

IDENTITY  
ISSUES  
AND  
WORLD  
RELIGIONS

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# WHAT CONSTITUTES THE IDENTITY OF A RELIGION?

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## I. THE PROBLEM

The problem I am going to discuss arose out of a historical investigation of Chinese religion in Taiwan. As everyone knows we customarily distinguish in China three religious traditions: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. As a result of my research I came to the conclusion that what is normally called 'popular religion' also has to be regarded as a religious tradition of its own (Seiwert, 1985). The ensuing dispute with a sinological colleague made it obvious that the history of religions (Religionswissenschaft) has no theoretical concept whatsoever to decide on which account the congeries of religious phenomena — religious beliefs, practices and institutions — may be regarded as a religion. To put it differently: What constitutes the identity of a religion, if there is any?

Looking for comparable cases where problems like the one I was facing have already been discussed and were possibly solved I turned my attention to Ceylon. Unfortunately the solutions offered in this case are by no means unanimous. One scholar cites the coexistence of Theravada Buddhism and popular religion, the former clearly exhibiting its own particular identity (Bechert: 220, 224); another detects three religious systems each having its own identity (Evers: 98f), a third comes to the conclusion that there is only one religious system in Ceylon consisting of four different sub-systems (Ames: 27f). No one discusses the problem I am interested in: What makes the identity of a religious system? and Is a religious system the same as a religion?

On further consideration you will find that the problem under discussion has important theoretical dimensions for our discipline. For it becomes obvious that one of the seemingly most self-evident notions of the history of religions, that of 'a religion', is ill-founded. We talk of religions as historical units but find ourselves in difficulties when asked to define the identity of these units. The fact that only very few scholars have actually been puzzled by this problem is doubtless due to the seeming self-evidence of the notion "the religions". This has a long tradition in our discipline.

One of the forefathers of Religionswissenschaft, Friedrich Schleiermacher, took pains to show that religion as something infinite and unfathomable cannot but individualize itself and reveal itself in the so-called positive religions. To him every single 'individuum of religion' had its own marked 'physiognomy' (Schleiermacher: 165, 167, 171). The concept of individual religions, each having its own life and development became widely held during the following one and a half centuries of Religionswissenschaft. Still today most historians of religion would agree that while 'religion' as such is a concept which should be used only with great caution — if used at all — the individual religions are something which are given empirically and historically and therefore represent the genuine objects of the history of religions or Religionswissenschaft (cf. Flasche: 274, 277).

As one example I may quote Ninian Smart who has formulated this almost universally held position in very precise words: "... we are not confronted in fact by some monolithic object, namely religion. We are confronted by religions. And each religion has its own style, its own inner dynamic, its own special meanings, its uniqueness. Each religion is an organism, and has to be understood in terms of the interrelation of its different parts" (31f). Here a religion is called not an individuum but an organism; still others prefer to speak of a system. These different terms, of course, do not mean exactly the same but in one regard they are fully congruent: they all presuppose that there is something, called 'a religion', which exists as a historical entity and can as such be identified, in short, that there is something like the identity of a religion.

Only a few scholars have challenged this common view of the religions. One of the most vigorous attacks was launched by Wilfried Cantwell Smith.<sup>1</sup> Smith argues in a very striking way that "the concept of religion and the religions ... ought to be dropped altogether ... For fundamentally one has to do not with religions, but with religious persons" (153). Smith's arguments are certainly not to be taken lightly. Obviously what we call 'a religion', e.g. Buddhism or Christianity, is nothing that can be observed without further ado. What is given empirically are individual human beings, their individual beliefs and practices and a host of other individual facts. All these individual phenomena are said to belong to a larger unit called "a religion". And this religion is said to exist in history expanding over centuries and continents. This being so we are supposed to see the same religion, Buddhism, in the fourth century B.C. in India as well as in the thirteenth century A.D. in Japan. If we look closer, however, we do not see Buddhism but individual phenomena, persons, rites, scriptures and monasteries. In what sense are they part of a historical entity called 'Buddhism' and in what way is Buddhism in Japan and India the same? If they are! These are questions of a wide bearing and you should not expect me to give the final answers right now. What I try to do is to bring to light a problem which lurks in the darkness deep down at the foundations, the methodological foundations, of our discipline. Of course I shall also give a few hints as to where in my view we can possibly look for a solution of this problem.

## II. TWO KINDS OF IDENTITY

What do we mean by 'identity'? From the logical point of view the matter is quite simple. 'Identity' here signifies a relation in which a given object is only to itself. Put differently: *a* is identical with *b* if *a* is exactly equal to *b*, if there is no difference whatsoever between *a* and *b*.

Taking this logical meaning of 'identity' as a basis we meet conspicuous difficulties in applying the term in the realm of the history of religions. Obviously one cannot maintain that there is no difference whatsoever between Buddhism in China of the 8th century and Buddhism in Ceylon of the 20th century. This implies that we cannot speak of an identity between these two phenomena. We can even generalize the issue: Every observable phenomenon, i.e. every empirical fact, has as one of its attributes a spatiotemporal specificity. No empirical phenomenon can, therefore, be identical with any other but itself. From this it follows that either there is no identity of Buddhism or that Buddhism is not an empirical phenomenon. If the latter applied, however, then the study of Buddhism or that of any other of the so-called 'religions' would not be empirical research but some kind of metaphysics. Given that alternative most of us would probably prefer to relinquish the claim that Buddhism and the other religions have an identity in history. In principle our inquiry into the identity of a

religion could be concluded at this point as there obviously is no such identity. But that would be just one side of the medal.

Historians of religion certainly realize that the logical argument which I have proposed and which leads us to deny the identity of the so-called historical religions, is soundly Buddhist. It suggests that the empirical world consists of congeries of ever-changing elements and what seem to be identities and individuals are in fact nothing but illusory products of our unenlightened minds. From the point of view of the logically analyzing observer, this reasoning is doubtless true. But from the point of view of most participants in history this notion of identity is all but meaningless. Most people do not regard their own religious beliefs and practices, their religious feelings and institutions, as isolated events but consider their own religious life as part of something more comprehensive which exists in history. You may call it 'cumulative religious tradition' instead of 'religion' as Smith (154-168) does but this does not change the fact that people not only identify themselves with a certain religious tradition but regard this tradition or religion as something possessing its own identity. This of course cannot be the kind of logical identity we were dealing with before but is another kind of identity. For sake of convenience I shall name it 'historical identity'.

What constitutes a historical identity? Let us first consider the following example: In the year 1752 the imperial government of China introduced the sacrifices to Xiannong, the 'First Farmer', as obligatory in all counties of the empire. On this occasion the question was discussed whether these sacrifices were the same as those which were offered during the Han dynasty to the local earth-god *she* who was also an agricultural deity (cf. Seiwert, 1985:205). It seems that no final agreement was reached.

The case may serve as an illustration for a discussion of historical identity. The question was whether two things which are separated in time as well as in space can be regarded as the same. Now, an answer to this question cannot be given by us as historians of religion. What we can possibly ascertain are facts such as: the sacrifices to Xiannong in the 18th century and the sacrifices to the local earth-god during the Han-dynasty bear or do not bear strong similarities; there exists or does not exist a historical connection between both. But neither similarity nor historical connections nor both taken together amounts to historical identity. It is only the participants, the objects of our historical interest, who can settle the question. If they regard what they do as identical with what has been done in the past then we have a case of historical identity even if there should happen to be not the slightest historical connection. By the same token we as observers could not assert historical identity of two different phenomena on the grounds of similarity and historical connection if the participants refuse to do so. For historical identity is nothing that can be proved objectively — as indeed it is no real identity at all — but it is a category of subjective meaning. Historical identity is a category by which men interpret history and above all their own place in history. As historians we have to take historical identifications as given facts which cannot be criticized any more than we could criticize other religious beliefs. As the study and understanding of religious beliefs is one central task of our business as historians of religion the study of historical identifications must also be part thereof.<sup>2</sup>

Again we could conclude our investigation of the identity of a religion by stating that historical identity is a category of subjective meaning which as historians we have to understand and to recognize. But understanding other persons' meanings, understanding how they interpret history, cannot be the last word. Otherwise we would find ourselves only with a host of different ways of looking at history not only because the multiple religious traditions have each their own interpretation but also because

single individuals within the same tradition do not necessarily share the same view. As historians we, too, interpret history and this means more than just understanding other people's view of it. Our own interpretations of history are, so to speak, on another level than that of the persons and traditions we try to understand in our hermeneutical enterprise. Let me call those which are the object of our understanding and interpretation the 'object-level' contrasting it with our own views of history, our interpretations of it and our theories about it, which I would designate as the 'meta-level'.

Talking about meta-level interpretations of history, there are two points which are important in our present context. First we have to recognize that historians presuppose historical identities as a matter of fact. Historians deal with states, peoples, institutions or religions assuming without hesitation that these entities possess some kind of identity. On this point there is no significant difference between historical identities on the object-level and on the meta-level. Coming to the second point, however, we must admit that historians claim that their own views and interpretations of history are not quite the same as anyone else's. Not that their statements are necessarily more true but that at least they have been arrived at in a methodologically well-founded way. And this is an important point. As historians of religion we are obliged to try to give a methodologically sound foundation if we use concepts signifying historical entities like Buddhism and the other religions — or to stop using these concepts altogether. Since it is not to be expected that we can ban the concept of "the religions" from our vocabulary I keep to the other alternative and try to find a methodological foundation.

### III. THE IDENTITY OF RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS (SYSTEMIC IDENTITY)

What is a religion? An ingenious man or woman has answered this perennial question by stating that religion is everything which Religionswissenschaftler investigate. Now we actually study a host of different phenomena, ranging from beliefs about the world including gods and human fate to rituals and ethical practices, social institutions and personal feelings. In view of the diversity of these empirical phenomena it seems no easy task to prove that they normally form unities which we call religions. The task does not become much easier if we replace the term 'religion' by 'religious system' although the latter is less suspected of metaphysical ambiguities — falsely, as I believe.

If we designate the congeries of different religious phenomena "a religious system" we have to proceed on two assumptions: First, that we can prove some kind of unity and closedness. The minimum requirement for something to be called a system is that we can define its boundaries. This is exactly what nobody has yet done for a religious system. The second assumption would be that the system somehow persists in time. If both conditions were met we could fairly conclude that the religious system possessed something like an identity. Let me name this hypothetical identity which would be the outcome of our own historical and theoretical analysis 'systemic identity' to differentiate it terminologically from historical identifications on the object-level.

I begin by turning to this second assumption which supposes the diachronical persistence of a religious system. It is not necessary to explain again that actually there can not be any identity of concrete phenomena at two different points of time. What is happening in the Malvatta Monastery at Kandy in central Ceylon today is certainly not identical with what was happening there last year of fifty years ago. On the other hand it would be foolish to maintain that there was no connection

whatever between these different facts. There is an almost unlimited number of possibilities with respect to how people can behave, how they can interpret the world or what they can consider to be their own destiny. Although there are numberless possibilities for acting and believing, however, the members of any given society usually select only a few of them which results in conspicuous similarities in their actual beliefs and practices. What is more, even diachronically we find these similarities pointing at some kind of connection.

What is the connecting element between the beliefs and practices of different people? I think it is the rules or norms which determine the selection out of the in-principle numberless possibilities. Because these norms affect the actual beliefs and practices we find these otherwise astonishing regularities. Is it then the norms which constitute a religious system and define its identity? In a way this is the case. A religious system doubtless can be regarded as a system of norms for selection.<sup>3</sup> But on a closer look we see that the norms can on no account be regarded as defining the identity and the boundaries of a system. For on the one hand we must admit that norms may change. What was taken for the right way to look at history for a Christian in the Medieval Ages is not the same as today. On the other hand it is obvious that we may find substantially the same norms, especially in the realm of ethics, in different religious systems. This proves beyond doubt that it is certainly not the substance of the norms which defines the systemic identity of a religious system.

If we suppose that there really exists some kind of systemic identity then we can proceed on the assumption that however much the substance of the system may change at least the system itself must be able to identify itself. Otherwise it could not maintain its boundaries which is crucial for the persistence of the system as a unity distinguished from its environment. This means we have to look for some sort of self-reference by which the system identifies what belongs to itself and what not.

Turning now to our hypothesized religious system being basically a system of norms we can detect one essential form of self-reference: Each system of norms has to define itself on grounds which it claims to be valid. This is evidently a crucial element since it is essential for a religious system not only to offer norms for selecting ways to act and to understand the world but at the same time also to claim that these are the right rules in contrast to other possibilities. This, however, is a pretension which obviously cannot be founded in any way without referring in the last analysis to a principle which has to be accepted as unquestionable. If you subscribe to this source of authority then you will adopt as valid the normative system which is set up on it. The validity of a system of norms depends on the recognition of the authority which is defined by the system itself.<sup>4</sup>

It is exactly this source of authority which marks the boundaries of a given authority *A*, e.g. the Buddha, as part of the normative system *a*, while substantially the same norm, not to kill, would belong to the normative system *b* if founded with reference to authority *B*, e.g. the New Testament.

On this basis we can now define the boundaries of a religious system and by the same token its unity rather precisely: they are defined by the recognition of the source or the sources of authority on which the system is founded. On the same ground we can also explain in which sense a religious system persists in time: we are dealing with the same system as long as the same authority is recognized. This is my approach to the problem of systemic identity of a religion.

In fact it is just an approach not yet the final answer. Let me conclude by pointing to a few implications and open problems. Most important: a "religious system" in the defined sense is not altogether the same as a "religion" as this term is commonly

understood. On the one hand a religious system may be more than a religion. We may take as an example the religious system of Ceylon which comprises besides Theravada Buddhism also beliefs and practices associated with the so-called popular religion. What defines the religious system as a whole is the recognition of several sources of authority, Buddhist scriptures and institutions as well as popular customs and priestly institutions.

On the other hand a religious system may be less than a religion. The various schools of Mahayana Buddhism are most easily differentiated by pointing to the different sources of authority to which they adhere, be it a particular sutra, or a particular line of patriarchs or teachers. They may, therefore, each be regarded as a particular religious system or sub-system, which belongs to the more comprehensive system called 'Buddhism'. The unity and identity of Buddhism as a whole would be defined by the recognition of the Buddha as the final source of authority.

This leads me to my last point: Buddhism may serve as an illustration for my argument that it is not the content or the substance of the norms, i.e., what is actually believed and practiced, that is decisive for the identity of a religion but the authority referred to. For the contents of a religion may change almost beyond recognition as the substantial differences between the various forms of Buddhism from Ceylon via Tibet to Japan show. It seems difficult if not impossible to define the identity of a religion on such grounds. As the approach just presented overcomes at least this kind of problem I recommend it to your attention.

#### NOTES

1. Another critic of the notion of 'the religions' using different arguments is Baird (126-142).
2. Of course we can still engage in what Rudolph (1978) has called the 'ideologiekritische Funktion der Religionswissenschaft'. This is, however, a special case and not one of the central tasks of the history of religions.
3. The idea that a religion is to be regarded as a system of norms has already in outline been advanced by Durkheim (22). In contrast to him, however, I do not believe that a religious system is constituted by 'croyances obligatoires' and 'pratiques obligatoires' (19) but by the *rules for selecting* the right beliefs and practices. As a matter of fact most religions have only a few if any obligatory beliefs and practices. They are within a certain range more or less flexible as to which beliefs and practices out of the countless possibilities are to be considered as acceptable. It is this range of what is still regarded as acceptable for members of the religious system which is defined by the rules for selection.
4. The central role which authority plays for the definition of the category 'religious' has been discussed in another article of mine (Seiwert, 1981).

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