, and the others. But it is difficult to do the same in the science of religion. The prime difficulty is due to the fact that the subject-field has no clear, direct, self-sustaining second-order tradition. The scholar within the field comes to sense that the theories of E. B. Tylor, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Sir James Frazer, Max Müller, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, and the others, have something to do with one another. On closer inspection, they seem to exhibit certain intriguing family likenesses. But one can never be quite sure. For, as is obvious, such personages come from a variety of fields, represent a variety of disciplines, and hardly ever enter the science of religion from the same standpoint or on the same grounds. A good case can be made that the principle contributions and the prime discoveries within the field have ordinarily been made by persons who are self-conscious practitioners of methods and disciplines of other fields: anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, historians, psychologists, sometimes historians of art. Much of the time the formative contributions have not come from within the field, but from the outside, as it were. Thus, if a sense of a second-order tradition is to be recovered, one cannot expect to look for a chain of communication that bears any resemblance to apostolic succession. Instead, it is disparate, disjointed, flexible, and accumulated or even created rather than discovered. Its sources lie here and there, and its ingredients are always arbitrarily assembled. But no matter how difficult it is to recover, the field cannot get along without a sense of an underlying, second-order tradition. It cannot hope to be instrumentally self-conscious without knowing how to arrange its

second-order literature. It cannot pretend to find its way until it can relate to its past in narrative form.

Because there is no clear, conscious second-order tradition in the science of religion, there is profound uncertainty regarding the configuration, boundaries, and self-definition of the field. This fact has been made apparent by the large number of definitional questions that continue to be unresolved. For example, is the science of religion a subject or a field? Is it a discipline or is it multi-disciplinary? Does it have a proper subject, or does the multiplicity of its interests prohibit a common focal point?

Answers to such questions are seldom convincing if only because of the enormous range of subjects which the science of religion claims to comprehend. For, strictly speaking, the science of religion is neither a discipline nor a subject. Rather, it must be designated as a 'subject-field' within which a variety of disciplines are employed and a multiplicity of subjects treated. It is a subject-field before it is anything more discrete than this. And when it becomes more discrete it lends definitional exactness, methodological precision, and specific focus to the objects of its attention.

This is simply another way of saying that what the scholar does within the subject-field depends upon where he is standing. Where he stands influences what he discovers. Furthermore, where he stands and what he discovers are implicit in what he is trying to do. All of these factors, in turn, form his conception of the field and help set the operational definition he gives to religion. Consequently, when one looks within the academy for analogs to the science of religion, he should pay attention to fields which have just recently emerged, for example, 'environmental studies' or even 'ethnic studies'. In all such cases, the name of the enterprise indicates that the subject-field is a collectivity within which a variety of useful endeavors occur which draw upon a large number of disciplines, methodologies, and tutored sensitivities.

In this paper so far, I have attempted to register two contentions. Both belong to the concern for a 'ground-clearing', reflexive action within the science of religion. The first pertains to the need for a clearly articulated second-order tradition within the subject-field. Without the awareness of such a tradition, it is difficult to find orientation and establish identity. The second contention points to the massive disparateness

of the subject-field. With regard to this disparateness, I want now to be more specific. When the second-order tradition of the subject-field is conceived, it must possess both sufficient dynamism and flexibility to sustain the following kinds of variability.

VARIETIES OF OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Within the large subject-field, there are several clusters of subjects, topics, and foci which lend a regulative definition to the word 'religion'. Some methodologies treat religion as religions, for example, and spend their energies describing one or more religious tradition. In such approaches, religion is understood to refer to an organism. The organism has component parts, and tends to function well when those parts are in harmony.

But other methodologies are not trained upon religious traditions, just as philosophers do not always think in terms of philosophical schools and ideologies (Platonism, Aristotelianism, existentialism, positivism, and the like). Instead such methods focus upon religious quotients or religious factors. They are sensitive to the religious components of the development of the personality. They identify the religious factors which inform cultures. There treat religious dimensions to social, ethical, and political life.

In addition to the two large postures already cited, there is an orientation to the field which is motivated neither by religion as tradition or organism nor by religious factors and quotients, but, as it is said, by religion itself, or 'the nature or essence of religion' if you will. For this temperament, it is not enough to concentrate on the prominent patterns of religious institutionalization or upon religious qualities that register elsewhere: rather, it is necessary to get to the heart of the matter. Consequently, this approach is preoccupied with questions about what religion is, what its fundamental components are, how it is to be defined. Under the same rubric, one can list the apparently perpetual, ongoing quest to locate the range of human experience to which religion properly refers (feelings, actions, thoughts, imagination, etc.). In all of this, religion is construed as being something other than an adjective modifying a noun or a noun that can become pluralized.

MULTIPLE METHODOLOGICAL INTERESTS AND INTENTIONS

The range of the subject-field is compounded further because the multiple subject is also approached from multiple intentions and vested interests. Some methods, for example, are equipped only to describe religious phenomena, whether such phenomena be organisms, quotients, distinguishing elements, or structures. Others attempt to transcend 'mere description' and engage in exercise in comparison and contrast. Comparison and contrast, in turn, can be of the internal kind (when applied to one and the same organism), or it can be of the cross-cultural or even cross-disciplinary kind. But some methods function not only to compare and contrast, but, more ambitiously, to systematize and synthesize. That is, they have been designed to build systems of unification or patterns of similarity.

This is sufficient multiplicity. But the multiplicity is further compounded when the various methodological intentions are coupled with deepseated convictional goals. Scholars engage in descriptive, comparative, isolative, and synthesizing work, sometimes, in order to defend religion, demonstrate its utility, verify it, explain it away, or, frequently, to give it a theological sanction. Admittedly, these examples of convictional intent hardly ever display themselves in such unambiguous manner; but the point is worth making that elements of evaluation and sanction possess a formative place in methodological dispositions. In various degrees, every scholar in the field does what he does in order to show the significance, relevance, meaningfulness, uniqueness, connection, or utility of religion, in either positive or negative terms.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN LARGE CONTROLLING QUESTIONS

In addition to variations of foci and methodological proclivities, the subject-field called the science of religion has also been influenced by a multiplicity of large controlling questions. Here we have reference to the comprehensive philosophical or ideational issues under which the tasks and methods of scholarship were conceived. For example, when one looks back across the past one hundred fifty years, he recognizes that a large portion of the second-order tradition was inspired by the desire to identify religion's *sine qua non*. From Immanuel Kant — perhaps

from Descartes — onward, a large host of scholars and methodologists have concentrated attention within the science of religion on the discovery of first principles. Their methods have been tailored to reduce all qualities, characteristics, and aspects of religion to those components that are absolutely basic. The goal is to analyze complex entities so that an unambiguous simple core-element might be identified. Then, this fundamental simple element is understood to be indispensable. Whether it be Kant's moral compulsion, Schleiermacher's 'feeling of absolute dependence', Otto's 'numinous', Freud's 'illusion', Feuerbach's 'projection', Nygren's 'agape', Tillich's 'depth dimension', Goodenough's 'protection against the tremendum', etc., etc., the isolated core-element is regarded as that without which religion would not be what it truly is.

But there are other questions under whose influence the science of religion has taken shape. In addition to the concern for religion's essence, the tradition also reflects a pervasive interest in revocering religion's origin. Here, the attempt to disclose an underlying core-element is merged with the awareness that realities are affected by the passage of time. Thus, the quest for the *sine qua non* becomes transposed into an interest in tracing back to religion's *primordium*. It is here that I would place the work of E. B. Tylor, Andrew Lang, R. R. Marett, Wilhelm Schmidt, Frazer, Müller, perhaps Durkheim, and (as we scholars are wont to say) 'a host of others'.

Furthermore, when the attempt to find the fundamental core-element (whether logical *sine qua non* or chronological *primordium*) is abandoned, there is still much that can be done to lend description to the relationship that exists between the pluralized (rather than singularized) components (or perceptible features) of religion. Methodologically, one can regard the phenomenology of religion as having been formed out of a pluralized, detemporized attempt to put the various elements of religion — the irreducible simples — in meaningful order. Thus, instead of trying to identify the single, definitive core-element, or providing an account of religion's origin and development, scholars in phenomenology have seemed content to give a comprehensive description to the manner and form in which religious phenomena appear in human experience. Rather than searching for underlying causes, essences, or exhaustive explanations, they have focussed on the manifest, descriptive features of phenomena. Their eventual goal is to provide a complete account of a thing's form, structure, and distinguishing lines. All of them

have assumed that within the proper manner of viewing — which combines empirical techniques with a kind of intuitive grasping of the subject — such manifestable features ‘stand out’ for the investigator to perceive.

Our subject can only be treated in sketch here. But even in sketch, the large variety of interests, methods, intentions, materials, subjects, skills, questions, and issues referred to should indicate that the science of religion is a large, dynamic subject-field within which a variety of selected subjects is approached by means of numerous disciplines under the influence of multiple attitudes and methodological sets of interests. This variety should demonstrate that there is no single, common subject which is treated by all, regardless of their backgrounds, who claim association with the science of religion. There is no single subject within the science of religion which is common to all endeavors. Furthermore, the science of religion perhaps owns no agreed-upon center. It possesses no single, identifiable core-element. And the more specific subjects within the field do not share a common likeness. The enterprises sponsored within the subject-field may have direct and indirect associations with each other. They possess family likenesses, to be sure. But such likenesses need not rest on a common property; such associations need not be organic. Rather, the science of religion is a collectivity in which a variety of useful endeavors occur which draw upon a large number of disciplines and involve a multiplicity of subjects.

At the same time, the very disparateness of the subject-field makes consciousness and articulation of a second-order tradition all the more necessary and crucial. For collectivities and traditions function to give formation and to sustain arrangement and direction. The components of collectivities are ingredient in the composition of second-order traditions. Collectivities are composed: they are always at least partially idiosyncratic. They consist of peculiarities, not of logical steps. Their function is rather odd-job, not regular and forensic. They are given to perimeter settings, not necessarily to definitional exactness. And while they carry a formative junction, they are not causal. A tradition, too, is formed, not caused. It is composed, not deduced. It has a certain spontaneity and flexibility; it is never forced. It is like a design applied delicately and lightly rather than a necessary conclusion of a sequential, discursive series.

The science of religion owns such patterns of arrangement, and they

have not yet been enunciated. And, as we have suggested, this is a commentary on the sheer diversity and immensity of the subject. Perhaps it testifies too to the embryonic nature of the field. It may well be that the science of religion is just now reaching the stage of its corporate life cycle, where, in the words of Erik Erikson, after knowing that it can make things and make them well it seeks to align its capacities with its sense of endowment, opportunity, and heritage. At earlier moments, it sought place, purpose, and competence. Now, as the cycle indicates, it is also a matter of fidelity.

Until a second-order tradition is found and nurtured, scholars may find themselves engaged in tasks that are obsolete even before they are undertaken, communication from within the subject-field outward will be frustrated by an untranslatable vocabulary, and the familiar stimulus-and-response syndrome will prevail as the chief source of a creativity always at least once-removed. More seriously, until a second-order tradition becomes conscious, all methodological stances seem doomed to maintain a rigid focus on permanence (norms, laws, structures, and recurrent patterns) within the science of religion. At some future point, the turn must be taken away from permanence to processes of change, motion, movement, and spontaneity. Eventually, instead of straining to identify the underlying pattern of stability of religious phenomena, future methodologies must become equipped to come to terms with the change factor: the moving, inconstant, spontaneous, irregular, discontinuous, non-forensic, once-only, explosive, surprise element. Instead of focusing on 'arrested pictures' or moments of stopped action, as all past and/or present methodologies seem to do, future approaches must find access to the dynamics of catalytic and kinetic realities.

But this is to shift our topic to new ground. It is necessary first to clear that ground a little.

Commentary by Hans-J. Klimkeit

1. H. Biezais' clear presentation actually leads us into two different areas worthy of discussion: (1) the problem explicitly addressed, i.e. typology of religion and its relation to history, phenomenology and morphology,