SHINTO AND THE TYPOLOGY OF RELIGION

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The typology of religion has been attempted by various authors at two distinct levels which may be termed the analytic and the holistic respectively. An analytic typology seeks to identify various elements which occur in different religious systems and to give these names such as myth, priest, prayer, purification ritual, and so on. A holistic typology seeks to consider whole religious systems or traditions as unities in themselves and to classify them in accordance with some overarching concepts. Popular categories here have been prophetic religion, mystical religion, revealed religion, nativistic religion, state religion, higher religion, or (with the anthropologists) great tradition, little tradition, and such like. In a well-founded and comprehensive approach, neither the analytic nor the holistic typology should take priority but there should be some interdependence between the two. It seems possible to say, for example, without being finally committed to the concepts currently in wide use, that religions of salvation (holistic typology) do not in their initial form offer or require rites of transition (analytic typology). Cases which seem to count against this should be considered in terms of their diachronic development, for rites of transition may be brought into use as an accommodation to the needs of society. Primal religions, however, (see further below on this concept) would normally be expected to provide rites of transition for.
the societies in which they function. For this reason the character of
the juxtaposition between primal religion (which is not existentially
critical) and salvation religion (which is) can be appraised in a given
social context in terms of the provision of transition rites.¹

It is easy to be critical of the analytic typologies proposed in the
now classic works of Gerardus van der Leeuw, Friedrich Heiler and
others, but it is difficult to make viable alternatives. As far as Shinto
is concerned, it is for example remarkable that van der Leeuw’s seven
hundred pages in Religion in Essence and Manifestation contain not a
single reference to it.² One might of course argue in his defence that a
really successful typology ought not to be required to have references
to specific religions anyway. This would however be a remarkably
optimistic line of thought. In fact, it has to be admitted that van der
Leeuw’s typology refers to many specific religions but at the same time
cannot easily be related to the specific case of Shinto. In Heiler’s
Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion there are by contrast a
number of specific references to aspects of Shinto.³ Yet this massive
work is also negatively instructive in that it illustrates how such
scattered references can get lost in the mass of varied details with the
result that the real spirit or character of Shinto is lost. In spite of the
difficulties evident from these famous examples, the need for
comparative categories in the systematic study of religion remains, and
these must in part take the form of an analytic typology. If not
consciously attended to, such categories will only be brought into
specific studies in an uncritical way, as so often happens when studies
of religion are carried out by specialists in other disciplines. The
elaboration of the required categories on a truly intercultural basis is
still in its infancy. This paper, however, is more concerned with the
problem of typology at the second, holistic level. Here too it is easy to
be critical of widely current concepts but difficult to propose viable
alternatives. While difficulties abound, it would nevertheless seem
unavoidable in the systematic study of religion to attend to questions of
holistic typology in order to provide a reasonably stable framework for
attempts at comparison. The argument below consists of a proposal
with respect to the place of Shinto in the holistic typology of religion,
without, however, seeking to advance a comprehensive typology at this
level.⁴

It is difficult to think of any of the terms mentioned earlier as
quite fitting the case of Shinto. It is also notable that none of them
arose in connection with a consideration of the place of Shinto among
the religions of the world. This need not matter in itself, for as with