BUDDHISM AND THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

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The ethnography of practical Buddhism in Sri Lanka shows that theistic-type definitions and conceptions of religion are inadequate, as Durkheim argued. It is futile to follow Durkheim in seeking a better definition, as all such definitions must fail because religion is a polythetic class. The fact that it is a polythetic class is positively significant: it suggests that a religion is a compound of diverse elements. We should seek to understand why religions are compounded as they are. Buddhist cultures are particularly relevant because the compounding takes an unusual form. It is argued that Buddhism, though non-theistic, resembles other religions in depending on mystical notions; it is shown how this contributes to understanding the social functions of religions. Nevertheless dependence on mystical notions may not be fundamental for explaining religious behaviour.

I

Religion is not, especially in the societies that anthropologists study, an institution with sharp boundaries; any form of behaviour may have its religious aspect. Nevertheless there can be no study of religion, ethnographic, analytical, or theoretical, which does not employ some criterion for distinguishing the more specifically religious from the less: which is not founded on some conception of what it is appropriate to regard as religion. The conception may be made explicit in the form of a definition; but it guides the selection of facts and their analysis no less when it is left implicit.

Now the conception that most of us employ is that which Tylor expressed in his 'minimum definition of Religion, the belief in Spiritual Beings' (1871: I, 424); and most modern explicit definitions can be seen as attempts to provide a better verbal formulation. This large degree of consensus may be expressed by saying that, for most of us, *a central concern with godlike beings*[1] is characteristic or definitive of religion. (It is necessary to stipulate a 'central concern' if we are to distinguish the specifically religious from forms of behaviour in which references to godlike beings occur casually and inessentially.) For brevity, I shall refer to this conception, and definitions which express it, as 'theistic'.

Now, as is well-known, Durkheim rebutted the theistic conception and definitions of religion by pointing out that Buddhism (and some other religious phenomena) cannot be accommodated to them (Durkheim 1912: 40–49; 1915: 29–35).[2] One might reasonably doubt the force of Durkheim's demonstration on the grounds that his sources of information on Buddhism were unsatisfactory. Is his argument sustained by modern studies of the ethnographic reality, of the actual beliefs and practices of actual Buddhists?

Man (N.S.) **13**, 362–79.

II

I made a study of the ethnographic reality—of what, following Leach (1968), may be called 'practical Buddhism'—in Sri Lanka, in 1974–5, and with these issues in mind, I found that what Durkheim wrote about Buddhism was substantially true, and impressively perceptive: his case against the applicability of the theistic conception to Buddhism requires little revision. Rather than review Durkheim's statements, which are readily accessible, I shall make the case in terms of my own observations. These are corroborated by, and corroborate, the reports of other modern ethnographers[3]; but a comparative discussion of the data must await a more ample occasion.

At least as I use the term, there are several practical Buddhisms, corresponding to different groups and categories of Buddhists. That which I observed and report upon was the practical Buddhism of Sinhalese villagers, mostly lay persons, in an area of Kurunegala District of Sri Lanka. Every other practical Buddhism that I know of, at least in the Theravāda tradition, is equally refractory to theistic conceptions of religion; this seems not to be true of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

My informants called Buddhism 'Buddhāgama' (or 'Bauddhāgama'), i.e. the Buddha or Buddhist *āgama*. Other *āgamas* they speak of are the Hindu, Christian, and Moslem. The word '*āgama*' is the Sinhalese word *nearest* in sense to our 'religion'. Gombrich (1971: 9, 58) actually maintains that '*āgama*' is equivalent in meaning to 'religion', which is plainly wrong.[4] When I asked my informants what an *āgama* is, they usually replied that an *āgama* is concerned with *lokottara* matters, as contrasted with *laukika* matters.[5] Both these latter two words are cognate with '*loka*', 'the world' (literally, 'worlds'). '*Laukika*' means 'worldly', with almost exactly the meaning of the English word. The *lokottara* is that which is contrasted with the *laukika* and, at least in a Buddhist context, superior to it. Carter, in his Sinhalese-English Dictionary (1924: 555), wisely refrains from offering a translation for '*lokottara*' in this sense: he gives simply 'the opposite of *laukika*'. If we must have a rough translation-equivalent, 'supraworldly' will do. The contrast between *lokottara* and *laukika* is evidently similar to Durkheim's contrast between sacred and profane; however, I would add that as Durkheim develops these concepts they are not entirely apt for Buddhism (see note 7).

A few more sophisticated informants said that an *āgama* is a way to salvation. This seems also to be implicit in the understanding of others who did not actually state it. Salvation, liberation, enlightenment, are by Buddhists called Nirvana (Sinhalese: *nivan*; Pali: *nibbana*). Nirvana is viewed as a condition free of suffering (*duka*); no less, it is viewed as a condition in which one is freed from bondage to worldly existence. If a person has attained Nirvana, and not subsequently lost it, when he dies he will not be reborn, but will cease to exist. This is considered a great prize, and unavailable by any means other than following the Buddhist way.

As Ling remarks, 'Whatever is venerated for its "sacred" character is in Buddhism that which has a very close or special relationship to *nibbana*' (1973: 235); and this is still more true if we substitute '*lokottara*' for 'sacred'. But, it

must be said, for Sinhalese villagers Nirvana has become a remote goal, like the Second Coming of Christ for most Christians. They told me with confidence that no-one now living could attain Nirvana in his present birth; and, with slightly less confidence, that no-one is likely to attain it for many births to come. Most considered that Nirvana has become unattainable until one is reborn in the period of the next Buddha, Maitri, about 2,500 years from now. However, I have to report that some of my friends in the village insisted on taking me to meet a Buddhist monk who, they said, many people believe to be a Buddha (and, *a fortiori*, to have attained Nirvana). My friends avoided saying that *they* believed this; but I had little doubt that they were at least more inclined to believe than to disbelieve it. The belief that Nirvana *can* be attained at present, and probably has been by some, is characteristic of Buddhist Modernism,[6] as contrasted with village Buddhism.

Since the ultimate goal of Nirvana has become remote, the more immediate goal of Buddhist action has become the gaining of Merit (*pin*) with a view to achieving a better rebirth. Merit is gained by good deeds and by training the mind; my more careful informants pointed out that the operative force determining one's condition in rebirth is the condition of one's mind, which is shaped by one's deeds. By 'a better rebirth' people professedly mean rebirth with greater spiritual abilities which will enable one to make greater progress along the long path to Nirvana. But it must be said that in contexts where religion is not to the forefront, people usually think of 'better' in worldly terms: e.g. to be reborn as a rich man, or even as a god in one of the heavens. Had I been unkind enough to tax them with this, I am sure my informants would have said that by thinking thus they revealed their sinful frailty, their unworthiness as Buddhists.

III

Now Buddhists do, normally, believe that gods (*deviyo*) exist, as well as such other godlike beings as demons (*yakshas*) or ghosts (*prētas*); many of these are named, and regard is paid to them. But Nirvana is never conceived of as a state of communion, or any other relation, to gods. The Buddha, having achieved Nirvana, is described in scripture, and depicted in the imagery found in many temples, as being courted and worshipped by gods. But no one ever mentioned to me such relations with gods as among the benefits of Nirvana.

If gods have no bearing on the end of Buddhist striving, they have little bearing on the means to that end. Sinhalese are not consistent about this. Some gods are regarded as guardians of Buddhism and/or as future Buddhas. Their images, even shrines, and those of other gods, are often found in, or in close association with, Buddhist temples. They are often invoked, and involved, in specifically Buddhist rituals.

But this is somewhat misleading. If gods are invoked at Buddhist rituals, the stated purpose is usually to give the gods the opportunity to gain Merit by their participation, and for the people to transfer to them the Merit they themselves have gained by participation, and thus to gain for themselves more Merit by having transferred Merit. In return for the Merit they have been given the opportunity to gain, and that which has been transferred to them,

the gods are expected to bestow on the people worldly benefits, which is all they have the power to bestow—but this is no part of Buddhism. What is part of Buddhism, for the people, is the gaining of Merit. But gods are not special, still less necessary, in this regard: one can as well gain Merit by transferring Merit to other *people*.

In the main, concern with gods is regarded as irrelevant, if not indeed antithetical to Buddhist purposes. Nearly everyone, at least in the village I studied most intensively, did participate in cultic practices specifically directed to the gods; even those few who claimed not to believe in the gods admitted, under pressure, that they did participate 'in order not to give offence to others'. Most people were quite open about their participation. Those with whom I raised the question said that they propitiated the gods for worldly purposes, and that this was aside from Buddhism; none ventured the opinion that concern with the gods (or other godlike beings) was a part, still less a necessary part, of Buddhism. Buddhism, and Buddhist practices, were regarded as helpful to maintaining good relations with the gods; but no-one suggested that he was, or anyone else could be, a better Buddhist for propitiating the gods. A substantial minority developed the contrast between Buddhist concerns and concern with gods to the point of opposition or contradiction. They tried to conceal their involvement with gods from me, and when they failed they were evidently embarrassed and often apologetic. 'As Buddhists', they would say, 'we ought not to do these things. But we are sinful and weak, and so we have to concern ourselves with worldly matters'. The rationale for these attitudes was frequently explained: the gods have power only in worldly (*laukika*) matters, and one chooses to relate to them only for worldly ends. But Buddhism is concerned with supraworldly (*lokottara*) ends, which are at least distinct from, and at most antithetical to, worldly ends.[7]

In Buddhism, then, we have a religion where, ideally, and for the most part, godlike beings are associated with the profane and not the sacred. It certainly cannot be said that concern with these godlike beings is central to Buddhāgama, the 'Buddhist religion'.

IV

But could the definition nevertheless be saved by identifying the Buddha himself as a godlike being? This has indeed been attempted. Spiro, for example, rewrites the Tylorian definition thus: 'I shall define "religion" as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" ' (1966: 96). He then points out that the Buddha is superhuman: thus Buddhism is a religion, and the *nat*-cults are a religion (1966: 92–4; 1967: 268–9). But this is sheer equivocation, exploiting the vagueness of the word 'superhuman'. The Buddha is, or rather was, superhuman in certain respects; the *nats* are superhuman in certain respects; but there is nothing significant in common between these respects. In any case, superhuman or not, the Buddha quite definitely is not, as I shall show, godlike in the sense required by the theistic conception.

Gombrich, while applauding Spiro's efforts, tries a different tack. He acknowledges that Sinhalese say that the Buddha was human, and is defunct, non-existent; but these are only their 'cognitive beliefs'. What they really believe—their 'affective beliefs'—is shown by what they do. Among other things, they make offerings to the Lord Buddha, and they occasionally utter a prayer to him. Thus they show that the Lord Buddha is for them 'affectively divine'.[8]

Gombrich's evidence is impressive—the more so when one actually witnesses such behaviour. But his analysis is fallacious. One can never infer a man's beliefs from his behaviour alone: for any course of behaviour is consistent with more than one possible set of beliefs. If a man's conduct is consistent with his professed belief we may (perhaps) assert that he does believe what he professes. If there is a thoroughgoing inconsistency between the two we may, probably must, say that he does *not* believe what he professes. But we have then no way of saying, with any confidence, what he *does* believe. *A fortiori*, if a man's conduct *is* consistent with what he professes, then we have no warrant in these facts for saying that he does *not* believe what he professes, and still less for saying that he *does* believe something else which he does not profess, but actually denies. But it is just this which Gombrich does. The Sinhalese do have professed, non-theistic, beliefs to explain their ritual conduct which Gombrich has called in evidence; as Gombrich himself reports, they say that they make offerings and pray to the Buddha for the sake of the good effects of their acts on their states of mind. Why does Gombrich reject their account, and prefer another for which he cannot have proper warrant? What the Sinhalese say is consistent with their behaviour, and does adequately explain it. We can even say it is better than a theistic explanation for ritual behaviour even when the theistic explanation is advanced by the actors. Durkheim, writing of rites generally, and in a passage which shows no explicit awareness of the Buddhist account, says that their 'true justification . . . does not lie in the apparent ends which they pursue [e.g. influencing the gods], but rather in the invisible influence which they exercise over the mind and in the way in which they affect our level of consciousness' (Durkheim 1912: 514; 1915: 360—I have used Lukes's translation—1973: 473–4).

All my informants, if asked, stated positively that the Buddha (1) was human not divine, and (2) is now defunct and non-existent; I never succeeded in beguiling anyone into revealing even slight uncertainty about these propositions. Indeed a Buddhist would have to be remarkably ignorant to doubt the first, since it is a familiar and rather basic doctrine that only humans, and not gods, can attain Nirvana. He would have to be downright idiotic to doubt the second, since it is quite fundamental that Nirvana is liberation from rebirth. St Paul, as a Christian, wrote '. . . if Christ was not raised [from the dead], then our gospel is null and void, and so is your faith' (I Cor.15: v14, N.E.B.). A Buddhist would have to say—not that my informants did—'If Lord Buddha *was* raised, then is his teaching null and void, and so is our faith'.[9] Gombrich would surely reply, with justice, that the very dogmatic inescapability of these peculiar doctrines must make us wonder whether human beings genuinely internalise them. The issues are indeed complicated

and subtle, and I have not taken space to do them full justice. I would in fact concede that some Buddhists sometimes come almost indiscernibly close to believing, in some sense, that Lord Buddha presently exists in a godlike mode. But this is far from warranting the conclusion that Buddhists believe—'affectively' or otherwise—that the Buddha is divine, and founding on this, as Gombrich does (1971: 9), the further conclusion that 'a definition which equates religion with theism . . . certainly holds' on the affective level with respect to Sinhalese Buddhism. Thus, for Sinhalese Buddhists, the Lord Buddha is *not* a godlike being, since he does not exist, and when he did exist was human and not divine.

V

We have thus shown that practical Buddhism does not manifest a central concern with godlike beings. Hence, *either* the theistic definitions and conception of religion are wrong *or* Buddhism is not a religion. But the latter proposition is not a viable option. In virtually every other respect Buddhism markedly resembles religions, and especially the religion prototypical for our conception, i.e. Christianity. If we declare that Buddhism is not a religion, we take on the daunting task of explaining how a non-religion can come so uncannily to resemble religions. Moreover, since the comparison of Buddhism with religions is so interesting and important, we should have to form a super-class, called say 'religion-plus', containing all religions plus Buddhism; and this may well seem a scientifically more valuable category than that of religion simply. We should have preserved the purity of our conception of religion at the expense of demoting it in the conceptual hierarchy. In any case the basic conceptual problem and challenge remain, however we shuffle labels: what, confronted with the facts about Buddhism, are we to make of our conception, or prejudice, that central concern with godlike beings is fundamental to phenomena of this kind?

Hence theistic definitions of religion are shown by Buddhism to be wrong, as Durkheim argued. Formally, a definition to be valid must apply to every instance of the phenomena to be defined; hence even one exception is sufficient to refute the definition. It might be countered, with good sense, that exceptions are so rare that theistic definitions, though not perfect, are good enough for practical purposes. This defence, however, fails against a more substantial objection which applies not only to formal definitions but also more generally to theistic conceptions of religion. We have in Buddhism (which in fact is not wholly unique) a well-authenticated instance of a system of religious behaviour without a central concern with godlike beings. This suggests that such a concern is not fundamental to religious behaviour, and invites us to look again for other features which may be more fundamental. It may be—and I believe that it is—that the near-universality in religions of a central concern with godlike beings has stalled enquiry, leading us to mistake as fundamental what is actually only a secondary or derivative characteristic. The serious objection to theistic definitions and conceptions of religion is not that they fail to be universal but rather that they are too superficial. The theoretical importance of Buddhism is not that it enables us to score points off

this or that definition of religion, but that it challenges us to formulate a more adequate conception of religion.

VI

Durkheim's argument follows a similar course: he refutes widely accepted definitions of religion not for the sake of merely negative criticism, but in order to clear the way for presenting a more adequate definition. It seems natural to follow him in this. But in fact by taking this further step Durkheim committed a grievous error.

It is notorious that Durkheim's definition of religion, in terms of the opposition of sacred and profane, fails, both because it does not fit many of the data and because it is incoherent (see especially Stanner 1967 (summarised in Lukes 1973: 26–7), and Evans-Pritchard 1965: 64–5). What is less widely appreciated is the positive harm that has resulted from this failure.

(1) Some kind of contrast or polarity between the sacred and the everyday is a significant feature of many religious systems; where it does apply, a concept of a sacred/profane dichotomy is clearly valuable. But by proposing the concept as the definition of religion, Durkheim claimed too much; the refutation of the definition has caused the concept itself to appear discredited.

(2) Durkheim sought to impose his definition by what is basically a mere rhetorical device. He outlined, and brilliantly refuted, two familiar definitions: and then suggested that no alternative was left but his own (1912: 33–50 sq.; 1915: 24–37 sq.). The first of the refuted definitions is that which defines religion in terms of mystery and the supernatural—which no anthropologist, for the very reasons Durkheim so ably expounds, is likely to accept. His 'argument' thus reduced to the presentation of a dilemma: *either* theistic definitions *or* Durkheim's own. Oddly, this thoroughly tendentious formulation has been widely accepted: but with just the opposite result to the one Durkheim intended. Sophistically, he claimed that the objections to theistic definitions recommended his own; just as sophistically, readers seem to have decided that the still greater objections to his definition recommended the alternative. 'Tis the sport to have the enginer Hoist with his own petar; but it is unfortunate that his quite valid objections to theistic definitions have thus come to be discounted.

(3) By deliberately refuting two respected definitions of religion, and unwillingly exposing the inadequacy of a third, Durkheim lends weight to the supposition that it is impossible to get a satisfactory definition of religion—and therefore we might as well make do with a demonstrably unsatisfactory one. And, since attempts to provide definitions of like kind for other basic terms lead to equally lugubrious results, he lends weight to the widespread view that all definitions are futile, and any concern with them a sheer waste of time. Though this view is very plausible, it is actually false and harmful. In the first place there are some kinds of definition which can be carried through successfully, and which make a genuine if limited contribution to scientific work: these should not be discarded. In the second place, and far more seriously, although definitions of the kind that Durkheim attempted are

necessarily futile, they are also misguided attempts to do something very important: that is to reconceptualise phenomena in a way which will enhance our understanding of them. The great danger is that in rejecting as futile attempts at definition, which are the traditional method of attempting this task, we shall reject all attempts.

VII

We should agree with Durkheim that the facts of Buddhism (and some other non-theistic religious phenomena) reveal the inadequacy of theistic conceptions of religion, and the need to seek for better concepts for the phenomena. But concept formation must not be attempted by way of definition, since definitions of this kind almost invariably and inevitably fail. To understand why this is so suggests a more fruitful way to proceed.

Definitions may be divided into two major categories, known traditionally as Nominal Definitions and Real Definitions. A Nominal Definition is described in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as 'A declaration of the signification of a word or phrase', while a Real Definition is there described as 'A precise statement of the essential nature of a thing'.[10]

Durkheim's definition of religion—like most definitions which promise much but achieve nothing—is a Real Definition. The dictionary's description of Real Definition is not clear; indeed it is very muddled. But what is aimed at by Real Definition, in so far as it has any relevance to scientific purposes, can be more plausibly formulated. I shall say, then, that Real Definitions seek to determine those attributes of the members of a class of phenomena which are most important for yielding an enhanced understanding of the phenomena.

In order to explain why the search for Real Definitions, even in this improved sense, is nearly always abortive, it is useful to draw upon Needham's invaluable distinction between monothetic and polythetic classes (see Needham 1975). A monothetic class is a set of phenomena such that there is some set (or 'bundle') of attributes which is common to all of them—which is possessed by each and every member of the class. With a polythetic class there is again an associated bundle of attributes; but in this case it is not necessary that *all* the attributes in the bundle be possessed by a member of the class. A phenomenon may be treated as a member of the class if it possesses only *some* of the attributes. Since different members of the class may possess different selections from the bundle of attributes, there is no guarantee that any one of these attributes is common to all the members. Indeed a class must be regarded as polythetic when there is no attribute which is both common to all the members and important for understanding them.

Now Real Definition presupposes that the class in question is monothetic: for if the attributes singled out in the definition prove not to be common to all the members of the class, the definition fails. That Durkheim assumed that religion is a monothetic class is shown by his writing 'Since all religions are species of the same class, there are necessarily essential elements which are common to them' (1912: 6; 1915: 4—my revised translation). His definition is generally rejected because it is evident that the 'essential elements' to which he pointed are *not* common to all religions.

But the classes with which we classify phenomena are mostly polythetic. This is because they are by-products of usage in natural languages: such a class is merely the totality of things to which people have applied a particular word. Such a class is formed piecemeal, and not for strictly scientific purposes. We allow a phenomenon to be a member if it significantly resembles at least one acknowledged member; it is no-one's business to ensure that each member resembles every other member by sharing the same common bundle of attributes. It is not impossible that a class so constituted should turn out to be monothetic; but it is highly improbable.

Thus Real Definition is almost always futile because it amounts to the search for the significant common attributes of a class which has none. Hence Real Definition ought not to be attempted. How then should we try to reconceptualise phenomena which are presented to us as a polythetic class—such as those termed 'religion'?

The simplest and most familiar approach is to let go of the polythetic class, and to form one or more new monothetic classes: by determining attributes which seem scientifically significant, and focusing attention on those phenomena which do in fact possess them. The new monothetic class had better be called by a label: it does not matter greatly what label is used, provided it does not have an established usage to designate a class with different membership. If Durkheim had contented himself with discussing that class of phenomena which actually do manifest a radical opposition between sacred and profane, he would have advanced understanding. It was by making the unwarranted, and superfluous, claim that this class is identical with the class called 'religion' that he sowed confusion.

VIII

An alternative approach, which I shall pursue here, seeks to take positive advantage of the fact that the concepts we actually have are polythetic classes. I shall expound it by exploring how it may be pursued with regard to religion.

With every polythetic class there is associated a bundle of attributes, some of which are possessed by any member of the class. I cannot say precisely what are all the attributes associated with religion, as this would require much more analysis than has been undertaken. But the method can be illustrated by a quite tentative and incomplete list of crudely specified attributes.[11] Roughly, then, anything which we would call a religion must have at least some of the following attributes:

(1) A central concern with godlike beings and men's relations with them.
(2) A dichotomisation of elements of the world into sacred and profane, and a central concern with the sacred.
(3) An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of worldly existence.
(4) Ritual practices.
(5) Beliefs which are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or highly probable, but must be held on the basis of faith (i.e. Evans-Pritchard's (1937: 12) 'mystical notions' but without the requirement that they be false—see below).
(6) An ethical code, supported by such beliefs.
(7) Supernatural sanctions on infringements of that code.

(8) A mythology.
(9) A body of scriptures, or similarly exalted oral traditions.
(10) A priesthood, or similar specialist religious elite.
(11) Association with a moral community, a church (in Durkheim's sense—1912: 60; 1915: 43–4).
(12) Association with an ethnic or similar group.

The word 'religion' designates cultural systems which have at least some of these attributes; this is a polythetic class since some religions lack some of these attributes. Nevertheless, for a long time we have found our concept, called 'religion', serviceable, for much of the time when we have assumed it to be a monothetic class. This indicates that these attributes are very strongly associated with one another, not just in one culture but in human societies throughout the world. On the other hand we can be sure that these associations are not necessary, either logically or empirically, since we do find cultural systems where some of the attributes are dissociated from the others. Buddhism shows us that the first attribute is not necessarily associated with the others; various tribal religions that the second, the third, the sixth, and the tenth, at least, are not. It follows then that the observed strong associations between the attributes must be due to contingent factors, empirical characteristics of human nature and the nature of cultural and social systems. Thus this view of the phenomena indicates a programme of research and analysis to determine how and why these attributes are so frequently found in combination: how and why it is that in almost every human society we encounter a cultural system which plainly, if not perfectly, corresponds to our notion of a religion.

The recognition that religion is a polythetic class which approaches, but does not reach, monotheticity, has a number of advantages:

(1) It shows clearly that we need not waste our time searching for a Real Definition.

(2) It allows us to point to certain attributes as having especial explanatory value without having to assert that they hold true of all religions.

(3) It enables us to perceive certain crucial facts—e.g. the near-universality in religions of concern with godlike beings, or the widespread tendency to contrast the sacred and the everyday—in a more fruitful way. When these are taken—mistaken—as definitive of the class of phenomena, they tend to be taken for granted;[12] when they are seen as contingent facts they pose scientific problems. Why is it, for example, that nearly all religions focus on godlike beings though this is plainly not necessary for the religious life?

(4) It is consistent with, and suggests, the view that a religion is not a homogeneous system responding to any single need or inclination. Rather, a religion is compounded of a variety of forms of behaviour which tend to be produced in response to diverse individual and social requirements; but these forms of behaviour, though they have in this sense diverse origins, have marked affinities one with another which tend to lead to their coalescence into a moderately coherent system. Religion is polythetic because of the diverse origins of the forms of behaviour which constitute it; it approaches monotheticity because of these affinities between them.

(5) This view in turn suggests a new way of singling out those attributes of religion which may contribute most to understanding it: we should attend especially to those which contribute crucially to the linking up into one system of basically independent modes of behaviour: that is to those which contribute crucially to the connectivity of the network of attributes that we call 'religion'. For example, it may be noted not only that both central concern with godlike beings, and ritual practices, are among the most nearly universal attributes of religious systems, but also that there are determinative relations between them. On the one hand, once godlike beings are postulated, and regarded as important, it is almost inevitable (though compare Quakerism) that ritual means must be employed to communicate with them. On the other hand, once rites become established, it is very natural (though compare Buddhism) that godlike beings should be postulated as their objects, in order to rationalise the behaviour. More speculatively, I suggest that the exceptions indicated may actually confirm the posited connections. The Quaker concept of God seems to me less godlike than most. I have a little evidence which suggests that Buddhists who are more ritualistic than most are more inclined to suppose that Lord Buddha exists—while yet knowing that he does not; which indeed shows that Gombrich's interpretation corresponds to some of the facts.

IX

This approach seems to be fertile in suggesting new ways of analysing known facts about human religious behaviour. I cannot here explore these further. Instead, I pursue one line of analysis which emerges from my observations of practical Buddhism.

When I asked my informants, as I regularly did, 'Why are you a Buddhist?', the usual reply was 'Because it is what I am accustomed to' or 'Because I was brought up as a Buddhist'. Naive as they may appear, these are very adequate explanations at the individual level. But we may press the enquiry further; if my friends are Buddhists because they were born into and live in a Buddhist culture, why is the culture of the Sinhalese Buddhist? The answer[13] is very plain—though I did not elicit it from my informants. In the third century B.C. virtually the whole of the Indian sub-continent was under the sway of the Emperor Asoka; the principal exception was an area at the Southern tip of India. This is the area adjacent to Sri Lanka; and it is the area from which, in subsequent history at least, there came repeated invasions and a continual threat to the political and cultural integrity of the Sinhalese. Asoka was a devout Buddhist, and sent out missions to proselytise neighbouring domains. When such a mission came to the Sinhalese court (in about 243 B.C.), what could have been more natural than to return a favourable response, thereby securing the alliance of the most powerful empire known, and the enemy of one's own principal enemies? I do not mean to exclude other factors which may have, and probably did, also determine the response. For example, if a king is to establish any national religion, Buddhism offers some distinctive political advantages, as Tambiah has recently made clear (1976).

But why did the Sinhalese continue with Buddhism after the dissolution of the Asokan empire? We might remark that a civilised people, having once adopted and practised so noble a religion as Buddhism, are not likely lightly to abandon it. More important, I think, is the fact that the Sinhalese lived under constant threat and attack from the kingdoms of South India, mainly Tamil, and all 'Hindu' by religion, until the period after A.D. 1500 when the Sinhalese were attacked, and partly subdued, by European, and Christian, colonial powers. Throughout these millennia, Buddhism was the principal symbol of Sinhalese identity, and rallying point and inspiration for its defence.

In modern times the Sinhalese nation does not face any comparable military threat; though the Sinhalese do, and not without reason, feel that their cultural identity is threatened by the Tamils, who have a bridgehead in the vigorous Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. What is also important is the fact that by most criteria the Sinhalese are not leading actors on the world stage; but they can and do take a justified pride in being the principal bearers, preservers, and potential teachers of the Buddhist religion.

X

Now this analysis assumes, what the history of many other areas also shows, that a religion is peculiarly apt to serve as a symbol and rallying-point for cultural and ethnic identities, and the societies which realise them. Why should this be so? I perceive two factors, one fairly obvious, and one less so.

In the first place the ethical code which is commonly associated with religion—very prominently in the case of Buddhism—serves both to unite people as an effectively co-operating unit, and to give them a sense of moral coherence and solidarity.

As to the second factor: many of my informants, both villagers and middle-class, insisted, and none denied, that to be a Buddhist one must believe in Rebirth. By this they referred to a combination of what strictly are two separate doctrines: (1) that every living being, animal, human, or godlike, not having attained Nirvana, after death is inevitably reborn into another worldly existence; and (2) that the conditions of this reborn existence are determined by *karma*—which is commonly, if crudely, interpreted as the sums of Merit and Demerit that have been accumulated. I found this surprising, since many Buddhists, even some village Buddhists, often claim that Buddhism is the most rational and scientific of religions, as it does not require a belief in gods: yet here was an equally compulsory and preposterous belief. I also found it disconcerting, since I had accepted the claim. It seemed clear to me that I could never believe in Rebirth: however much I might allow its plausibility and even desirability, it would always seem to me fanciful and without facticity. After some months of living among the Sinhalese I observed that I virtually was believing the doctrine: that is, not only in my speech but also in my private thoughts, to assume the reality of Rebirth had become natural, extremely attractive, and increasingly axiomatic. This was partly because I was constantly engaged in conversations in which, for my partners at least, the

reality of Rebirth was assumed. Still more it was because I experienced great affection and respect for the people I was living with and for their culture.

The doctrine of Rebirth has a quality that I would call 'empirical indeterminacy'. There is much to be said, logically and empirically, in support of its truth; there is much to be said, logically and empirically, in support of its falsity; objectively, it seems quite impossible to show that one case is significantly stronger than the other; the evidence, and other relevant considerations, seem to be quite neutral as between its truth and falsity. (Such doctrines can of course be ruled out by Occam's Razor; but Occam's Razor is not often employed outside the field of scientific thinking, and seems to me of questionable validity even within it.) Now once such a doctrine comes to be accepted within a culture, its elements and implications will pervade all manner of modes of speech and behaviour; and anyone who participates in these will be led unwittingly to accept, or at least allow, these assumptions. But once one begins to accept the truth of the assumptions, one selectively perceives and favours the considerations tending to the truth of the doctrine, rather than those suggesting its falsity. This is a self-augmenting process which must rapidly lead to a sense of certainty of the truth of the doctrine. On the other hand, for those who are not immersed in the culture, such a doctrine is likely to appear fanciful and alien, more or less preposterous and perverse. The apparent truth or falsity of such doctrines seems to depend wholly on social factors.

This is why religions, as cultural systems in which empirically indeterminate doctrines are crucial, are so effective in identifying and distinguishing, unifying and separating, cultural communities. A doctrine which is important and indubitably true to members of a cultural community, and more or less preposterous and perverse to outsiders and enemies, must establish a gulf around that cultural community, and powerfully strengthen, for its members, the sense of communal identity, solidarity, and worth. I must add that the doctrine of Rebirth itself would hardly have served this function in confrontations between Buddhists and Hindu enemies, who would not have found it strange. There are other Buddhist doctrines—e.g. the unique efficacy of the Buddha's way to salvation, and the irrelevance of gods thereto—which would have served in that context. I have chosen to enlarge on the Rebirth doctrine because to persons of Western culture, including myself, its empirically indeterminate character seems particularly evident.

Empirically indeterminate doctrines also have a bearing on my first factor, the social importance of the ethical codes which so often form an element of religions. As it seems to me, it is impossible to produce an objective rational argument, which will be convincing to many, for preferring the welfare of others to one's own, provided only that one is sufficiently strategic in one's pursuit of self-interest. This is why, in all societies, a large part of ethics is embedded in kinship, that is the direct and indirect appeal to biologically rooted dispositions. Where this is insufficient, since a worthy ethical code cannot be convincingly derived from determinate truths, it must be founded on indeterminate.[14]

Empirically indeterminate doctrines seem to be important for some of the

major social functions of religion. This is partly because, since their apparent truth or falsity seems to depend wholly on social factors, they tend to segregate cultural communities; and partly because of their basic contribution to ethical codes. If they most often take the form of belief in godlike beings, this is probably because such beliefs have other notable functions. The example of Buddhism shows that a doctrine of similar character, but quite different content, can also serve.

XI

My concept of empirically indeterminate doctrines is obviously similar to the more familiar concept of mystical notions. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 12), in defining mystical notions, says that they 'attribute to phenomena supra-sensible qualities . . . which they do not possess': and this is to say that they are false. But this is unsound; for many mystical notions, including I think Zande witchcraft beliefs, cannot be known to be false, nor true either: they are empirically indeterminate. Indeed this seems to be a necessary consequence of Evans-Pritchard's definition. As is evident from his definition of 'commonsense notions' (1937: 12), the attribution of *supra-sensible* qualities is crucial, since this alone serves to distinguish mystical from merely mistaken notions. Though Evans-Pritchard fails to define the crucial term 'supra-sensible', its meaning becomes fairly evident from his text: especially the passage (1937: 81) where he says of the action of witchcraft, 'It is not an evident notion but transcends sensory experience'. What transcends sensory experience is *ipso facto* placed beyond the reach of empirical falsification or decisive corroboration.

On the face of it, there do appear to be some mystical notions which are demonstrably false: for example some doctrines proclaimed in Cargo cults. It might be said that these are falsifiable not because they are mystical but because they are insufficiently mystical. Distinctions of this kind seem to me unhelpful in classifying empirical data; I propose instead to reword Evans-Pritchard's definition of mystical notions as follows:

> These are patterns of thought that attribute to phenomena supra-sensible qualities which, or part of which, they cannot objectively be confirmed to possess. Predications of them are either empirically indeterminate or false.

Unless I am mistaken in supposing that some mystical notions are demonstrably false, it follows from these definitions that the concept of mystical notions is more widely applicable than is that of empirically indeterminate doctrines. On the other hand, it has less explanatory power. I have argued that their dependence on empirically indeterminate doctrines helps to explain how some religions serve to segregate cultural communities. It is unlikely that mystical notions which are demonstrably false could serve such a function for long: for the situation of confrontation between persons of different cultures is likely to lead to their falsification and replacement by

empirically indeterminate formulations—as has evidently occurred in Christianity in recent centuries.

In other respects both varieties of mystical notions may function in similar ways. Both can provide a basis—a necessary basis, as I have suggested—for an ethical code. Both share another important characteristic. Since mystical notions, of either kind, transcend sensory experience, their supposed truth-value cannot be uniquely identified with any particular kind of experience: they are perceived as equally meaningful in relation to a variety of experiences. Because they are empirically vacuous, they are empirically permeable and elastic.[15] Hence, like ritual acts and symbols, which are equally open to many interpretations, they can be commonly meaningful to people whose actual experiences are quite various. They seem to speak equally to the condition of persons whose actual conditions are quite diverse. This helps to explain why religions are peculiarly able to symbolise the common interest, the sought-for community and harmony of society and the world.

XII

The concept of mystical notions is as applicable to Buddhism as it is to all religions which have a central concern with godlike beings (cf. note 1); it appears to apply to all religions. Does this not show that my central contention that religion is a polythetic class is mistaken, since we have now shown that it actually is monothetic? I think not: the issue is not what kind of a class religion 'really' is, but in what way it is most scientifically fruitful to regard the phenomena. Dependence on mystical notions is an attribute which does help to explain some features of religion; but, as I have argued, it explains less than does dependence on empirically indeterminate doctrines, which is less widely distributed. We should do well to employ a Real Definition of religion in terms of dependence on mystical notions if this led us to see what religion is fundamentally about. In my judgement it does not have this power: mystical notions appear to be rather a necessary by-product of religious behaviour than a source thereof.

It may also be objected that for all my scorn for definitions, I have made somewhat free with them myself; I have for example ventured to redefine both 'godlike beings' and 'mystical notions', as well as 'Real Definitions'. But these are not Real Definitions. Similarly, it may be conceded that my analysis does imply a definition—though not a Real Definition—of 'religion': it implies that we ought to use the world 'religion' just as we do, that is, to designate the polythetic class of all cultural systems that it seems reasonable to call religions. These are minor matters. It should be clear—and would be but for the confusions which plague the topic of definition—that how we should use words, and how we should conceptualise phenomena, are two quite distinct questions. I do think we should use words clearly and prudently. My main object, however, has been to argue, and to begin to show, how by building on the polythetic character of our concept of religion we can enhance our understanding of the phenomena.

NOTES

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[1] The expression 'godlike beings', like Tylor's 'Spiritual Beings', is intended to designate both gods and also other kinds of spirits which, though they may lack some characteristics of divinity, have a similar place in religious cults. More explicitly: if it is asserted that there exist one or more beings which have super-human powers, and can be induced by appropriate human action to employ these powers for human benefit, or to refrain from employing them to human detriment; and if such assertions are not true as a matter of objectively demonstrable empirical fact, but are rather 'mystical notions': then such supposed beings may be termed 'godlike'. (I mean 'mystical notions' broadly in the sense of Evans-Pritchard (1937: 12), though later in this paper I shall modify his definition).

[2] I give references to Swain's English translation (1915) as well as to the French original (1912). While the translation is broadly satisfactorily, I have corrected it for both the sentences I quote directly.

[3] In particular, the studies of Sinhalese Buddhism by Gombrich (1971), Ames (1964*a*; 1965*b*; 1966), and Obeyesekere (1963; 1966). These are closely paralleled by studies of practical Buddhism in Burma and Thailand—notably Spiro (1971), Tambiah (1970) and Bunnag (1973).

[4] Gombrich cites from his own informants such statements as 'Gods are nothing to do with religion [i.e. *āgama*]' (1971: 46; cf. 150–1, 176, etc.).

[5] I am quite astonished that Gombrich reports '. . . these terms are pure Sanskrit, and purely learned; I have never heard them used in conversation, and to most villagers they are not even intelligible' (1971: 58). My informants freely used them, if not in conversation at least in answering my questions; as Ames (1964*b*) indicates that his did. It is virtually inconceivable that Gombrich should be mistaken; the difference must be one of those disconcerting cultural differences that seem to exist between Sinhalese villages. I might add that in my area, though it was one which an eminent ecclesiastic told me was 'religiously underdeveloped', I found that the people had a sound grasp of the elements of Buddhist doctrine. At least some of the teachers of Buddhism in the schools and of the parish clergy were keen, able and well-educated.

[6] The term is that of Bechert (1966, cited from Gombrich 1971: 56n.); Obeyesekere (1970) describes the same phenomena as 'Protestant Buddhism'. Buddhist Modernism is manifested primarily among Sinhalese who are not villagers, especially members of the middle class. But its characteristic doctrines are adopted by some villagers.

[7] I allude in this paragraph to what I had in mind when I said that the concepts of sacred and profane, as developed by Durkheim, are not wholly apt for practical Buddhism. For most of my informants, though there is a distinction, even a contrast, between *laukika* and *lokottara* concerns, these are not radically opposed. Without apparent misgivings, they render unto each the attention that seems appropriate, often on the same occasion and often by the same act. To borrow a striking phrase from Ames (1964*a*; 78), Buddhism and the cults of godlike beings 'although frequently fused in practice . . . are never confused'. A minority, especially those who tend to Buddhist Modernism, do exaggerate the contrast as Durkheim does; this seems to me a peculiar, if not pathological, phenomenon.

[8] I summarise here an argument which Gombrich develops at length in his book. I refer particularly to pp. 4–5, 8–9, and Chapter 3, especially pp. 117–18, 121–2, and 139–43.

[9] According to Scripture, the Buddha himself dissented from the view that a Buddha does not exist after death *and* from the view that he does. Whatever this means, it does exclude existence as a godlike being. In any case, it is standard doctrine among Sinhalese Buddhists that the Buddha ceased to exist when he died.

[10] Similar descriptions are given in Webster's International Dictionary, and in many technical accounts of definition, including Robinson 1954. It should be pointed out that some modern logicians—notably Hempel (1952)—use the terms 'Nominal' and 'Real Definition' to express a quite different contrast; failure to notice that different writers use the terms in quite different senses is a serious cause of confusion. The reader who wants a fuller account of the technicalities of definition than can be provided here should consult Robinson 1954 or Southwold 1978.

[11] Among the advantages of using a polythetic concept is the fact that it is not crucial to state the relevant attributes completely and precisely from the outset. If a critic points out that other attributes should be added to the list, or that attributes should be specified more precisely (as,

e.g. the 4th ('ritual practices') clearly must—cf. Skorupski 1976), we can incorporate his suggestions without invalidating what has already been done. We can refine our concept piecemeal.

[12] Though Horton 1960 is a distinguished exception.

[13] The facts outlined in this and the next two paragraphs are commonplaces of Sri Lankan studies. Among many sources, see Nicholas and Paranavitana 1961 for the historical period (and Basham 1971: 54, for a map of the Asokan empire); and for the colonial and modern periods, Phadnis 1976, and Malalgoda 1976.

[14] In philosophical Buddhism there is an analysis, based on the *anatta* doctrine, and attributed to the Buddha himself, which does provide a rational basis for non-egotistical behaviour. But this is not an exception to what I have stated, since it is clear, and acknowledged, that the analysis could not appear thoroughly convincing to more than a very few in any human society.

[15] These terms are suggested by Gluckman 1955: 293.

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