THE DEFINERS DEFINED: TRADITIONS IN THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

JAN PLATVOET

The problem of definition is a central issue, involving not only the concepts within the field of study but also the nature of the field itself. (Hill 1973, 2)

This article surveys three traditions in defining religion. It proposes an operational definition in the Tylorian tradition expanded with the definer proposed by the anthropologist Jan van Baal, to wit, the non-verifiability/non-falsifiability of the addressable "meta-empirical reality." Dealing with religion as a social institution, I offer tools for the analysis of religion as postulated communicative events within believed networks of relationships between believers and their non-verifiable/non-falsifiable beings or (addressable) reality.

Copyright © Jan Platvoet 1991.
"OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS" OF RELIGION

Many definitions of "religion" have been constructed in the past. It is likely that many more will be proposed in the future. So far, they seem to have been constructed for mainly two purposes: (1) to define what religion "is" where- and whenever it is found; (2) to define what religion is taken to be in societies that are being studied for the purpose of provisionally delimiting "religion" as an object of study. The first purpose results in "real definitions" of religion of the "essentialist" subtype. They state what the "thing" (res) "religion" is taken to be by indicating the traits that are held to constitute its nature or essence. These traits are determined by philosophical reflection on the religion(s) with which the philosopher is familiar as a believer, by cultural association, or by study. The second purpose results in "lexical definitions" of religion which state what particular traits are typical of the religions that are being studied. My concern is, however, with those which have been constructed for the additional purpose of serving as analytical tools in the analysis of those religions. It is because of this second purpose that I term them "operational" or working-definitions of religion. It is hoped that they will be useful analytical tools, i.e, be heuristically fruitful.

The first mode is a deductive and normative one. What religion "is," is deduced from a normative appreciation of a paradigmatic religion, usually that of the scholar or the scholar's society. Moreover, an essential definition is held to be universally valid and applicable to all other religions. Its normative character is revealed by its use. It is used to discriminate "religions" and "fake religions" in historical data, which have a prima facie resemblance with the paradigmatic religion, some being accepted as "religion" and the rest being disqualified as "superstition," "magic," or by some other depreciative term. These labels not only remove them beyond the pale of "religion," but also qualify them as improper, inferior, immoral or false "religions," i.e. as non-religions. These definitions are, therefore, reductionist in intention.