A Definition of Religion, and its Uses

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In recent British Anthropology three principal types of working definition have been used in approaching the comparative study of religion. The first treats the term 'Religion' as lending itself with difficulty to further definition and as covering an area of human activity which lacks sharply delineated boundaries; where such a point of view prevails, the reader is simply asked to accept as 'religious' any phenomena which the author happens to select for treatment under this heading. The second type treats 'Religion' as referring to a class of metaphorical statements and actions obliquely denoting social relationships and claims to social status. The third type treats the term as referring to commerce with a specific class of objects, i.e. 'Religion is the belief in spirits' or 'Religion is the belief in the supernatural'. As they stand, I believe all of these approaches are unsatisfactory, and in this paper I shall follow up their criticism with the proposal of an alternative definition. Definitions being mere tools towards the discovery of empirical regularities, I shall of course try to show that the alternative proposed is of value in terms of the hypotheses and questions it suggests about the determinants of religious forms.

The approach which would press on with the scope of the term 'Religion' left undefined has had some worthy advocates—among them, Professor Nadel, author of one of the most comprehensive analyses of an African religious system produced to date. According to Nadel (1954, pp. 7–8),

'Whichever way we propose to circumscribe the province of things religious, we are bound to encounter a border zone which defies precise a priori allocation on this or that side of the boundary. To be sure, this residue of inaccuracy is entailed in the broad view of religion which we made our starting point. But no other starting point seems feasible. Bluntly stated, what we set out to do is to describe everything in a particular culture that has a bearing on religion. And since "religion" is precisely one of those words which belong to the more intuitive portions of our vocabulary, and hence cannot be given a sharp connotation, we have no choice but to feel our way towards the meaning it should have in given circumstances. We must not risk omitting anything that might be relevant; the risk we have to take is that of including, besides "religion proper", also that "border" zone composed of mere superstitions; of science misconstrued or all too crudely attempted; and of science aiming too high or incompletely severed from mystic thought.'

Now this is not enough. First of all, I believe that for non-anthropologists at least the term 'religion' has a much clearer connotation than is suggested here. Secondly, to go ahead with the comparative study of religion while leaving the scope of the term undefined is to behave in a self-stultifying way; for until some fairly precise criteria of inclusion of phenomena in the denotation of 'religion' have been given, it is impossible to specify those variables whose behaviour we have to try to explain in our study. Until such criteria have been given, it is also possible to carry on an endless and entirely barren argument about whether a given item of human behaviour is or is not religious.

The second type of approach makes up for the first in positiveness of attack; but, in
defining religious activities as an oblique way of referring to relations between men, it grossly distorts fact. The point of view is certainly respectable in sociological studies; introduced by Durkheim (1915) and adopted with variations by Radcliffe-Brown, it is maintained in essentials by many contemporary figures. E. R. Leach, one of the most forceful of these, has stated the position as follows (Leach 1954):

‘Actions fall into place on a continuous scale. At one extreme, we have actions which are entirely profane, entirely functional, technique pure and simple; at the other, we have actions which are entirely sacred, strictly aesthetic, technically non-functional... From this point of view, technique and ritual, profane and sacred, do not denote types of action but aspects of almost any kind of action.’

Leach looks upon activities which would commonly be called ‘religious’ as falling on to the sacred, aesthetic, technically non-functional end of his scale. He says:

‘It is these aspects which have meaning as symbols of social status and it is these which I describe as ritual whether or not they involve directly any conceptualization of the supernatural or the metaphysical... In sum, then, my view here is that ritual action and belief are alike to be understood as forms of symbolic statement about the social order.’

Finally, Leach broadens the traditional Durkheimian view by admitting the symbolization in myth and ritual of social conflicts as well as social solidarities:

‘Since any social system, however stable and balanced it may be, contains opposing factions, there are bound to be different myths to validate the particular rights of different groups of people... Myth and ritual is a language of signs in terms of which claims to rights and status are expressed, but it is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony.’

It will be noticed that in these lines Leach lumps together performances of the sort commonly labelled religious with others generally described as non-religious ceremonials. Here, however, we shall be concerned solely with the applicability of his ideas to religious activity.

Now there is no doubt that in most cultures religious ritual and religious mythology do sometimes get used as symbols of social relationships and social alignments; but as to how far such use is integral or incidental to the nature of religious activity, it may be useful to answer by reference to a West African religious system with which I am familiar—that of the Kalabari of the Niger Delta.

In the Kalabari state, which consists of a congeries of primary segments or ‘houses’ controlled by chiefs, and a royal segment whose core is the lineage which provides the king, the cult of the chiefly and royal ancestors is one of the principal sanctions of authority at both ‘house’ and state level. This ancestral cult is particularly rich in activities interpreted by the congregations themselves as symbolic of social and political alignments. Thus, formerly, when a house chief conducted rites in honour of the dead chiefs of his line, the congregation of house members would be supplemented by a number of chiefs of other houses who would present rams for sacrifice to their host’s ancestors, even though the latter were in no blood relationship to them. Asked why the house members attended such a rite, Kalabari informants say that it was because they wanted their dead masters to bring them wealth and free them from sickness. On the other hand, the presence of chiefs from other houses who presented rams is explained by saying ‘it was a sign that they wished to remain friends of the feast-giving chief’. Again, when a
new king succeeded to the headship of the state, he had to make the offering of a series of rams to the spirit of his predecessor. The first of these offerings was of a ram provided by himself: this was followed by the cutting of rams brought to him by each of the chiefs of Kalabari and, finally, by the cutting of rams brought by the heads of the various villages under Kalabari protection. Of this succession of sacrificial presentations, it is said, 'the bringing of a ram for cutting meant that the bringer accepted the new king.'

Here, then, we have examples of the act of sacrifice being used explicitly as a symbol of social alignment in the best Durkheimian manner. But what would Kalabari say about a man who indulged in the actions of ancestor-worship in this purely symbolic, gestural way, yet merely shrugged his shoulders and did nothing when told that his painful illness was due to ancestral anger and could be brought to an end only by sacrifice? Like us, I suspect they would say that the man no longer believed in his ancestors: indeed, I have sometimes heard hints to this effect in the case of educated men returned from abroad to take up a chieftainship, who have conducted ancestral rites for their house members without applying the cult to the vicissitudes of their own life. More common is the opposite situation, which often arises with modern Christian cult-practices in Kalabari. The various forms of Christian cult have become important symbols of high status in the community, probably through the association of Christian ideology with the Western education, which chiefs from an early date, using their riches, gave to their sons. Many chiefs, therefore, make a careful parade of their church adherence, especially on occasions of public Christian ritual. When some crisis of misfortune comes their way, they are apt to go surreptitiously to consult a diviner and, as a result of his advice, to make a sacrifice, either to the dead or to a water-spirit. In such circumstances, Kalabari say as readily as we should that the people concerned are not Christians, do not believe in the Christian God. In other contexts, Christian observances become symbols of factional allegiance; and here again, examples suggest that where it is seen to be this and nothing else, the Kalabari reaction is to say that those concerned are not Christians. I am reminded in particular of the case of a Kalabari village whose headman and his descent-group were in chronic opposition to another descent-group which included a prominent water-spirit medium. When the time came round for the latter to give the periodic festival for his spirit, the headman, who had been invited to attend, refused to do so on the ground that, as a Christian, his God would not allow it. Although he was in fact a fairly regular church attender, many of the villagers on both sides of the cleavage interpreted his reply as a sign of his antagonism to the giver of the festival and his group. People felt this interpretation to have been vindicated when two days later his wife who had been ill for some weeks reached a crisis, and he actually came quietly to the medium to consult his spirit about what he should do. They all agreed that he was, in fact, no more a Christian than those who stayed away from church.

Where then a person is seen to be using a prayer, sacrifice, or profession of belief in a god merely to make a statement about social relations or about his own structural alignment, Kalabari say that the one concerned 'does not really believe'. To find out what he really believes, they watch to see which of the gods he goes to for help with the troubles of his life, which of the gods he communes with when he is off parade.

In the Near East and Europe, the history of Judaeo-Christianity is full of similar
judgements. Christ himself condemns the Scribes and Pharisees for using religious ritual as a status-symbol and points to their attitude as the essence of irreligion. And Christian pastors up to our own day have continually contrasted the true believer with one who uses the forms of church-going in a Pharisaic way. One might guess that comments from inside any religious congregation the world over would show much the same reaction to the definition of their activities in social-symbolic terms.

Such a reaction, of course, is a flat refutation of Durkheimian ideas. In this theoretical tradition, the statement ‘I believe in God’ implies ‘I subscribe to the system of social-structural symbolism of which this belief-statement is part; and, in uttering this statement, I signify acceptance of certain social relationships and adoption of a certain social alignment’. Hence, a man’s religious belief-statements should be verifiable solely by watching to see whether he does, in fact, accept the relationships or take up the alignments allegedly referred to by such statements. The instances we have raised above, drawn both from an African culture and from one nearer home, suggest that the very reverse is the case.

All this must sound very trite and obvious to the average non-anthropologist of any culture who, if not religious himself, has been brought up in an environment which included one or two Christians or other cult-practitioners. But for those brought up academically in the Durkheimian tradition and possibly also living in a largely agnostic social environment, it seems that these things can still usefully be said. In effect, defining religion as structural symbolism comes to much the same thing as defining the substance ‘linen’ in terms of its occasional use as a flag: the symbolic function is as incidental to the nature of the first as it is to that of the second. The truth of the matter, surely, is this. One of the most important pre-conditions for one thing becoming the symbol of another is the regular association of the two in collective experience. Now, to the extent that certain religious activities and professions have become associated in the collective experience of a given culture with certain status-positions and social groupings, so these things may come to stand as symbolic for such positions and groupings; but this symbolic function is only a by-product of religious activity and is the result of prior structural associations whose formation has nothing to do with symbolism. This, I think, is a most important point: for it was just this co-ordination of gods and their cults with the enduring groups of a society that Durkheim and his successors seem to have felt inexplicable on any basis other than that of the assumption that religion was essentially structural symbolism. As I hope to show further on, however, the impressive systems of god-to-group co-ordination found in so many societies can be just as readily explained on the basis of a definition of religion which conforms perfectly well to more general usage.

Of the three approaches dealt with here, I have left till last the definition of religion as belief in a certain kind of object, whether this be ‘spirits’ or ‘the supernatural’. The definition of religion as ‘belief in spirits’ has had currency as a working concept somewhere or other in anthropology ever since Tylor (1871), surviving the come-and-go procession of more exotic ideas with its robust closeness to common usage. In fact, the definition I shall put forward is so close to Tylor’s that I hesitate to call it in any way new. ‘Belief in spirits’, however, is just a little too vague for our purposes; and before going any further, we shall do well to weed out the misleading implications of Tylor’s formula from those that are of value. One way in which this formula can mislead is by
making us think of 'spirits' as the label for a class of objects characterized by a specific mode of existence or in terms of specific conditions of knowledge relevant to the making of true statements about them. One is easily led into this mistake by conventional associations of the word 'spirit' with others such as 'immaterial'.

Now what happens if we follow up this error by trying to define the mode of existence and conditions of knowledge common to all those entities generally termed religious? We find, first of all, that we can point to no single ontological or epistemological category which accommodates all religious entities. Secondly, we find that every major ontological and epistemological category we can devise contains religious as well as secular entities.

Let us take a few illustrative examples from African cultures. First of all, from the Nuer, as described by Evans-Pritchard (1956, pp. 315-16):

'Nuer philosophy is . . . dominated by the idea of kwoth, Spirit. As Spirit cannot be directly experienced by the senses, what we are considering is a conception. Kwoth would indeed, be entirely indeterminate and could not be thought of by Nuer at all were it not that it is contrasted with the idea of cak, creation, in terms of which it can be defined by reference to effects and relations and by the use of symbols and metaphors. But these definitions are only schemata, as Otto puts it, and if we seek for elucidation beyond these terms, a statement of what spirit is thought to be like in itself, we seek of course in vain. Nuer do not claim to know. They say that they are merely doar, simple people, and how can simple people know about such matters? What happens in the world is determined by Spirit, and Spirit can be influenced by prayer and sacrifice. This much they know, but no more'.

For religious objects of radically different epistemological status, we may turn to the Kalabari of the Niger Delta. In the Kalabari view of the world two main epistemological categories obtain—the first that of bodies, the second that of what we may call 'spirits' for want of a better word. Bodies are thought of by Kalabari in much the same terms as we think of material objects. Spirits are rather different. To the ordinary man, they are known only by their effects: he can neither see them, nor hear them, nor indeed have any direct experience of them. Such experience can be had only by experts who have undergone a series of herbal treatments known as 'clearing the eyes and ears', and can in consequence both see and hear spirits. These objects, nevertheless, are thought of as an order of existence entirely different from bodies. Thus, whereas a Kalabari would be as contumacious as we should of someone who talked about a table as being in two places at one time, he would not be so of someone who said the same thing of a spirit: for instance, the dead, who are thought to exist 'in spirit' only, can be talked of without any sense of contradiction as both 'in the sky with God' and as 'in the burial ground' where experts may communicate with them. In this respect they, like Nuer Spirit, are compared with the wind: they are anywhere and everywhere at once. In Kalabari culture, however, the realm of practices which the eye of common-sense would identify as religious is not directed to a range of objects co-extensive with that covered by the term 'Spirits'. Of the three categories of religious objects which we may call Deads, Village Gods, and Water-People, the first two are seen as existing 'in Spirit' only, while the last like human beings have both bodies and spirits: unlike Deads and Village Gods, they can be seen, heard, touched, and smelt by anyone who happens to cross their path.
in the rivers. They are not like the wind: they can be talked of as inhabiting definite localities as the Deads and the Village Gods cannot. Many other gods of primitive peoples could be cited as resembling the Kalabari Water-People in their thorough-going materiality.

A definition of the mode of existence and conditions of knowledge of religious objects which at once differentiated them from non-religious objects and included both Nuer Spirit and Kalabari Water-People must necessarily defeat the imagination: for it would have to include contradictory assertions. Further than this, it seems true to say that the epistemological characteristics of any religious object one can think of are shared with some class of non-religious objects. In the case of Kalabari Water-People this seems obvious enough, for existentially they are of the same order as human beings, tables, etc. Nuer Spirit and similar conceptions would seem at first sight to share their mode of existence with no secular objects; but as Gellner has shown, even entities of this type fall into an epistemological category with others which are not religious, e.g. with certain of the theoretical entities of modern science such as atoms, molecules, and alpha particles. These entities are defined as incapable of direct observation, and statements about them can only be said to be verified by the behaviour of certain characteristics of observable phenomena which are assumed to be ‘symptoms’ of variations in the un-observables (Kneale 1952, pp. 89–113). Thus the increasing pressure of a gas which is heated in a vessel of constant volume is indirect confirmation of the theory that molecules increase their velocity with increase in temperature, given the assumption that the observable pressure of a gas on the walls of its enclosure is the symptom of the impacts of countless unobservable molecules on this wall and that the increase in pressure is a symptom of increase in molecular velocity. Here, just as with the Nuer conception of Spirit, the behaviour of observable objects is held relevant to the truth of what is in principle unobservable, but only by virtue of an assumption that variations in the observable are symptoms of certain variations in the unobservable—an assumption which in both cases can have no further justification.

It appears, then, that even in the case of those entities whose mode of existence and conditions of knowledge remove them furthest from the sphere of ordinary, solid, material things, we find the religious side by side with the secular.

So much for the misleading implication of Tylor’s definition. The more valuable implication is that of analogy between human beings and religious objects generally. Extending this from the context of belief to the context of action, we can say that the value of Tylor’s approach is that it leads us to compare interaction with religious objects and interaction with human beings.

This, of course, will encounter very strong objections. It will be said that so many crucial differences divide the two types of interaction as to make any comparison worthless. Anthropologists have long been drawn to regard the sentiments and actions evoked by religious objects as different in kind from those evoked by secular objects: this point of view came to the fore with Marett (1914) and received new strength from the work of the theologian Otto (1928). But it seems doubtful if the theory of specifically religious sentiments and modes of action will hold water. Thus, the sentiments of awe and reverence which we tend to regard as very closely associated with religious situations in our own culture are replaced by some very different sentiments in the
religions of other parts of the world such as West Africa. A complex of sentiments and emotions common to all religions everywhere is as much of a chimera as an epistemological category which will contain all religious objects. Even within the bounds of the Christian tradition, evidence against the existence of a specifically religious sentiment seems patent in the fact that so many who have claimed close contact with God have not found it necessary to coin any special new terms in describing the feelings and emotions that such contact evoked.

All this was noted a long time ago by William James who, for some curious reason, is commonly misreported by anthropologists as having thought the essence of religion to consist in some peculiar kind of organic thrill. I can hardly do better than quote him (James 1902, pp. 28–9):

'Consider also the religious sentiment which we see referred to in many books as if it were a single sort of mental entity. . . . The moment we are willing to treat the term "religious sentiment" as a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse in alternation, we see that it probably contains nothing of a psychologically specific nature.

There is religious fear, religious love, religious joy and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations; and similarly of all the various sentiments that may be called into play in the lives of religious persons. . . .

As there seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common store house of emotions on which religious objects may draw, so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object and no one specific and essential kind of religious act.'

Though the thinness of the case for a religious sentiment should encourage us to more exploration of the parallels between man-to-man and man-to-god relationships, we must first deal with some apparently widespread contrasts between ordinary human social activity and religious behaviour. Thus, it is undeniable that a great deal of religious behaviour is highly stereotyped, while activity oriented to other human beings contrasts with it in greater flexibility. Again, much religious behaviour is governed by the idea that its objects can be compelled by the actors involved; while behaviour oriented to other human beings usually contrasts with it in a much greater development of the idea that the objects have freedom of choice in their response.

On closer reflection, however, it should be clear that the stereotyping and ideas of compulsive efficacy of human action so markedly developed in very many religious situations are by no means entirely foreign to relations between human beings; nor are the flexibility and ideas of free choice which we tend to associate with inter-human relationships entirely unrepresented in certain religious contexts.

Let us look a little more carefully at the contrast between secular flexibility and religious stereotyping. In an interaction sequence involving two human beings taking up familiar roles in which they are co-operating towards definite ends, experience will have taught each participant the limited predictability of his partner's reactions to his own moves. Alter's reaction to ego on successive occasions will show a wide variation in
response to a given move; and if ego is to achieve the ends he hopes to fulfil through the interaction with any degree of regularity, it is clear that he must be capable of a flexibility of action sufficient to compensate for the effects of alter's response variability and to secure consistent results despite it. This flexibility must be manifested as a capacity for moment-to-moment modification of action in the light of alter's observed reactions. To drive home the force of this, I suggest the example of a mother and her child. On each new day, the mother's response to a given move by the child is likely to vary as a function of such things as rows with her husband and late nights out; and if the child is consistently to secure various favours from its mother, it must be capable of modifying its own behaviour to compensate for her variability.

If now we substitute for the human alter a god, conditions for fulfilment of ego's aims become rather different. First of all, in the majority of contexts of religious behaviour there can be no question of modification of ego's action in the light of the god's reactions, since these are inaccessible to observation. In most cases, what happens is that the reaction is made known to ego by a sign after his part in the interaction is over: in the case of a curative ritual, the patient either gets better or he does not; in the case of a rain ritual, either it pours or it does not. Anyway, ego may get no 'feedback' as to the god's reactions to his behaviour until days, weeks, or months after he has completed it. Then, if the sign is negative, he may initiate another sequence of ritual actions and again wait for the results; and so on. In all this there is no equivalent to the need for moment-to-moment modification of ego's action in the light of alter's reaction; and in the absence of such pressures towards flexibility, stereotyping of action would seem inevitable. The resulting pattern contrasts strongly with most behaviour directed towards human partners; but is not entirely without parallel in this sphere. In quite a few contexts of man-to-man behaviour, for example, the uncertainties arising through the limited predictability of human partners are recognized as threatening to the business on hand; and steps are taken to obviate the danger by explicit definition of a limited number of permissible responses for any stage in the interaction. The result is the stereotyping so characteristic of 'official' correspondence and communication in our culture—a stereotyping whose resemblance to that of religious behaviour has given rise to much of the fun poked at civil servants. A contributory cause of this parallel may be the general tendency for large status differences between actors to be accompanied by stereotyping of their interactions. Since the gods are by definition the status superiors of men, we should expect action directed toward them to resemble in this respect action directed toward human beings of markedly higher status than ego. By corollary, the flexibility associated with the majority of relationships between human beings does come to the fore in certain religious contexts—notably, as we should expect, in those where events which pass for moment-to-moment reaction by the gods replace the more usual situation where such 'feedback' is lacking. A typical case is where one or more human beings interact with a god who is 'possessing' a medium. Amongst the Kalabari of the Niger Delta, for example, a great deal of religious activity takes the form of a highly stereotyped prayer and offering to the gods; and in these stereotyped situations there is no manifestation of the gods in moment-to-moment reaction to what the human congregation is doing: 'the gods are there but we do not see them.' On other occasions, however, one of the gods will be called by a human congregation to come to the community and
possess a medium. What follows is sometimes a spectacular sequence of actions summing up the character of the god, sometimes a conversation between the god and men; but in both these conditions every action of the human congregation secures an observable reaction from the god, and in so far as such reactions have only limited predictability, we find just the same moment-to-moment modification of the congregation’s behaviour in the light of the god’s response as we should expect to see were the god replaced by a man. The other type of situation where the same thing should apply is where the man is confronted with his god in visual, auditory, or other types of hallucination. Here again, his every action has the same moment-to-moment reaction from the god as when the latter is possessing a medium; and once more the facts indicate a change from stereotyping to flexibility. Kalabari doctor-clairvoyants conversing with the dead in cemeteries behave little differently from Kalabari laymen passing the time of day with their fellow men in market places: and Christian mystics who have described their confrontations with God stress the conversational give-and-take of such experiences.

Stereotyping and flexibility, then, are opposite poles of behaviour dominant in religious and non-religious contexts respectively. But this contrast between the two contexts can now be seen as very far from absolute; and it is therefore of no use as a criterion for differentiating the religious from the non-religious.

Much the same conclusions present themselves when we investigate those ideas of compulsion of the object which seem to be much more strongly developed in the context of man’s interaction with his gods than in that of his interaction with fellow men. In no culture is it thought very odd or unusual for one man to refuse another’s request through sheer ‘bloody-mindedness’; but there are relatively few cultures whose religious world-view admits of the possibility that a god may refuse human requests just because he chooses to. Nevertheless, ideas of compelling one’s fellow-men do direct a good deal of secular action; and there are religious contexts in which the wide range of choice open to the gods when addressed by man is a prominent feature of doctrine.

All men, everywhere, are in some degree irked by the freedom of choice enjoyed by those with whom they pass the greater part of their lives; to have the ends that one hopes to see fulfilled with the help of other men constantly menaced by the latter’s freedom is a source of anxiety the world over. The most obvious responses to this form of frustration, by statesmen who mobilize armies to batter neighbours who will not be reasonable, and police to truncheon recalcitrant subjects, have long been the sport of historians. But it is only more recently that students of human relations have drawn attention to the dreams and realities of more subtle methods of compulsion, which probably have as long a history as that of physical violence itself. And here again, the emphasis has been on rulers of men as the principal exponents of such methods—whereas, in truth, the ordinary man of no influence has, through the ages, been as deeply involved as his master in the attempt to compel and curtail the will of those around him.

Even in so-called ‘primitive’ societies, there exists a wealth of subtle techniques intended to ‘change men’s minds’—love magic designed to secure inevitable hopeless infatuation in place of the uncertainties of seduction; potions to compel approbation and spare the social climber from the exertions and hazards of having to win it. In modern Western culture, brain-washing and subliminal advertising are seized upon by power hounds as long-sought means of controlling human behaviour without risking
the mediation of the victims’ faculty of deliberate choice, means of sneaking round the backs of their rational, conscious minds to slug them mentally from behind (Huxley 1939; 1958; Packard 1957; Sargent 1958); while for the Little Man of no position there are the Occult Bookshops with their torrent of popular ‘psychological’ literature which offers him techniques of gaining control in a less ambitious way over the reactions of his acquaintances and employers. Some of the literature of the ‘How to Make friends and Influence People’ genre looks, indeed, as if it might go a long way towards reinstilling a popular belief in the compulsive power of the spoken word.

The idea that a man can develop wide powers for restricting his fellow men’s freedom of choice is thus a very live one in all societies we know. Nevertheless, in the context of social relationships among human beings, the obvious recalcitrance of one’s fellows provides continuous empirical demonstration of the limits beyond which they cannot be compelled. On the other hand, the frequent unavailability of gods to continuous observation, which we found to be an important correlate of action stereotyping, also implies a lack of direct evidence of their uncoercibility. True, the benefit that fails to materialize when a god has been invoked to provide it might throw doubt on the compulsive efficacy of human action in this sphere: but in a polytheistic world-view such doubt can be allayed by postulating interference from another god who, in his turn, is none the less susceptible to compulsion through prayer; and so on. Given that in many cases there is no further evidence which would differentiate between the two alternative explanations of failure, and given the anxiety-reducing value of beliefs which imply the elimination of free choice, it is likely that in such contexts explanations stressing interference by other gods and retaining ideas of the coercibility of gods in general will prevail over explanations which accept the failure as evidence that ‘Man proposes, God disposes’. Out of this grows the common paradox of the god who greatly exceeds his worshippers in power, yet is under their close control.

Where there is monotheism, of course, such developments would seem to be ruled out by the absence of alternative agents to save the idea of compulsion in cases of prayer failure. From this assumption arises the hypothesis, which merits testing, that in a sample of world religions monotheism will be found highly correlated with the attribution of wide freedom of choice to the religious object, while polytheism will be associated with ideas of wide or total coercibility of the gods.

As we found with stereotyping of religious action, in the less common situation where the reactions of the gods to human beings are directly observed rather than merely inferred from eventual results, even polytheistic religions are forced to incorporate the possibility that the gods may not choose to accede to human requests. Thus, in Kalabari religion, one prays and makes offerings to a god in order to obtain a certain result. In most contexts, the god himself is not observably present; and the success of one’s actions often becomes apparent only later when the result prayed for either materializes or does not. Normally, too, prayer in the correct terms and offering on the correct scale are thought of as sufficient conditions of success. If there is failure despite correct approach, this is not simply interpreted as due to the god’s inscrutable freedom of choice: it is due either to interference by another god, or to a mistake on the part of the diviner who advised as to which of the gods was concerned in the situation. Sometimes, however, the god is visibly and audibly present when requests are made to him. This happens when
he is addressed by human beings while possessing a medium; and, under these conditions, one quite frequently encounters a point-blank inscrutable refusal to accede to the request of a petitioner which contrasts sharply with the prevailing view stressing the coercive power of human address to the gods.

Here again, we see that another common point of contrast between the religious and the non-religious is by no means absolute: hence, it is no more useful as a differentiating criterion than stereotyping versus flexibility.

These findings justify us in making more explicit use of the implication of analogy between human beings and religious objects, which we pointed out earlier as the valuable aspect of Tylor's definition. For purposes of the definition put forward here, it will be assumed that in every situation commonly labelled religious we are dealing with action directed towards objects which are believed to respond in terms of certain categories—in our own culture those of purpose, intelligence and emotion—which are also the distinctive categories for the description of human action. The application of these categories leads us to say that such objects are 'personified'. The relationships between human beings and religious objects can be further defined as governed by certain ideas of patterning and obligation such as characterize relationships among human beings. In short, Religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society. And for completeness' sake, we should perhaps add the rider that this extension must be one in which human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position vis-à-vis their non-human alters—a qualification necessary to exclude pets from the pantheon of gods.

What are the criteria of a good definition in this sphere and how far does the approach outlined above measure up to them? First of all, we are concerned with a term which has a clear common usage in our own culture. To avoid confusion, therefore, any definition which we put forward as the basis of its use in anthropology should conform as closely as possible to the usage of common sense. At the same time, we must look for the universal aspect of the phenomena commonly denoted by the term: for a culture-bound label is of no use in cross-cultural comparisons. This universal aspect, fortunately, is not hard to discover; for laymen have freely used the word 'religion' to refer to happenings observed in a wide variety of cultures other than our own. Secondly, we should bear in mind that members of several other academic disciplines—notably Psychology and History—are also bent on the study of 'comparative religion'; and our definition should be sufficiently congruent with their assumptions for the results they achieve to be compared with our own findings.

Our approach seems to measure up fairly well to these requirements. It sticks close to common sense in preserving the connexion between 'religion' and other terms such as 'god' and 'spirit'; and it tallies closely with the assumption of psycho-analysts and historians. Many anthropologists, of course, may continue to object that by laying all emphasis on the similarities between man-to-god and man-to-man relationships, we have missed the crucial 'something extra' which gives the real essence of religion. I have gone to considerable pains to show that in fact there is no 'something extra' which distinguishes all religious relationships from all secular relationships. In so far as the feeling of dissatisfaction persists despite such a demonstration, I suggest that the mode of difference varies from society to society and has no universal features whatsoever. As
far as I can see, the way in which religious relationships are seen to differ from secular relationships in any given society is much the same as the way in which any one category of secular relationships is seen to differ from all other categories of such relationships. If this is true, then to go on asking for the ‘something extra’ is to cry for the moon.

There still remains one very large question to be asked about our definition. That is, is it scientifically useful? Does it point to a number of possible dimensions along which religious phenomena can be seen to vary? Does it suggest testable hypotheses about the way in which variation along these dimensions is connected with other social facts? As I said before, definitions are mere tools, standing or falling by their usefulness; so the last section of this paper will be taken up with a fairly lengthy discussion of some of the hypotheses which our approach suggests.

An obvious consequence of defining religion as an extension of social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society is the assumption that variables found useful in the analysis of man-to-man relationships will also be found useful in the analysis of man-to-god relationships; and in what follows, we shall select one of the most important of such variables to see how far it helps us in handling religious phenomena.

Two poles of relationship can be distinguished in the sphere of interpersonal behaviour among human beings. At the one pole, we have a situation well illustrated by the relationship between two unmarried lovers of equal financial and social standing in modern Western society. In such a relationship, ego’s action is directed entirely towards obtaining certain responses in alter which he values intrinsically and towards giving certain responses to alter whose discharge is of similar intrinsic value to him. We may call this a pure communion relationship. At the other pole, let us take the example of a ‘business’ relationship between two unscrupulous financiers. Here, ego values intrinsically neither his own nor alter’s responses, alter being treated as a mere means of arriving at a goal which can be defined without reference to the behaviour included in the relationship. We may call this a pure manipulation relationship. In between these two poles, of course, there is a continuum of relative importance of communion and manipulation aspects, on which every human relationship falls somewhere or other.2

As might be expected granting the validity of our definition of religion, the same dimension of variability is important in the relationships of man with his gods. Its significance is brought out in Nadel’s (1954) pioneering work on Nupe religion, in which he uses the sort of religious experiences and activities described by William James (1902) as comparisons for the African material. The wide-spread differences both in content and in ends subserved by religious behaviour in the two cultures seem to have surprised him; but he is too good an ethnographer to have squeezed Nupe religion into a Jamesian mould and has left us instead with some stimulating, if unsystematic, comparisons. The point that emerges clearly is that James’s American and European case material is mainly drawn from religious relationships of an extreme character in which sheer communion with God is stressed to the virtual exclusion of benefits accruing either in life or after death; while Nupe religion by contrast lays emphasis almost exclusively on the manipulation of God for his worldly benefits of health, wealth, and increase. If, as I have a hunch, the communion aspect of religious relationships in all Christian denominations in our culture is becoming more and more important than manipulation, we need to remind ourselves very forcibly of the existence of this dimension of variation.
when we are observing alien religious systems where the position may be reversed. The sort of conditions that precipitate conversion, for instance, will be quite different in the case of a primarily communion relationship and in that of a primarily manipulative one concerned with various benefits of a material kind; and a member of the Church of England is unlikely to find insights derived from his own conversion experiences very helpful in a study of, say, the spread of fertility cults or even of Christianity in West Africa. (Although membership of a religious denomination may be valuable to the anthropological student of alien religions in so far as it gives him some modicum of sympathy with the psychological reality of religious relationships, it can clearly also be a drawback in so far as it may obscure insight into the sustaining conditions of such relationships, at least where these differ widely in character from those of the observer.)

So much for awareness of this dimension as a safeguard against the anthropologist’s ethnocentricity in religious matters. In fact, the majority of religious relationships likely to be studied will have both communion and manipulation aspects and any comprehensive analysis and interpretation must reckon with both.

Several British anthropologists, prominent among them Forde and Worsley (Forde 1958a; 1959; Worsley 1956) have recently analysed systems of religious relationships in their manipulative aspect, i.e., as instrumental to the fulfilment of the various external goals pursued by the congregation members. Pushed to its logical conclusion, such analysis may prove to have great explanatory value in such matters as the co-ordination of cult structure to social structure and the extinction and proliferation of religious relationships generally. A theory of god-to-group co-ordination capable of replacing those derived from Durkheim can perhaps be elaborated from it as follows:

Assumption I: The individual member of any society pursues a given goal with several different levels of social-structural reference. Such a goal will generally be pursued with different references on different occasions. To take an example, a member of a given social category in an African village community may actively pursue the goals of health, wealth, and increase for the village as a whole, for the descent-group of which he is a member and for himself as an individual. Generally, his concern with one of these structural levels on a given occasion excludes for the moment his concern with the others.

Assumption II: The religious relationships in which the members of a society are involved function as instruments to the achievement of their various goals. Where there is any change in the structure of such goals, the religious relationships will always change and develop towards the point at which they can be seen by those involved as severally making a contribution to all of their goals at all of the latters’ various levels of reference. Where the structure of goals becomes stabilized, this point is one at which the system of religious relationships also becomes stabilized.

Assumption III: In a society where the relations between segments of the total group are markedly competitive, the fact that a god and its cult are seen as contributing to the members’ goals at the total group level of reference ipso facto implies that they cannot be seen as contributing to the same goals at the next lower level of reference, i.e. that of the segments. Thus, a cult which is defined as contributing to collective welfare of a group
clearly cannot be seen as contributing to the welfare of any one of its segments in contexts where such welfare is defined as achieving benefits at the expense of the other segments. By converse, where relations between segments of a group are not markedly competitive, relevance of a god to members’ goals at their total group level of reference does not debar it from relevance to the same goals at the segment level of reference.

From these assumptions there follow generalizations about the sort of cult structure which is likely to arise in connexion with a given social system. First of all, in the case of a system in which relations between the segments of a group at any level in the whole are markedly competitive, every level will have its own set of cults distinct from that of all other levels in the system. In each level, furthermore, there will be at least as many distinct, though mutually equivalent, cults as there are competing segments in it. At the lowest level—that of the individual—an alternative to the last condition may be the soliciting by many individuals of a single god whose culturally defined lack of concern with the welfare of any particular social group makes him a suitable instrument of individualistic aspirations through an implication of his readiness to sell to the highest bidder irrespective of provenance.

In a system where relations between segments at any level are predominantly non-competitive and harmonious, there may be one or more cults co-ordinated to the group at the top level and no additional cults co-ordinated to its segments or to the segments of the latter. The minimal intensity of competition which would give rise to this type of situation is, however, probably fairly rare.

To take a concrete illustration of the first type of system, let us consider a Kalabari village community. This consists of a congeries of apically unrelated descent-groups whose interrelations are normally characterized by strong competition. The component individuals of each such descent-group are also prone to compete vigorously among each other for headship and other positions of influence within the group. As we should predict on the basis of our assumptions, each of the three levels, village, descent-group and individual has its distinctive set of cults: thus at village level, we find the cult of the Founding Heroes who are considered as instruments of collective village welfare, while at descent-group level we find the apical ancestors considered as instruments of collective descent-group welfare, each descent-group having its own one or more ancestors. At the level of the individual, though there is no co-ordination of a distinct god and its cult to each man, we find individualistic competitive aspirations catered for by the cults of the Water-People, who are defined as associated with none of the enduring social groups of the community and as conferring their benefits on all comers on a scale proportional to offerings made. The life of these various cults is maintained to an important extent by the decisions of individuals as to which they will make use of to meet a given contingency; and many Kalabari explain their choice in terms very similar to those of our assumptions. Thus, it is commonly believed that only the Water-People are capable of conferring on an individual a degree of wealth that is excessive in relation to that of fellow members of his community and descent group. For such wealth, it is said, one would not go to the founding Heroes of the village, or to the descent-group ancestors; for both of these are concerned alike with the welfare of all those under their surveillance and would hardly benefit one of their charges above the others. The Water-People, on
the other hand, ‘choose no one’. They ‘look to see what one carries in one’s palm for them’ and give accordingly.

As I said above, systems in which competition between segments at any level of grouping is virtually absent are probably rare; so I find it hard to provide examples. However, if Benedict was in any way correct in her analysis of Zuni culture and her thesis of Zuni non-competitiveness, this people provides the sort of contrast to Kalabari which our generalizations would lead us to predict (Benedict 1935). Thus, descriptions of Zuni religious organization place very strong emphasis on cults whose effective congregation is the community as a whole and stress the lack of cults which could be seen as catering mainly for competitive aspirations at sectional or individual levels. Although many priestly offices and religious duties are vested in particular clan sections of the community, those concerned do what they have to do on behalf of Zuni as a whole and not on behalf of their own clans. Again, as Benedict points out, the Guardian Spirit cult which is so vital an instrument of individualistic aspirations over much of North America finds no equivalent in Zuni.

This attempt at explanation of the relations between cult-structure and social structure on non-Durkheimian lines also provides us with a broad answer to the general question, still sometimes asked, as to what is the social structural significance of religious activity. Given the assumption that religious systems tend to take such forms as are seen to make a contribution to all the goals of a society’s members at all their levels of structural reference, it follows that where the constituent units of a wider group are in competition, cults will tend to be adopted by these units which contribute to achievement of the goals involved in this competition; and to the extent that the competition involves mutual hostility of the units involved, these cults can be seen as agents of disintegration acting in opposition to the cult concerned with the collective welfare of the inclusive group. Where, on the other hand, the constituent units are not markedly in competition, the god concerned with the welfare of the inclusive group will be adequate to their needs, and cults co-ordinated to these units and contributing to factional hostilities and disintegration are unlikely to appear. In other words, our approach leads us to look at religious relationships in their manipulative aspects as means toward accomplishing what those participating in them want to do: if what the participants want to do involves disintegrative competition, then the world of their gods is likely to include some who are defined as helping their human partners in such competition; or if what they want to do involves little competition, their world of gods is likely to be more concerned with the collective welfare and harmony of all. In a sense, then, religious activity tends to be as integrative or as disintegrative as the particular congregation or individual wants it to be.

An explanation of the co-ordination of religious system to social structure based on treatment of the gods as a set of instruments meeting human wants does of course imply a process occurring over time whereby the existing structure of wants acts to develop in cult certain religious ideas selected from a pool available to the society. The processes whereby this pool is kept filled have no necessary connection with the processes of selection; indeed, in many cases they may be quite random relative to these latter as when trading contracts with neighbouring and alien cultures keep the members of a community acquainted with outline features of a number of cults which until the
appropriate ‘want situation’ arises will not be utilized. The most illuminating analogy here appears to be that of Natural Selection operating on an animal population which has a certain fairly constant rate of spontaneous random mutation.

Given this assumption, the religious-social structural co-ordinations found in societies which are more or less static when observed by the anthropologist must be regarded as the outcome of a selection process which took place in an unobservable and often unrecorded past; and our theory will accordingly be strengthened by studies of ongoing religious change which demonstrate the universal operation of the selection of religious concepts in the light of wants and desires standard to the social group involved in the change. This sort of analysis of religious change has been commonly enough practised among historians such as Tawney and Weber (Tawney 1948; Weber in Gerth & Mills 1948); but it is only recently that anthropologists in England have taken up the tune. One of the first to do so was Worsley, who recently made a vivid analysis of Melanesian Cargo Cults (Worsley 1958), treating them as responses to new structural developments and hence to new (super-tribal) levels of structural reference for existing goals of action. Worsley shows that the pre-Cargo cult religious system of the peoples he deals with contained nothing which could be seen as contributing to their goals of action at the new level of reference and interprets the Cargo cults as being developed as fillers of this gap.

In my own field-work amongst the Kalabari of the Niger Delta, treatment of the traditional system of gods as a system of instruments seen as contributing to the fulfilment of the standard action goals at their various levels of reference has made the curiously selective effect of incoming Christian ideas readily understandable as the outcome of recent changes in village social structure. In Kalabari communities generally, there is a great emphasis on the incompatibility of the cults of the Village Founding Heroes with the new religious ideology; while at the same time there exists an elaborate series of rationalizations justifying continuing attention to descent-group ancestors and to the Water-People. The selectivity is all the more striking for the fact that these latter rationalizations are, from a logical point of view, no more and no less valid as justification for continuing the cult of the Village Heroes than as justification for continuing that of ancestors and Water-People. All becomes clear, however, when we remember that the Village Heroes have special relevance to the collective welfare of the community as a whole, the ancestors special relevance to collective descent-group welfare, and the Water-People special relevance to individual aspirations. The last fifty years have seen the gradual withering away of solidarity at village level, the advent of the Pax Britannica having made otiose the crucial defensive functions of this level of organization. On the other hand, the descent-groups have lost no whit of their former importance, and individualistic status strivings remain as characteristic of the culture as ever. Given these structural changes and the respective instrumental relevances of the three categories of god, the selective elimination of the cult of the Village Heroes could readily have been predicted. In the Melanesian situation, the addition of another level of structural reference to the standard action goals of the population was followed by the adoption of a further series of cults. Here, on the other hand, we have a reversed situation, where dropping out of the top level of structural reference is being followed by dropping-out of the corresponding series of cults.
A significant though more or less incidental contribution to the analysis of religious change was made by Nadel in his Nupe work, in which he mentions the current system of goals pursued by members of a society as an important determinant of cult importations. His particular contribution was to point out that recent importations into the Nupe cult system form only a limited selection from among the wide variety of models available to the population, who are acquainted with them through their contact with representatives of alien cultures but utilize only such as are seen to have relevance to current requirements. One hopes that future studies of religious change, by drawing attention to the unutilized as well as the utilized components of the pool of religious ideas available to a given population, will have similar relevance to testing the applicability of the Mutation-Selection model to this sphere.

If we assume that the gods of any population have become co-ordinated to individuals and the various levels of grouping that include them as a result of a process of selection based on perceived relevance to particular goals at particular levels of structural reference, we can expect to find 'written in' to the character of any god some implication of relevance in the particular social context where it has become fixed. In fact, so far as correlations between character and structural position are discoverable, it would seem that character may be either the independent or the dependent of the two variables. In the situation where it is the independent variable, the character of a god which forms part of the pool of unutilized models will determine its structural fate when changing conditions give it new relevance to human needs. Thus, in the West African coast belt, extensive trade linkages give any community a large pool of unutilized religious models in the shape of the gods of its culturally alien neighbours; but whether or not the cult of a god spreads beyond the group with whom it originated depends partly, at least, on whether or not there is written in to the god's character an implication of exclusive relevance to the needs of that group. Contrast, for example, the fixed, static social co-ordinations of the Dahomean Clan-Founding Heroes (defined as exclusively concerned with the interests of their own descendants), with the continuous spread and congregational expansion of the cults of the vodun, the great gods in charge of the various natural elements who have no implication of restricted social relevance built in to their character. One might indeed say that the peculiar congregational structure of Dahomean religion, so much of it marked by recruitment virtually unconnected with social provenance and resulting in ritual groupings coincident with none of the enduring structural units of the kingdom, is a function of the character peculiarities of the vodun (Herskovits 1938).

Another context where character probably determines the type of social co-ordination reached is that of the Dead conceived as surviving in personal form. Whether a given population has or has not a developed cult of the Dead, in so far as the latter are seen as surviving on the other side of the grave, they are very generally considered to have passed over with the same values as they held during life. Where their cult is developed, this definition of their character implies a relevance restricted to the social contexts within which their various obligations lay during life. Thus, when the head of a Yoruba or Ibo patrilineage dies, his ghost will be seen as relevant to the needs of his descent-group more or less exclusively. Hence the cult of a given Dead tends to become co-ordinated to the group within which his principal obligations lay during life and is
highly unlikely to be adopted by individuals and groups outside this social context. In so far as this inflexibility of co-ordination appears not to hold, the exceptions are likely to be the 'bad Dead', the ghosts of those who, during life, conducted themselves with ruthless disregard of the social obligations laid down for them by society. Among the Kalabari of the Niger Delta, for example, these, in so far as they carry over their amorality with them, can often be utilized for the purposes of anybody who approaches them with sufficient inducement, be his ends good or evil. Here again characterological definition would seem to determine the pattern of social co-ordination.

By contrast, character may be the dependent variable; as where implications of relevance to the particular interests of the worshipping group are the outcome of a steady process of moulding by members of this group, a process of wishful reinterpretation of the body of existing doctrine. An example of this moulding process is provided by Tawney's study (1945) of the modification of Christian doctrine under the pressure of a growing tendency for the individualistic pursuit of material wealth in sixteenth-century Europe: such a pursuit of wealth was in fact a condition of damnation in earlier Christian doctrine; but with Christianity continuing as the religion of a class of people for whom this became irresistibly the primary value in life, it suffered gradual reinterpretation at their hands until financial individualism of a most ruthless sort became not a condition of damnation but, if successful, a sign of election for the enjoyment of bliss in the world hereafter.

The structure of the Bible, indeed, seems particularly fitted to make the character of the Judaeo-Christian god function as a dependent variable in relation to its social context: for different parts of the book provide widely differing models, and it is possible to select from amongst them a god congruent with almost any social setting. Thus where there is a readiness to identify with the Chosen People of the Old Testament, the latter's models can be easily utilized to cater for the aspirations of a group in conflict with others. New Testament models, on the other hand, are more easily connected with universalistic aspirations.

Our treatment of a human population's relationships with its gods as a system of social relationships viewed in its manipulative aspect does, I think it will be conceded, suggest a wide variety of hypotheses about the relations between religious forms and other socio-cultural variables. These hypotheses cover questions both of god-to-group co-ordination and of the character of the gods themselves. Equally, however, this type of treatment suggests very forcibly the limitations on our attempts to predict the type of religious organization which will supervene in a given socio-cultural situation. In general, the gods as instruments are invited to intervene in human affairs in those situations where the apparatus of empirically-tried techniques currently available leaves a rather wide margin of uncertainty as to the accomplishment of a desired end. But in this position, the gods are functionally equivalent to a multitude of other non-empirical instruments which are of a secular nature, e.g. charms, medicines, and the host of techniques which utilize the principle that the symbolization of a desired end brings about its fulfilment. Thus, from the point of view of an instrumental analysis, whether a fighter pilot setting out on a hazardous mission prays to a god or packs a luck charm is a matter of chance.

This conclusion gives the lie to one of the strongest of anthropology's Durkheimian
prejudices about religion; for, in asserting that either religious or secular means may be invoked to attain any end in any social context, it rejects the traditional association of religion with collective action and the attainment of socially approved goals, and of secular non-empirical techniques with individualistic action and anti-social goals. Such an association is generally supported by citing a selection of societies in which secular techniques satisfy individualistic aspirations and religious relationships the collective aspirations of wider social groupings. But the selection is a biased one and can be countered without difficulty by citing a large number of societies (e.g. many in the West African and North American culture areas) in which religious relationships between a god and an individual are considered essential instruments of the latter’s competitive and even anti-social aspirations.

In fact, whether any new situation demanding supplementation of empirical by non-empirical instruments is met by religious or secular means depends on which are more prominent in the stock of unutilized models available to the individual or group concerned at the time. And this is a question which will depend on such incidental factors as the cultural make-up of neighbouring communities and the particular idiom used by individual innovators.

As we pointed out earlier, every man-to-god relationship can be assigned a place on the communion/manipulation dimension of variability; and to the extent that the communion aspect is important in a given case, by so much interpretations based on the manipulative aspect are inadequate. This, of course, is true in man-to-man relations. To the extent that a relationship is purely ‘business’, so far is it capable of explanation in terms of the ends it is set up to serve; but as more and more of a ‘personal’ element enters in, so this sort of explanation becomes less and less applicable. It is fine for the choice of a partner in a marketing enterprise, disillusioningly applicable to the choice of a marriage partner, and quite inapplicable to the choice of a lover; and in so far as many religious relationships are as near the latter extreme as they are the former, the need for a complementary approach is acute.

Two types of question suggest themselves here. The first is, why do some societies like the Nupe have religious systems characterized by an extreme emphasis on manipulating the gods as tools for the achievement of health, wealth, and issue, while other societies such as our own show a very high loading of emphasis on sheer communion divorced from the seeking of other benefits? The second is, how far can the particular characteristics of a society’s various gods be explained in terms of the goals involved in the communion aspect of social relations?

We are hampered in answering these two questions by the rudimentary state of theorizing about the communion aspect. Some anthropologists still see social systems as made up of a myriad parts all grinding away madly to produce maximum cohesion, neglecting the goals and values actuating their members. Others cock a snook at cohesion and look at a system of social relationships as a set of tools serving the participants’ material consumption goals. Few have acted upon the truism stressed by Linton (1945) that social relations are what they are partly because of the participants’ continued seeking after a certain give and take of love, hate, approbation, contempt, dominance, submission, and other kinds of action and reaction seen, not as instruments, but as valuable in themselves. It is true that some workers have looked in this direction;
but, in general, they have concentrated exclusively on the pursuit of approbation and dominance—a rather narrow part of the total range of these communion strivings.

In search of people who have been sensitive to the complexity of the communion aspect of social relationships, one turns naturally to the psycho-analysts. Unfortunately their theories on this subject multiply like rabbits; their concern with problems definition and empirical testing has lagged sadly behind their speculations. Nevertheless, they are the only people who have anything to say in this sphere; and certain persistent themes do emerge through the riot of their often conflicting ideas. One such is the tenet that the extent to which any particular type of give-and-take of response is fostered in one of a person’s roles will affect the extent to which he actively seeks the same give-and-take of response in his other roles. Thus, the degree to which, say, discharge of anger is developed in one role will affect and be affected by the degree to which aggression is cultivated in other roles played by the same person. Such an interdependence will involve both roles taken at different periods of the person’s life-history, and also roles taken up in different social contexts during a given phase of the life-history. In so far as one can summarize the general view, it seems to be that roles succeeding one another along the time dimension will tend each to reflect the various types of communion striving—for love, hate, approbation, etc.—that have been fostered in earlier contexts. On the other hand, the several roles held by a person at a given phase of his life-history will tend to strike a balance in this respect: thus Parsons (1952) and Homans (1951) have both suggested that in any social system the field of impersonal relationships will always tend to be balanced somewhere else in the system by relationships that place heavy stress on personal affection, and that the more the field of impersonal relationships expands, the more the remaining relationships will stress such affection. Homans treats the contrasting relationships with father and mother’s brother in unilineal descent systems along these lines. Parsons gives a similar analysis of changes in the marital relationships in the United States, treating what he regards as the greater and greater emotional loading of the attitude toward one’s spouse as a counter-weight to the increasing depersonalization of ‘business’ relations.

At the present stage of anthropological theorizing, it is not at all easy to see how these concepts fit into the main stream; but they do seem to provide some of the only clues available as to how we might set about studying those variables of religious relationships not covered by an analysis of their manipulative aspects. Given that we treat roles played vis-à-vis gods and roles played vis-à-vis men as parts of a unitary system, then it follows that variations in the communion content of relations with men must be interdependent with variations in the communion content of relations with the gods. If a balance of love, hate, and the rest of it is to be struck, this will be in the total field of people’s relationships which includes both men and gods.

Work exploring this type of assumption has been done principally in America and, to date, is suggestive rather than scholarly. However, as it is suggestions rather than scholarship we are looking for in the present context, a couple of articles seem worth quoting by way of illustration.

In the first of these (Bushnell 1958), the author deals with a society in which a relationship of great intensity and affection exists between mother and child, but in which the mother withdraws herself abruptly when the child has reached about three
years of age. For the female child in this society, growing up and marrying brings back the possibility of a further series of such warm, affectionate involvements in the role of mother. But for the male child, there is no equivalent in later life to the warmth, affection, and security received in this early period: both friendship and sexual relations later on are marked by insecurity, distrust, and little emotional depth. The author correlates with this situation the peculiar emotional intensity with which the cult of the Beneficent Virgin has become invested in this society; here, it would seem, the balance between types of relationships has not been worked out in the field of purely human relations, but in the wider field which includes relations with the gods. In the second article, also by an American (Wallace 1958), more suggestions along these lines emerge during a discussion of cultural changes mediated by religious experts. In speculating as to how an individual can suddenly take on a new social role whereby he frees himself to a great extent from involvement in certain crucial communion relationships, the author points out that exchange of these relationships with human beings for similar ones with gods may be one of the most important factors in enabling him to do this. As one example he quotes the acquisition of a personal Guardian Spirit in North American societies, an acquisition which enables the man concerned to satisfy his need for dependence and subordination with reference to a god and hence to act in a liberated, independent fashions *vis-à-vis* his parents and other close associates. Here again, we have a case where the majority of a population works out its balance of communion in the wider social field including both gods and man.

It will be noted that I use the word ‘balance’ here, in preference to terms such as ‘compensation’, ‘substitution’ and ‘projection’ more familiar in psycho-analytic literature. This use is an intentional rejection of the direction of causality implied in the usual psycho-analytic conceptual schemes. The tendency of such schemes is to suggest that religious relationships are always a sort of ‘second best’ for human ones; whereas it seems to me that to do justice to the facts such a simple view is quite inadequate. Love and other satisfying communion relationships in our own society have been frequently given up for the more pressing demands of relations with a god: indeed, in an institution like the Catholic Church, someone who was applying for priestly office and appeared to be making no sacrifice of rich human relationships in order to be a servant of God would be an object of grave doubt.

One might suggest a number of very different reasons for the readiness of some people in all societies to throw up human for divine communion. At one extreme, some people’s gods are like prostitutes: for those who can pay, they give more of a sort than ordinary human partners in return for a great deal less effort on the part of their clients. At the other extreme, they may demand far more effort and sacrifice than any human being, but may provide in return a perfection for those involved which quite eclipses the richest of their human involvements; they may, for example, combine in one person roles which are separated in the human social fields of their worshippers, e.g. those of mother, father, and spouse. For such reasons as these, our approach to studying the communion aspects of religion must be one that looks at a person’s total social field of men and gods as one in which causal relations can have all possible directions: gods of unimaginable delight can seduce their worshippers away from men just as effectively as arid relationships with men can precipitate a turn towards the gods.
From all this, one answer to our question about the loadings of communion and manipulation in religion seems to be that those religions with a highly manipulative emphasis are found in conjunction with human social systems whose communion aspects are ‘balanced’ in the sense sketched above; whilst those religions with a very strong element of communion occur where there is a similarly strong imbalance in the human social system. Whether the nature of the gods fostered the imbalance in the human sector, or whether the human imbalance nourished the gods must be a matter for historical research in each particular case.

Another possible answer to the same question seems of particular relevance to the history of Western Culture. Variation of religious relationships along the communion/manipulation dimension could be connected with changes in the importance of scientific thinking. Science versus Religion has been a cause célèbre in much recent writing by well-known scientists, of whom Julian Huxley (1957) has been one of the more notable contributors. Huxley and most other workers in the non-human sciences have tended to assume that as a wider and wider field of phenomena was covered by scientific explanation, so the field of relevance of the gods would shrink, eventually to nothing. Certainly, if we look at the purely manipulative aspect of religious relationships, this seems a likely outcome: for as empirical science broadens its scope, room for belief in godly intervention as determining the results of various life crises becomes progressively reduced. This is so, at least for those who cannot tolerate the more blatant forms of contradiction in their belief systems. However, to infer from this the eventual demise of religion is to overlook the communion aspect of religious relationships, which is not directly affected by the advance of science. As this advance continues, it seems likely that the manipulative significance of our religious beliefs will be continuously eroded while communion remains.

Here of course, we touch on a very controversial point; for Huxley and others maintain that the scientific outlook has made logically absurd not only the idea of gods as interveners in the events of the physical world, but the very idea of gods at all. These are views which hold wide currency among Western intelligentsia at the present day; but the banner of ‘Rationalism’ which they hold up to support their picture of a godless world is in one sense a banner of limited perspective which may well be abandoned by a future and no less scientific generation. For ‘Rationalism’ in the twentieth century implies the programme of holding testable beliefs only and of acting on the assumption that connexions between events in the future will continue to resemble connexions between events observed in the past. As philosophers now acknowledge, no further justification of such a programme can be found which does not appeal to the very principles involved. It is in other words a programme which has causes deep in the roots of our nature, but one which has no rationale; and as such its status is no different from a programme which accepts faith as sufficient ground for believing in a god or gods. Where a man is faced with certain statements that are empirically testable and others that are not, there is nothing logically absurd in his applying the rationalist programme to the testable statements and the programme of faith to the untestables. If the gods are so defined that no observations are relevant to the truth or falsehood of statements about them, such a scheme of action removes them from the rationalist purview and subjects them to the trials of faith. It may be simpler to live out one’s life
applying a single logical programme to all beliefs, but the man who applies a second programme to beliefs about which the first can say nothing is certainly no more or less logical than he who applies only one; and as we have seen, the pressures to behave in this way may be very powerful.

To sum up on this point, it looks as if the first flush of twentieth-century Logical Positivism led to a godless world-picture for an intellectual élite strongly valuing logical consistency in their beliefs; but the later elaborations of Positivism in which the implications of the position have been fully followed up leave the picture open for further religious developments. Having been thrown out with the bath-water, the baby bids fair to return through the window. For the reasons given above, it seems likely that future developments in our own culture will involve not the disappearance of religion, but a greater and greater emphasis on its communion aspect. Such a development, indeed, seems to have been going on for some time in sections of the Protestant Church, which has done a good deal of reinterpretation of dogma that formerly seemed to stress the functions of the Almighty as provider in the material world.

A final topic which seems usefully dealt with in terms of the manipulation/com- munion dimension of variation concerns the relations of those people known as prophets and shamans to the other members of their societies. In most groups where the relationships of the majority with their gods are primarily means of obtaining the prosaic benefits of health, wealth, and issue, we still generally find a few individuals whose religious relationships contrast with this situation in a striking fashion. Their involvements with their gods are talked of with great stress on elements of love, dependence, and admiration; and in many cases they may well be people of unusual personality structure whose communion goals cannot be easily fulfilled in any of the various possible fields of human relationship laid down by their society as standard. For example, I think here of certain Kalabari possession priestesses whose gods are conceptualized as so persecuting and aggressive towards them that one is led to suspect a paranoiac personality for whose response requirements the purely human social fields of their communities cannot cater. Many such people play a markedly creative role in their cultures, introducing both religious innovations and wider social changes. Indeed, Wallace, in the article quoted above, suggests that for the introducer of any radical social innovation touching on the basic moral norms of the community, intense communion relations with a loving and approving god, who is seen as the ultimate sponsor of the changes, may be an essential condition for the maintenance of sufficient resolve to carry his programme through: this, because in challenging the basic moral norms of his society, he probably sacrifices the love and approval of most of his human nearest and dearest. This may be one very good reason why moral changes are generally hung on a religious peg.

The contrasting types of religious involvement shown by prophets and their congregations are well illustrated through the history of Judaeo-Christianity and of Islam, (see for example Evans-Pritchard 1949, pp. 1-27). Here, as elsewhere, such individuals as Moses and the Old Testament Prophets, Christ and Mahomet are clearly people of exceptional personality; and it is likely that the conditions which led to their developing intense communion relationships outside the purely human context were seldom present in the general congregation who were influenced by their ideas. Often enough, it is an
implication of manipulative relevance written into the prophet’s definition or redefinition of his god which ‘sells’ the latter to his followers—in the case of Christianity and Islam the promise of present comforts and future bliss conditional on certain behaviour observances. Much of the phrasing of the character of a god in such circumstances is carried out by people involved with him in a way largely unparalleled in the congregation at large; and this wide difference of attitude can be a source of considerable tension between prophet and laymen, the prophet continually remonstrating against the ‘worldly’ manipulative approach of the rabble which he sees as an affront and an outrage to the god. This sort of prophetic exasperation has been well documented for Judaism in a recent comparative study (Rowley 1956, pp. 111–20).

In the long run, of course, the rabble win; and there is an emotional ‘dessication’ of the ritual resulting, as in present-day Christianity, in performances whose routinization and lack of emotional involvement seem strangely incongruous with the ideas of the give-and-take of love recurring throughout the verbal part of the service. In many societies studied by anthropologists we get an even stronger impression of ‘dessication’ in many of the religious relationships; though in this context we are generally not in a position to confirm the sort of interpretation outlined above. Nevertheless, contexts in which we have the historical depth we need do give us a useful warning about the limitations which we may expect to encounter in trying to interpret religious forms where such depth is lacking. Let us take for example the religious forms of the Kalabari fishing-villages in the Niger Delta. In each community, we find the cult of a hero-god who, sometime in the distant past, lived as a human being, gave the community the code of norms it should live by and, finally, disappeared into the sky. Now, in one village, this god may be male, in the next female, and in the next male again. As regards the manipulative aspect of the situation, however, there is no parallel variation in the implications of benefit for the community written into the definitions of the various gods. Further, there seems no variation in the general socio-cultural make-up of the community concomitant with the variation in sex of its tutelary god. Though frustrating to any anthropologist not content with mere description, this is just the sort of situation that diachronic data on religious development would lead us to expect: the individuals responsible for the original formulations of the natures of the village gods may well have been actuated by needs for particular types of communion relationship duplicated neither in the majority of their contemporaries nor in the subsequent population, for whom the manipulative aspect is that which maintained the vitality of the cult. If this is a correct reconstruction, attempts to find socio-cultural variations concomitant with those in sex of the several village gods are clearly fruitless.

In an earlier paragraph, we noted that in certain situations the equivalence of gods to non-religious instruments made it difficult to say that in specified socio-cultural conditions gods would be introduced to meet new needs; in many cases there is an equal probability that non-religious means will be brought in instead. In this last section, another important restriction on our generalizing has emerged. The definition of a god’s character, it seems probable, bears in large measure the imprint of the communion strivings (for love, security, approval, etc.) of the individual who introduced it to the community. But since it is generally some implication of manipulative relevance that is crucial for its survival in a particular society, a very wide range of possible imprints
reflecting the communion strivings of the inventor will be compatible with such survival.

So much for some of the lines of thought on religious questions which are suggested by the common-sense definition of religion whose use was advocated in the first part of this paper. A major implication of this definition was that the comparative study of religion should go ahead through the systematic application of the variables of inter-human relationships to the relationships of men with their gods. In this paper, we have explored only one such variable, that of communion versus manipulation. The results, however, were encouraging in some of the possibilities of interpretation which they outlined; and if sympathetic readers of these paragraphs try to carry out the same sort of exploration with some of the many other variables of inter-human relationship, I feel that this sector of anthropology may at last escape from its imprisonment within the bonds of sheer description. Another value of the common-sense approach outlined above is that it enables us to see how the work done by members of disciplines such as history and psycho-analysis fits in with the religious studies of anthropologists.

Besides these positive virtues, our approach has the negative one of high-lighting the wide limitations which we may expect to encounter in trying to make a socio-cultural interpretation of a given religious system. Further, in so far as it emphasizes the close affinity of man-to-man and man-to-god relationships, it gives us a timely warning that a comprehensive theory of religious forms must wait on a comprehensive theory of human social relationships generally; and we all know how far we are from that.

NOTES

1 In a paper read to the London University joint post-graduate anthropological seminar in 1956.
2 This formulation owes a great deal to Talcott Parsons's distinction between 'Instrumental' and 'Expressive' poles in human relations. Nevertheless, I have not used his terminology, partly because I am not sure whether the distinctions made here are quite the same as his own, partly because I found the word 'Instrumental' had all sorts of irrelevant associations for British readers.

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