Peter L. Berger: *The Sacred Canopy* (1967)

Appendix I

Sociological Definitions of Religion

Definitions cannot, by their very nature, be either "true" or "false," only more useful or less so. For this reason it makes relatively little sense to argue over definitions. If, however, there are discrepancies between definitions in a given field, it makes sense to discuss their respective utility. This we propose to do here, with the brevity appropriate to minor matters.

Actually, a good case could be made, at least in the field of religion, that even definitions based on patently erroneous presuppositions have had a measure of utility**.** For example, Max Mueller's conception of religion as a "disease of language" (*Essay on Comparative Mythology,* 1856) is based on a very inadequate rationalistic theory of language, but it is still useful in pointing to language as the great world-building instrumentality of man, reaching its most far-reaching power in the construction of the gods. Whatever else it may be, religion is a humanly constructed universe of meaning, and this construction is undertaken by linguistic means For another example, Edward Taylor's theory of animism and his conception of religion based on this theory (*Primitive Culture*, 1871) start from the quite unacceptable notion of primitive man as a sort of imperfect philosopher and, in addition, have a far too narrow emphasis on the soul as the basic religious category. Yet it is still useful to recall that religion entails man's quest for a world that will indeed be kindred to himself**,** that will be "animated" in this broader sense. In sum, the only sensible attitude in matters of definition is one of relaxed tolerance.

Max Weber, at the beginning of his discussion of the sociology of religion in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft,* took the position that a definition of religion, if possible at all, can come only at the end, not at the beginning, of the kind of task he had set for himself. Not surprisingly, he never came to such an end, so that the reader of Weber's opus waits in vain for the promised definitional payoff. I am not at all convinced by Weber's position on the proper **s**equence of definition and substantive research, since the latter can only proceed within a frame of reference that *defines* what is relevant and what is irrelevant in terms of the research. *De facto* Weber follows the definition of the scope of religion current in the *Religionswissenschaft* of his time–otherwise, for instance, he might as well have discussed the "nation" or the *oikos* under the heading of the sociology of religion instead of the quite different headings under which they appear in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft.* It seems to me that the main consequence of avoiding or postponing definition in a scientific enterprise is *either* that the area of research becomes fuzzy (which most certainly is not the case with Weber) *or* that one operates with implicit rather than explicit definitions (which, I believe, *is* the case in Weber's work). Explication seems to me the more desirable course.

Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, begins with a substantive description of religious phenomena, particularly in terms of the sacred/profane dichotomy, but ends with a definition in terms of the general social functionality of religion. In this, unlike Weber, he went *against* the tendency of the *religionswissenschaftliche* scholarship of the period, which tried to define religion substantively in one way or another. It may also be said, in view of *this,* that Durkheim's

approach to religion is more radically sociological than Weber's–that is**,** religion is grasped as a "social fact" in the precise Durkheimian sense.

The alternative of substantive and functional definition is**,** of course, a constant in all fields of sociological .analysis. Plausible arguments may be made for either choice and, indeed, one of the strongest arguments for functional definitions is that they permit a more unambiguously sociological, thus "neater" or "cleaner" line of analysis. I am not at all interested in taking a doctrinaire position in favor of substantive definitions at all times and all places, but only in defending the choice of a substantive definition here.

The most convincing and far-reaching attempt to define religion in terms of its social functionality is that of Thomas Luckmann (in his *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft,* 1963, English version, *The Invisible Religion,* 1967). This attempt is very clearly in the Durkheimian tradition, though it is augmented by general anthropological considerations that go considerably beyond Durkheim. Also, Luckmann is careful to differentiate between his conception of functionality and that of contemporary structural- functionalism. The functionality is grounded in certain fundamental anthropological presuppositions, *not* in particular institutional constellations that are historically relative and cannot be validly raised to a status of universality (as**,** for instance, is done by sociologists of religion fixated on the church as an institutionalization of religion peculiar to Western culture). Without going into the details of an extremely interesting argument, the essence of Luckmann's conception of religion is the capacity of the human organism to transcend its biological nature through the construction of objective, morally binding, all-embracing universes of meaning. Consequently, religion becomes not only *the* social phenomenon (as in Durkheim), but indeed *the* anthropological phenomenon *par excellence.* Specifically, religion is equated with symbolic self-transcendence. Thus everything genuinely human is *ipso facto* religious and the only nonreligious phenomena in the human sphere are those that are grounded in man's animal nature, or more precisely, that part of his biological constitution that he has *in common* with other animals.

I fully share Luckmann's anthropological presuppositions *(vide* our joint theoretical effort in *The Social Construction of Reality,* 1966–in which, logically enough, we sidestepped our difference as to the definition. of religion) and I also agree with his critique of a sociology of religion fixated on the church as a historically relative institutionalization of religion. Nevertheless, I question the utility of a definition that equates religion with the human *tout court.* It is one thing to point up the anthropological foundations of religion in the human capacity for self-transcendence, quite another to equate the two. There are, after all, modes of self-transcendence and concomitant symbolic universes that are vastly different from each other, whatever the identity of their anthropological origins. Thus little is gained, in my opinion, by calling, say, modem science a form of religion. If one does that, one is subsequently forced to define in what way modem science is *different* from what has been called religion by everyone else, including those engaged in *Religionswissenschaft*–which poses the same definitional problem all over again. I find it much more useful to try a substantive definition of religion from the beginning, and to treat the questions of its anthropological rootage and its social functionality as separate matters.

It is for this reason that I have tried here to operate with a substantive definition of religion in terms of the positing of a *sacred cosmos (vide* chapter 1 above). The differentia in this definition, of course, is the category of the sacred, which I have taken essentially in the sense understood by *Religionrwissenschaft* since Rudolf Otto (and which, incidentally, Luckmann treats as virtually interchangeable with his conception of the religious, which makes it even more difficult to differentiate between various historical forms of symbolization). This is not only the more conservative course, conceptually, but, I think, allows for less complicated distinctions between empirically available *cosmoi.* It must be emphasized, though, that the choice of definitions need not imply differences in the interpretation of particular socio-historical developments (as can readily be seen in those parts of the foregoing argument, particularly in chapter 6, where I not only agree with but am greatly indebted to Luckmann). In the long run, I suppose, definitions are matters of taste and thus fail under the maxim *de gustibus.*