

## RELIGION AS PROCESS

### The dynamic nature of John Cumpsty's theory of religion

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#### Abstract

*This article argues that, although John Cumpsty's theory does not wholly succeed in its set aim to integrate, describe and explain as many religious experiences and phenomena as possible, it still provides a necessary correction to most existing theories of religion. His approach, it will be said, regards religion as the dynamic and continuous process in which people and societies locate themselves within an ever-changing reality. This understanding makes religion a process in which change becomes a prominent aspect. As such his theory provides some intellectual tools for uncovering and understanding the dynamic nature of religious traditions.*

#### 1. Introduction

In his book *Religion as Belonging*, Cumpsty states that his contact with the religions of Africa forced him to reconsider the existing theories on religion, because he 'became ... unhappy with the fact that most existing theory treated religion typical of Africa as though it were a bit of the primitive past' (1991:xxx). This remark is a clue to what should be expected of his theory of religion, because it reveals his search for a theory that will describe religious phenomena and experience as they are *universally* experienced. As a native Briton it can be assumed that Cumpsty is heir to the European school of thought. But for him the obviousness of this tradition became suspect after his exposure to the religions of Southern Africa. He therefore puts his theory on religion forward as an endeavour to make it 'the one which, in the end, is likely to embrace in one integrated understanding, the widest range of phenomena understood to be religious' (1991:xxvii).<sup>1</sup>

The intention of this article is to show that, although Cumpsty's definition and theory of religion do not wholly succeed in this ambitious aim, they deal better than most existing theories with the changing nature of religions. As such they provide us with some intellectual tools by which these processes can be uncovered and even predicted.

#### 2. The science of religion: a universal category?

In a paper in which he re-examines the category of science of religion, the Eastern social scientist Yoon (1995) comes to the conclusion that, in the field of the study of religion, there is no sufficient theoretical framework to accommodate and explain *all* religious phenomena. This he attributes to the one-sided development of this science within the parameters of Western thought. His critique is directed chiefly against the methodological premise of all the main approaches to the study of religion, namely that its point of departure not only reflects its Western legacy, but also that it is not applicable to non-theistic religions. The essence of this non-applicability of the main approaches in the

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1. In his review of *Religion and Belonging*, Lawson (1994:184-5) accuses Cumpsty of pretending that his theory stands apart from existing research, insights and terminology. However, this critique is unfair and does not hold up against Cumpsty's statement that 'to attempt this is to tread where many have gone before. Therefore I must offer the results ... with apologies for the use of any ideas that may have filtered through, but which remain unacknowledged' (1991:xxxi).

study of religion to, in this case, the Eastern experience, Yoon attributes to the Western anthropology which lies at the basis of these approaches: 'As long as on[e]<sup>2</sup> stands upon this Western idea of man, he may not see the internal reality of Eastern religious experience' (1995:9).

This 'Western idea of man' which Yoon supposes to be at the basis of the science of religion, implies the unmistakable distinction that is made in the West between subject and object. This separation, which went hand in hand with what Bellah (1987:119) calls the separation between religious man and scientific man, is not only a characteristic of scientific thought in the West, but was probably also a condition for the development of the science of religion.

Because the meaning with which the term *religion* is charged is of Western origin (see for instance Malina 1994 and Sharpe 1983:39), it of necessity reflects the history of, and development in, the Western worldview. Therefore, the issues that form the centre of the science of religion are derived from the culture-specific origin of this science.<sup>3</sup>

Here not only the theological contents given to this term (see Yoon 1995:3 *passim*) should be mentioned, but also and especially the more subtle ways in which the Western worldview was carried into the rest of the world through what Robertson (1993) calls *the category of religion*. Robertson argues that, although globalisation did not eliminate religious pluralism, it did spread the *category* of religion to the rest of the (intellectual) world. 'The encounter with the West ... created - or at least exacerbated - the problem of distinguishing between the social-communal and the more spiritual-super aspects of religion' (1993:3) and, says he, in this process non-Western scientists, *notably those from the East*, conformed to 'Western expectations concerning ... the status of 'real religion' (1993:14). Globalisation therefore forced on non-Western scholars an *understanding* of what religion should be which did not necessarily correlate with the *experience* thereof.<sup>4</sup>

Closely linked to this aspect is the self-evident fact that the science of religion is also heir to the problematic of the way in which it came into being, that is, the problems, questions and characteristics of modernity. Here one of the most central and far-reaching consequences of the decline of the medieval metaphysical worldview was secularisation, a process that changed the consciousness of men and women as well as their thinking on religion. However, the purpose of this article is not to contribute to the overworked debate on secularisation, but rather to try to identify the particular way of thinking that went hand-in-hand with secularisation and which should therefore be expected to have influenced the study of religion as science.

Literature on the subject of secularisation is of course abundant, and different meanings of the word even more so. Although all these meanings are recognised, what I want to focus

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2. In instances where Yoon's grammar and spelling may cause too much confusion, corrections have been made in brackets.
  3. Although it is an arduous task to follow the gist of Yoon's (1995) argumentation, his is quite an illuminating Asian perspective on the one-sidedness of the development of the science of religion. See also Robertson (1993).
  4. Robertson argues that, at the same time when Durkheim and Weber created the basis for the sociology of religion in the twentieth century, Eastern intellectual societies were debating the meaning and relevance of a Western understanding of religion. In their debates the problem was that these Eastern intellectuals had to distinguish for the first time between the social and communal, on the one hand, and the spiritual, supernatural aspects of religion, on the other hand. The increasing religious and imperial of the West into the rest of the world thrust in the nineteenth century saw to it that 'the idea of the private, relatively sequestered status of religion was cultivated and (became) widely diffused ...' (Robertson 1993:5).

on is the impact that secularisation has had on the development of<sup>5</sup> the science of religion. This has to do mainly with the fact that, for the study of this subject to be regarded as a *scientific* endeavour, religion had to be identified as a *separate aspect* (over and against other aspects) of reality. With the rise of the different sciences and the attended shift in the West of the central locus of thought from metaphysics in the Middle Ages to epistemology in modernity (Van der Merwe 1994:92ff), it became necessary for researchers in this field to establish a distinct identity for the phenomenon of religion that will separate it from other fields of study. That is, a compartment for religion, distinct from any other compartments (i.e. economics, culture, politics etc.) had to be created. (See Robertson 1993:4-5.) Only by succeeding in this endeavour would an independent field of study be confirmed.

And so, ever since the Enlightenment, religion has acquired the status of being an aspect or phenomenon of human life, the latter consisting also of other (wholly different) aspects.

It was this search for the distinctiveness of what was understood to be the religious phenomenon that gave birth to most of the different approaches to this field of study and which also lies at the basis of its highly fragmented nature: according to one's conviction, either an anthropological or an ontological<sup>6</sup> premise can be identified forming the basis of the several divergent approaches.<sup>7</sup>

But in all these definitions of and approaches to religion, the one common factor to be found is that *religion* is almost always an *aspect* that must be studied as a phenomenon that is quite distinct from all the other aspects of human life.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Religion as the process of life

It is this fragmentation within the science of religion that Cumpsty strives to overcome. For his theory to succeed in this, it must be able to explain the religious experience of not only the Western understanding of it, but also that of the East and South.<sup>9</sup> To do this his theory must (at least) be able to overcome the subject-object divide that seems to be the hallmark of the Western experience and understanding of religion.

#### *Religion as belonging*

In working towards an all-encompassing theory, Cumpsty assumes that no investigation into religion can start without an essential definition of that which one is to investigate. It is

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5. Not 'within the science of religion'. As was mentioned already, secularisation (here meant in Bellah's sense of the word) was probably a condition for the development of this science. Says Robertson (1993:5): "Religion" is largely a category and a problem of modernity, a motif which was produced in the circumstances of modernity - partly 'in order to show what modernity was leaving behind.'
  6. By an *ontological* conviction is meant the ratiocination of substantialism in which the reality-quality of something is measured according to its *dinglichkeit*. For something to have any quality of reality within this frame of thought, it must have autonomy and permanence. Therefore, it has to transcend the impermanence and changing character of this reality.
  7. See Clarke and Byrne (1993:6-7) for an illuminating description of the different styles of definitions to be found in the science of religion.
  8. It should be mentioned, though, that there is a growing realisation of this fact also in the West. See, for instance, Smart (1989), Robertson (1993) and Fitzgerald (1995). But Yoon (1995) is probably correct in his opinion that all Western approaches to religion still suppose a definite religious *subject*.
  9. Of course, this line of thought presupposes that religion is a *universal* phenomenon that can therefore be defined in an essential way. There is also the approach made popular by Wittgenstein. In this approach the many concrete religions are understood to be, not something universal, but rather as *differant*, but sharing certain family resemblances. (See, for instance, Smart (1979 & 1989) and Clarke & Byrne (1993:5-6)). My criticism of this approach is that an essential understanding of the nature of religion is already presupposed in the way these so-called resemblances are selected and given weight.

important, though, that the term *essential* here must not be confused with *substantial*. According to Clarke and Byrne (1993:17-9) and Byrne (1988:13) there are two sources for essential definitions in the science of religion. The first they call the theological source. It originates in the desire to prove that there is a sacred reality above or behind the profane one: 'The problem posed by many parts of the human race following religions different from one's own is overcome if a harmony at the level of inner essence is discovered' (Byrne (1988:13). This will result in a definition of substantial essence. The other source they call the scientific one, the desire for the science of religion to be a true science: 'The attractiveness of the belief that religion has an essence ... lies in the thought that something akin to scientific understanding can be brought to bear on religion. Like a natural science, the science of religion will be able to discover true laws to explain religion's attributes and behaviour' (Clarke & Byrne 1993:19). Cumpsty's ambition for his definition of religion fits into this latter category.

He therefore takes as his point of departure the definition of religion as *the way in which people belong to meaningful reality*. This definition assumes three aspects. The first is that *belonging* to a reality necessarily implies a sense of what that reality *is*. The second assumes at least a minimal *conceptualisation* (either through rituals or myths) of this felt sense of reality, while the third assumes a *mode of belonging* to this (conceptualised) reality.

For now the first two aspects will be side-stepped in order to investigate the third and, according to Cumpsty, most essential aspect of his definition of religion, namely the mode of belonging to the (ultimate) real. According to Cumpsty there are only three (logical) paradigms possible for understanding reality.<sup>10</sup>

The way in which reality is, consciously or unconsciously, understood determines the way in which people will *engage* with that reality. Because it is, according to Cumpsty, this mode of engagement with reality that is the most obvious difference between the different religious types, he uses it as his criterion to identify and typify them. This approach avoids the classical problem of subjectivity caused when the different aspects of traditions are used as criteria for classification. In line with the three possible paradigms for understanding reality that Cumpsty distinguishes, there are also three ideal religious types. It should be stressed that these types merely describe *ideal possibilities*. No single tradition fits totally into just one of them. They are three models between and within which the different traditions are forever shifting in an effort search to reconcile the adherents' *experience* of reality with their cosmic *understanding* of it.

In this approach, where religion becomes the *process* whereby people engage with reality, subject and object become the two sides of the same coin. Although the way in which they engage with reality becomes an identifying factor, it is the fact that they (have to) engage with reality that Cumpsty sees as the religious drive. This approach differs from traditional approaches in that religiousness does not necessarily derive from an *other* reality (supposed or not) that stands in need of a special religious sense.

One of the classic problems that is avoided by making people's mode of engagement with reality the criterion for identifying religion is the question of when to identify something or some experience as religious or not.<sup>11</sup> Instead of petrifying religions by

10. Cumpsty's classification of the three ideal types of religion is based on the mode of engagement with reality and, he says, '(a)t the same time one cannot do more than one of, take hold and shape, withdraw from, or fit into the patterns and rhythms of the immediate world-out-there ... although these three models of engagement appear in actual traditions in uneasy mixtures' (1991:117).

11. Barnard (1994:231) correctly sums up the gist of this problem in the following way:

identifying them according to certain aspects, Cumpsty's approach makes religion the dynamic process of people engaging meaningfully with an ever-changing world. *Change* therefore not only becomes one of the prominent features of the living religious traditions, but also becomes the *condition* for their existence. Therefore, no tradition becomes fixated within one, single paradigm.

Because the way in which people belong to reality is intimately linked to how they understand it (and *vice versa*), any change within people's *experience* of reality will have implications for their understanding and, ultimately, modelling of it. To understand this aspect of Cumpsty's theory, it is necessary to understand what he means by the three modes of reality.

### *The three modes of reality*

To explain how the three paradigms for understanding reality came into existence, Cumpsty distinguishes between what he calls *affirmative* experience and *acceptable* experience. Affirmative experience is part of what people (consciously or unconsciously) believe reality to be. It is an experience that lies on a cognitive level. Acceptable experience, on the other hand, ultimately lies on an affective level. The fact that experience of the immediate world is affirmed as real does not necessarily mean, says Cumpsty, that such experience is *acceptable*.

Although Cumpsty believes that the normal human reaction to reality is usually the monistic one (that is, the immediate world out there is believed to be *the reality*), this changes when the affirmative experience of the immediate world is not acceptable as experience of the reality to which people want to belong. It is this search for a meaningful reality to which one can belong that leads to what Cumpsty calls the splitting of reality into this reality and an ultimate reality. This splitting of reality leads to the development of the other two paradigms that Cumpsty distinguishes (see Cumpsty 1991:173-5).

### *The felt sense of reality and change*

What thus becomes clear is that change is one of the prominent features of Cumpsty's paradigm for understanding the dynamic nature of religion. The living traditions, according to him, are processes by which their adherents are forever adapting their understanding of the (ultimate) reality to their experience of it. Cumpsty firmly believes that the monistic experience of reality will always prevail in stable conditions, that is, in conditions in which the *affirmed* experience is also *acceptable* experience. This will happen even where the confessed model or paradigm is of the dualistic kind.

Here Cumpsty mentions the Church of England as an example, but the Afrikaans churches probably functioned in much the same way in the heyday of apartheid. The same holds true for African Indigenous Churches, where there are unmistakable signs of the dualistic time and space conception in the millenarian features of these religions, but where adherents are increasingly seeking something of the traditional (monistic) worldview within the apparent dualistic framework. (See for instance Kanyoro 1995, Ranger 1988 and Turner 1988.)

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Are religious experiences immediate apprehensions of a hidden spiritual reality, or are they mediated, culturally approved, interpretations of physiologically generated sensations?

In Cumpsty's theory religion of necessity includes both. Even more, religious *beliefs* as well as *deeds* will therefore include both the Mother Therasas of the world as well as the Barend Strydoms. In the name of (sometimes the same) religion, people are saved as well as killed.

The living religious traditions can therefore be compared with an organism: On the one hand it cannot escape its own nature without ceasing to be what it is. On the other hand, the growth of a tradition by adaptation to its environment is imperative. *A living tradition is forever growing, and therefore changing, in an attempt to reconcile its adherents' experience of reality with their corporate understanding of it.*

### *Religion and truth*

The most important aspect of religion, according to Cumpsty, is people's need to belong to meaningful reality. But it is clear that *belonging* is not a constant factor in people's lives. Belonging to meaningful reality is a process in which individuals and groups are forever endeavouring to keep their experience of reality in line with their cosmic experience of it. The symbolic models which express the different understandings of reality must be flexible enough to adapt to the *adherents'* experience of reality.

In this ongoing hermeneutic process where (religious) history is adapted to the needs of the living communities, any claim to truth does not lie in something/someone *transcendent* to the changing, relative reality. Any living tradition's claim to truth is ultimately tested in its ability to offer its adherents the best model for understanding, and acting in, this reality.

Truth, therefore, is not indicative of an unchanging reality, but forms part of the changing, dynamic reality that drives the processes of the living traditions.

The nuanced way in which Cumpsty makes a distinction between the different modes of understanding reality (and therefore the different kinds of engagement with it), but at the same time his understanding of religion as a changing, dynamic process (so that no living tradition is ever fixed in one, unchanging paradigm), gives much scope for a better understanding of the ever-changing nature of religion.

### *Religion as the felt sense of the (ultimate) real*

It has already been mentioned that Cumpsty's definition of religion assumes three aspects. The third aspect has already been investigated, with the supposition that Cumpsty means it as the more decisive one. For the purpose of this paper, the second aspect will be bypassed. The one that therefore still remains is the first aspect of his definition, that is, religion as individuals' felt sense of the (ultimate) reality.

On the one hand, Cumpsty says that only the third aspect is needed for religion to be manifested, namely a felt sense of belonging. On the other hand, he states that the mode in which people belong to reality is determined by *the way in which they understand the reality to be*. It is therefore an illusion that *belonging* to reality is the only criterion for religious experience. It is in effect not belonging to, but the *felt sense of reality*, that becomes Cumpsty's point of departure.

Although it must be conceded that this felt sense of the reality can be either conscious or unconscious, Cumpsty accords it a very definite cognitive status: 'At the cognitive level it is the answer to the other side of the life-long question, 'Who am I?' namely 'What is all that out there?' (1991:172). This aspect of his definition reflects Cumpsty's inability in the last instance to overcome the Western conception of reality as consisting of two parts: subject and object. This becomes even more apparent if one looks at Rümke's (1956) model of religious development, the latter being the basis of Cumpsty's own model of religious development. According to this model, there can be no question of *cognitive* religion before the individual develops, in the Freudian sense of the word, to become an ego (subject) over and against everything that is not ego (object). Again it must be conceded that in Cumpsty's theory *both* subject and object are necessary for the religious development of human

beings, but his remains a definition that excludes the experience of people outside of this Western conception of reality. Here Yoon's (1995:9) critique again offers an insight into an Eastern experience of reality and the inability of the Western paradigm (and social theories) of reality to capture this experience:

Social sciences are grounded on the distinctively Western human anthropology of individual[ty:] that the self is [an] independent and unique agent, which has a strong recognition, 'I am different from others' ... As long as on[e] stands upon this Western idea of man, he may not see the internal reality of Eastern religious experiences ... in the East man is one of the phenomena of the universe ... there is no Western concept of the self in the East. Now, imagine, *if one is not clearly aware of the self*, how does a social scientist evalu[a]te the Eastern view and action? (my italics)

If Yoon's description of religious experience in the East is to be believed, then there is no experience that corresponds to that of a subject that can ask the question 'Who am I?' over and against 'What is all that out there?'

Granted, even though Yoon criticises the way that the culture-specific anthropology of the West became a universal category for the understanding of religious experience, his is but one voice. If Robertson's (1993) argument is accepted, namely that the Western understanding of 'religion' has become a global category for social scientists, Western and non-Western alike, then it can further be assumed that it will not be easy to find a critique similar to that of Yoon within the science of religion.

For verification of Yoon's argument it is therefore necessary to turn to research work done by psychoanalysts. Here the work done by Hofstede (1991) is quite instructive. After a survey of the values of over fifty countries, Hofstede comes to the conclusion that '[t]he vast majority of people in our world live in societies in which the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual ... The ... group ... is the major source of one's identity'. These societies, he maintains, differ vastly from the individualistic societies of mainly the West, where 'children, as they grow up, soon learn to think of themselves as I ...' (1991:50). Identity in these collective types of societies, he says, is 'based in the social network to which one belongs' (1991:67). Hofstede also quotes the Chinese scientist, Hsu (1971), saying that the Chinese language has no equivalent for the word 'personality' in the Western sense. 'Personality in the West is a separate entity, distinct from society and culture: *an attribute of the individual*. The closest translation into Chinese is *jen (/ren)*<sup>12</sup>, which includes not only the individual but also his or her intimate societal and cultural environment which makes his or her existence meaningful' (Hofstede 1991:74).

If Cumpsty is serious in his endeavour to describe religion as it is *universally* experienced, then he should take note of any non-Western social scientist's perspective on the subject of religion and, even more, on any critique of the assumptions underlying the (mainly) Western methodology of the science of religion.

Even more ironic than this seeming inability of Cumpsty's theory to ultimately overcome Western anthropology is its inability to escape his own critique against existing theory which treats certain religions as 'something of the primitive past'. Because for religion to be cognitive, according to his theory, it must function at the level of a subject that is conscious enough of itself to ask these two important questions: 'Who am I?' and 'What is all that out there?' Thus religious experience that does not function on this level

12. Hofstede does not give us the meaning of these words, but according to Bush (1988:211) *jen/ren* means *being human / having a generous spirit*, that is, having the (Confucian) virtue of humanness.

becomes reduced to a *non-cognitive* level, a position that is not fundamentally different from one that treats this type of religious experience as 'something of the primitive past'. Religion, says he, 'involves the individual, who has *really become an individual* in confrontation with all that is out there' (Cumpsty 1991:49, my italics).

#### 4. Conclusion

It could therefore be said that, by taking as its point of departure the experience of the individual, Cumpsty's theory of religion does not qualify as 'the one which, in the end, is likely to embrace in one integrated understanding, the widest range of phenomena understood to be religious' (1991:xxviii).

However, this critique by no means renders his theory worthless. The usefulness (a much more important criterion) of this theory lies in its understanding of the dynamic character of the religious process and the tools that it provides to interpret and understand the processes of transformation in any given living tradition or religious society. In terms of Cumpsty's approach religion can never be regarded as a completed process. The living traditions become dynamic processes in which societies are forever transcending their own models in the search for a balance between their experience of a changing reality and their cosmic understanding of it. This approach frees the different traditions and their adherents from the petrification which description usually produces.

In this view religion becomes the process of living a meaningful life, rather than one of the aspects of such a life. Thus, as opposed to the conception in the Romantic tradition, religion for Cumpsty does not and can not only concern the 'good' or the 'ideal' aspects of human life. Religion comprises the destructive as much as the constructive forces with which people engage with reality. This understanding of religion is an important correction to the traditional Western understanding of religion, which is still (mainly) the legacy of the science of religion.

In these processes in which individuals and groups are forever (re)locating themselves in an ever-changing reality, reality is ground in anthropology as much as what human beings are bound to reality. *Religion* does not get reduced to anthropology, but neither is it ontologically separated from the given reality.



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