Atmosphere and Religion: The Phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz and the Possibility for a Comparative Study of Religion

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Summary. On the basis of his phenomenological theory of body and emotion, and especially his concept of emotion as atmosphere, Hermann Schmitz (1928–) defines religion as "behavior derived from affectedness by the divine," i.e., communication with a powerful atmosphere overwhelming human beings. This definition enables us to explore religion in a broader context, such as dwelling, daily practice, rituals, architecture, art, etc. From this perspective, religion cannot be confined to the fields of theory, practice, institution, or convention but covers a much richer field in life. On the other hand, this view means that our daily existence is more profoundly related to the religious. This makes it understandable why new religious movements appear repeatedly, and why social phenomena appear that are not called religions but have some religious aspects even in a modern, secularized society. In this way, the theory of atmosphere can give us insight into the general necessity of the religious for human existence in each culture. Schmitz's phenomenology of religion has, therefore, its advantage in the analysis of folk religion, which is rooted more deeply in folk culture and such of its aspects as customs, festivals, and folklore. This article will address some characteristics of Japanese folk religion and then compare monotheism with polytheism.
Keywords: phenomenology of religion, atmosphere, Hermann Schmitz.

Atmosfera ir religija: Hermanno Schmitzo fenomenologija ir lyginamojo religijos tyrimo galimybė

Santrauka. Remdamasis fenomenologine kūno ir emocijų samprata, ypač savąja emocijos kaip atmosferos samprata, Hermannas Schmitzas (1928–) apibrėžia religiją kaip „elgesį, kylantį iš buvimo paveiktam dieviškumo", t. y. bendravimo su galinga atmosfera, apglobiančia žmogiškąsias būtybes. Šis apibrėžimas leidžia mums tyrinėti religiją platesniame – gyvenimo-kur, kasdienės praktikos, ritualų, architektūros, meno ir t. t. – kontekste. Žvelgiant iš šios perspektyvos, religija negali būti apribota teorijos, praktikos, institucijos ar formalios tvarkos sritimi, bet apima daug turtingesnį mūsų gyvenimo lauką. Kita vertus, šis požiūris reiškia, kad mūsų kasdienė egzistencija kur kas giliau susijusi su religiškumu. Tai leidžia suprasti, kodėl vis iškyla naujų religinių judėjimų ir kodėl pasirodo socialinių fenomenų, kurie nevadinami religiniais, tačiau turi religinių aspektų netgi modernioje, sekuliarioje visuomenėje. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad atmosferos teorija gali leisti mums įžvelgti bendrą žmogiškoje egzistencijoje glūdintį religiškumo poreikį, aptinkamą kiekvienoje kultūroje. Taigi Schmitzo religijos fenomenologija yra pranašesnė

analizuojant liaudiškąją religiją, kuri įsišaknijusi kur kas giliau liaudiškoje kultūroje, kaip antai papročiai, šventės ir tautosaka. Straipsnyje svarstomi kai kurie japonų liaudiškosios religijos bruožai, o paskui liaudiškosios religijos požiūriu palyginamos monoteizmo ir politeizmo tendencijos krikščionybėje ir japonų religijoje.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: religijos fenomenologija, atmosfera, Hermannas Schmitzas.

Introduction

Hermann Schmitz (1928–), who is famous for his phenomenological theory of body and emotion, developed a unique religious theory in his main work *System of Philosophy* (1964–1980), especially in the fourth part of the third volume, *The Divine and Space* (*Das Göttliche und der Raum*). He defines religion as "the behavior derived from affectedness by the divine (*Verhalten aus Betroffenheit von Göttlichem*)" (Schmitz 1995a: 11, 92f.). This definition may seem to be rather unfamiliar, but in fact this term – "the divine" or "divine atmosphere" – has its pioneer in the concept of "the numinous," which was coined by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). In *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*) (1917), Otto describes the numinous as a power that evokes strong emotions, captures and overwhelms human beings. In this sense, it is similar to an "atmosphere" in that it has a close relationship with human emotions. But then, why does Schmitz choose to discuss "atmosphere" instead of "the numinous" in order to explore the divine or religion?

As we shall explore in a moment, "atmosphere" is the key concept of Schmitzian philosophy, introduced to comprehend the phenomena of emotion from a broader perspective. On Schmitz's account, emotion is not an internal state, but rather an atmosphere which pervades physical space and affects humans from there. In fact, some things that surrounding us, or some phenomena that we find outside of ourselves, such as landscapes and the climate, also have a certain emotional nuance. So what evokes emotions in some way can be grasped with the concept of an atmosphere. As Martin Heidegger says, human existence is always "*gestimmt*" (emotionally conditioned) (Heidegger 1986: 134ff.), i.e., emotion conditions human beings at a fundamental level. So the concept of the atmosphere can be applied for understanding various fields of experience.

Talking about religion, in so far as it belongs to life and receives its full meaning there, we cannot approach religion as if it had formed a special independent field. Here, I want to explore it in terms of a concrete, lived context of an individual and collective life. For this purpose, Schmitzian theory has a great advantage, because it starts from atmosphere as the fundamental and vast phenomena of life. Besides, from such a perspective, folk religion – not usually taken as serious in philosophical considerations – is especially appropriate for phenomenological research, for it is not fixed by concepts or theories but rather practiced and rooted in the deep dimension of life. Therefore, the religious philosophy of Schmitz is able to compare religions at the level of various folk cultures.

In this article, the first part will set up the basic framework of a religious theory of atmosphere and explain its features and advantages. The second part addresses religion as a mode of "dwelling." This concept enables us to understand religion in a broader context of life. The third part explains the characteristics of Japanese folk religion, while the last

section attempts to compare monotheism and polytheism in terms of folk religion in Christianity and Japanese religion.

1. The Basis of a Religious Theory of Atmosphere

Emotion is usually understood as a state of mind, as an inner world. Schmitz changes this view by introducing the concept of an "atmosphere." According to him, emotion is "the atmosphere which poured out into the breadth of space" (Schmitz 1983a: 343; cf. Schmitz 1995b: 292–296).

Because of this spatiality, emotion as atmosphere enfolds not only individual persons, but also all people present there (Schmitz 1983a: 102). In other words, it can be felt by individuals but also experienced as a "collective atmosphere," such as the excitement in a football stadium or the sublime of religious rituals (Schmitz 1998: 50f.). Therefore, emotion can be found as an object outside. In comparison with physical things like a building or a cup, "it is not more subjective, but merely difficult to fix and identify" (Schmitz 1981: 144).

Moreover, so long as we are always living in some sort of emotional state, the situation in which we live and experience various things never appears without any atmosphere. Not only the weather or landscape, but also gatherings of people, impressions of things and persons can be described with an emotional nuance; for example, we talk about the "depressing weather," a "cheerful restaurant," a "sad fact," an "annoying phone call," or an "enthusiastic crowd." Such emotional nuances surround or cover a scene like the atmosphere in which these things emerge. In short, atmosphere is the affective feature of an individual and collective situation, the fundamental mode of the human experience of oneself and the surrounding world.

As religion is also a mode of human life, it is no wonder that Schmitz approaches it in relationship with the notion of atmosphere. But for religion, it is not merely some atmosphere, but a special one called the "divine atmosphere," which he elaborates on as "the atmosphere as emotion with power capturing humans is divine, when its authority has 'absolute seriousness' for the person involved" (Schmitz 1995a: 91). "Absolute seriousness" (*unbedingter Ernst*) means that the capturing power is so overwhelming that those who experience it cannot withstand its force simply by keeping distance from it (Schmitz 1983b: 654). In other words, we have no choice but to take it seriously and just accept it.

There are various kinds of such intense emotions or atmospheres – like awe, fear, horror, eeriness, sublimity, acute shame, rage, despair, ecstasy, exultancy, fascination, etc. It is true that the kind of emotion as divine atmosphere and how intensely such emotion is experienced varies from person to person and from case to case (Schmitz 1995a: 166f.). Therefore, the divine is neither permanent nor universal, but relative to the person who is affected thereby. However, because it can be also objective and collective, the appearance and experience of the divine is never merely a personal issue, but can be a common problem for a group, society or era.

It is to be noted here that divine atmosphere is different from God. According to Schmitz, the latter can only exist based on the former and derive from it. As an atmosphere has such an overwhelming power as to be called "divine," it is too difficult for humans to manage it. Then, for the safer relationship thereto, divine atmosphere has to be embodied in a (real or imaginary) personal figure (Schmitz 1995a: 152).[1] In this way, a vague, intangible atmosphere becomes concretized and easier to manage. Various expressions of divine figures – from the soft and gracious to the furious and frightening – can be regarded as the embodiments of the corresponding atmosphere through visible concentration. The behavior toward such figures, which can be called "God," is usually stylized through more or less complicated rituals, such that people can have more stable – also careful – relationships with a divine, originally overwhelming, atmosphere.

2. Religion as a Mode of Dwelling

How are divine atmospheres and gods related to our daily lives? In Schmitz's theory, "dwelling" (*Wohnen*) is also considered in connection to atmosphere, because this is, as stated before, associated with all that affects emotions that condition human existence at the fundamental level. Atmosphere varies depending on climate, landscape, events, sounds, music, etc. Therefore, it cannot be controlled arbitrarily, can sometimes affect us violently, threateningly, or destructively. But we can protect our living environment from unpredictable changes or invasions of atmosphere by bounding, isolating, or excluding such spaces that we can find a safe and stable place in. This is called an "enclosure" (*Umfriedung*) as the basis for dwelling. In this way, Schmitz defines "dwelling" as: a "culture of emotion in an enclosed space where humans can get along with an intangible, penetrating atmosphere in order to live in a certain harmony and balance with it" (Schmitz 1995b: 318; Schmitz 1995a: 258).

As we see from this definition, in Schmitz's philosophy, "dwelling" does not mean habitation in a physically enclosed building. The point is the arrangement of atmosphere – which is difficult to be controlled per se – by means of the selection and evocation of a desirable atmosphere based on the consideration of the emotional-affective conditions we need for each situation, place or space (Schmitz 1995a: 213, 224, 268). For the atmosphere in an enclosed inner space, the architectural style, taste of the interior and furniture, the intimacy of people living there, or shared customs and languages would play important roles. The "enclosure" brought about by these spatial factors enables us to have peace and comfort for life. As long as we live in various atmospheres and try to find a stable, more or less manageable relationship with them, the concept of "dwelling" can be applied for understanding a wide range of our life experiences, both on the individual and the collective levels.

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[1] The "personal figure" does not mean necessarily a human being. Regardless of whether it is imagined as an animal, a demon or a monster, it can be called a "person" when we treat them as a partner of communication like prayer or ritual.

Religion can be regarded as such a special form of "dwelling," as a mode of life for a "harmonious and balanced relationship with the divine atmosphere." Religious rituals for a personalized god are the series of practices aiming at rebuilding individual as well as collective "enclosure" in reaction to any disruption, e.g., if evils, such as natural disasters, epidemics, bad harvests, or famines, occur. On another hand, if we undertake something new – that which evokes anxiety as well as expectation – we may employ specific rituals to rebuild the enclosure for stable emotional and affective conditions. For this purpose, it is important, especially for a community as a whole, to evoke a collective atmosphere with its members and in this fashion create a sense of solidarity between themselves.

When religion and dwelling are understood in connection with atmosphere, it means that, on the one hand, religion, seen from an angle of the divine, cannot be confined in the specific fields of theory, practice, institution, convention, etc., but is much more than these. On the other hand, this perspective means dwelling, as the general mode of our daily existence, is much deeper and more widely related to the religious. This makes it understandable why new religious movements appear repeatedly, and why social phenomena appear that are not called religions but have some religious aspects even in modern, secularized societies. In this way, the theory of the atmosphere can give us insight into the necessity of the religious for human existence in general, as much as into practices found across various cultures.

Schmitz's phenomenology of religion has, therefore, its advantage in the analysis of folk religion, which is rooted more deeply in folk culture – customs, festivals, and folklore. From this viewpoint, I will address some characteristics of Japanese folk religion and then compare monotheism with polytheism.

3. The Characteristics of Japanese Folk Religion

The Japanese have recognized many types of deities, including demons, evil spirits, or monsters, which are usually understood to be the opposite of a so-called "god" (*kami*). Moreover, the border between them is vague and changeable. There are also cases where a worshipped god is, so to speak, "abandoned" and loses its divinity. Conversely, there are also cases in which an entity – ignored, refused or avoided so far – becomes newly deified and worshipped. In general, the most impressive ones, which are threatening or beneficial, would be worshiped, while the others, when they lose people's attention, would stop being objects of devotion (Komatsu 1997: 283–291).

A typical example for this is the belief in *Goryō*, a tremendous spirit. In this type of religious belief, when an evil disaster – a natural catastrophe, epidemic, famine, fatal accident, and so forth – befalls a community (especially repeatedly), people think that it was caused by the ghosts of those who had died a violent, unjust death and held a grudge against the living. The community first fears the dead, then apologizes, consoles, respects, praises, and finally worships them. How can we understand such a process from the perspective of the religious theory of atmosphere?

In this example, a community would fall into a critical situation, when it is hit by disaster, covering it with an atmosphere of fear, horror, eeriness, etc. The "enclosure" of the community would be shaken, disturbed, or become "out of order." In this situation, it can be said that the atmosphere might appear "divine" to the inhabitants because of its overwhelming power. In order to endure and overcome such a crisis, they perform a ritual – mostly with prayer and offering – such that the divine atmosphere is embodied into a personal figure that can be called a "god" or something similar. Through this togetherness under the shared atmosphere, the enclosure protecting the community would be thereby rebuilt, returning a sense of stability once again. Thereafter, a festival developed from the ritual would be held regularly, with the expectation that the power and benevolence of the god would in turn prevent possible disaster or provide greater fortune in the future. This can be interpreted as an effort by people in the community to control the intangible atmosphere, by embodying it in a concrete, more easily manageable figure, with a view to stabilize and energize the community. It is true that benefit and fortune cannot be guaranteed in any real material sense through this process, but what matters here is that people can maintain and renew a more or less harmonious relationship with the atmosphere.

The similar kind of religious belief and practice is often the case regarding rituals meant for gods of the mountains or sea, ancestral spirits, the god of pestilence, evil ghosts, and monstrous creatures. That is, when a misfortune or disaster occurs, people try to console or ask for forgiveness from the spirits or deities by performing a ritual for it/them and consequently expect receiving a favor or benefit in return.

Such Japanese gods or deities are mostly specific to a particular area, period, or role, i.e., they vary according to where, when and why they are worshiped (Yamaori 1995: 28f., 34f.). Each ritual has its own opportunity – for example, those related to occupations such as the beginning of farming, hunting, or fishing, or those for milestones in life like marriage, pregnancy, delivery, school entrance exams, etc. – and the gods invoked by the ritual vary according to opportunity. In this way, many Japanese gods are divided into different roles and functions. How can such characteristics be grasped from the viewpoint of a religious theory of atmosphere?

When people encounter a new or unusual situation, it can be said that they are surrounded by an atmosphere of fear or anxiety (or its mixture with expectation). In Japan, such atmospheres – not necessarily so overwhelming – might be intense enough to be experienced, so to speak, as the *quasi*-divine; they tend to be embodied in specific figures whose characteristics depend on the circumstances under which the original situation emerged. Such a new or unusual situation may elicit an important change or crisis for the community, though which the "enclosure," which is the basis for "dwelling" in general and also essential for religion, is reorganized or rebuilt. The divine atmosphere is, so to speak, the "trigger" for the process, and the figure of a god plays a role in stabilizing the situation. As discussed above, Japanese gods are various; moreover, they are spatially, temporally, and functionally limited (namely in terms of a given area, period, and role).

In other words, this means that Japanese gods are associated with specific situations, not easily relieved from them, and therefore not abstracted and made into "the god" with a universal validity.

4. Monotheism and Polytheism

In the previous section, I summarized the characteristics of Japanese folk religion: the entities called "god" (*kami*) or its equivalent, such as the Buddha (*hotoke*), also includes many kinds of deities that cannot be called "god" in the context of Christianity, and some do not seem to deserve the name "god" even for Japanese people.

However, such complexity is not only the case with Japanese religion but is true of polytheism in general. The meaning and scope of the word corresponding to "god" or its equivalent depend on each religious tradition. In a theoretical comparison, different religions have a different concept of god. Therefore, it is necessary to expand this notion in order to elaborate a more flexible framework.

As explained above, Schmitz regards "god" as an embodied figure derived from a divine atmosphere. The qualification for this is that the atmosphere has "absolute seriousness" for the person involved, i.e., the power of the atmosphere is so overwhelming that those who experience it cannot resist it by maintaining their distance. Schmitz finds in this definition two advantages: first, it enables us to distinguish "true" gods from false ones; and second, it provides us with a means to confront religion critically instead of just blindly believing in it (Schmitz 1995b: 445). Still, what we regard as "absolutely serious" and how intense one feels an atmosphere depends on by whom, when, and where it is experienced.

For example, when we consider everything that belongs to "nature," there are many things or phenomena which are either deified or treated as signs of the divine, such as the sun, moon, mountains, the sea, thunder, storms, etc., and they are often worshiped as gods. Long ago, when humans had far less equipment to protect themselves from the violence of nature, the atmosphere surrounding these elemental forces must have appeared much more powerful and "divine," while today we experience the violence of nature less, thanks to the development of technology and social systems.

In this way, whether or not we experience an atmosphere with "absolute seriousness" not only depends on our ability to be rational and critical but also on broader individual and social conditions, such as science, technology, institutions, circumstances, etc. As there is no clear-cut criterion for "absolute seriousness," we cannot definitely distinguish a true god or religion from a false one. Thus, for the comparative study of religion, it would be better to relax this criterion and to recognize the qualification of a god or divinity more widely, in order to cover a broader spectrum of religious phenomena.

In light of the theory of atmosphere, it can be said that Japanese religion has a low threshold for feeling seriousness in the power of atmosphere, or in other words, something may be deified even if it is not so serious. This seems to be at least one of the reasons why Japanese religion is polytheistic and has produced many gods.

Here we have a more general question: when we develop our rationality and can maintain distance from the power of atmosphere, would we have stricter criteria for divinity and thus a smaller number of gods, and so would religion gradually approach monotheism? Or can we theoretically suppose such a hierarchy of religion according to the grade of rationality?

However, Schmitz argues that monotheism is not derived from the experience of being overwhelmed by a divine atmosphere but rather from the will to suppress the unmanageable and to gain self-autonomy. In order to escape from the conflict between various divine atmospheres, monotheism fixes who should be offered prayer and grants that entity omnipotence (Schmitz 1995a: 176–179). From a Schmitzian perspective, it can be said that monotheism is an abstract construction separated from concrete experience, while polytheism is a more basic expression of a living mode of religion.

Is monotheism, such as Christianity, only a theoretical construction? Or it might be better to ask in another way: is Christianity really a monotheism? As mentioned above, when we relax the standard on the status of a god, we can recognize a wider range of divinity. In Christian hagiolatry, the worship of saints, each profession, organization, family, church, city, and country has its own patron saints. There are also many saints who are in charge of specific issues in life, such as disease, ailment, disability, storm, flood, fire, etc. They are similar to some Japanese gods in that they are not omnipotent but limited in terms of place and function.

A famous saint, Anthony the Great, known as the Father of all Christian monks, was believed to be in charge of the disease called "Anthony's fire," a kind of skin disease caused by ergotism (ergot poisoning through eating rye). He was said to have an ability to not only cure people of this disease but also to make them contract it. The same is true in the case of St. John for epilepsy and St. Sebastian for pestis (Delumeau 1978: 61f.). This ambivalent character related with disease – i.e., both a disease and a cure – is similar to the Japanese plague god for smallpox (*hōshō-gami*).

In my opinion, it is not because the level of "absolute seriousness" of the divine atmosphere was so high – or, if seen from the other side, that the level of rational ability was so high – that these saints were not recognized as gods, but because this was not theoretically allowed. Not only in Christianity, but in every monotheistic religion, god might be so abstract on the theoretical level as to be separated from any particular living conditions and to achieve the status of being the one almighty god; but at the practical folk level, where a god would never be separated from a specific field of daily life, many gods are connected to specific social and personal issues. In this way, polytheism may be understood as a general tendency of religion as a whole.[2] When the concept of a god is

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[2] Mircea Eliade wrote about ancient religions (including Judaism) that in societies during peaceful, stable periods, people tended to move away from the worship of an almighty highest god and almost forgot it; instead, they were inclined to worship the lower gods, who were in charge of ordinary concrete issues, such as the harvest, fertility, and other forms of earthly happiness. Cf. Eliade 1987: 108–112.

originally rooted in the experience of the divine atmosphere, and this atmosphere can only be experienced by a specific person, the divine, strictly speaking, cannot recognized as the only absolute god (Schmitz 1995a: 166–168).

However, I suppose, monotheism itself is not necessarily just a theoretical construction. In fact, there is no hagiolatry in Protestant Christianity. Although in theory it is not allowed, if there are specific social institutions, customs, rituals, and other practices which combine the uniqueness of god with concrete situations, a monotheism associated with daily folk life might be also possible.

Conclusion

In the comparative study of religion, there are two general approaches to comparison: first, the difference among religions (including that among sects and branches); and second, the difference between the sacred and the profane (the religious and the non-religious). If we place too much emphasis on the specificity of religion, we overlook the compatibility and continuity between different religions, as well as that between religion and daily life.

Still, as we addressed above, based on Schmitz's phenomenology, human beings always live in a situation with a certain atmosphere which they seek to manage. And when we regard religion as a kind of a "dwelling", i.e., a "culture of emotion in an enclosed space" with a view to a harmonious and balanced relationship with atmosphere, we can understand religion in the broader context of life, i.e., that even if a comparative exegesis and a theoretical inquiry suggest many incompatible differences between religions, they often have much in common when we consider their practice in life. This can make different religions and cultures both more accessible and familiar to each other.

Furthermore, we can find something "religious" in the spheres of life that we otherwise do not usually consider as religious, such as political movements or cultural phenomena (like music festivals, sports games, or charismatic figures), that is, when we experience something divine in the sense of an overwhelming power of atmosphere. Such theoretical flexibility in our approach to research on religion is especially significant today, in societies that are presumed to have already been broadly secularized and rationalized through long processes of modernization.

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