The Meaning and End of Religion*

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LET US TURN, next, to theoretical analysis. My own reasons to be urged for abandoning the concept altogether, are basically two. There are two considerations in the light of which a notion of the religions can be seen to be inherently and necessarily inadequate for interpreting man's religious life. Aphoristically, these are God and history.

Not all observers believe in God, and not all the devout are concerned with history; but it is difficult to escape both.

In the European Age of Reason, when these concepts were developed and flourished, men might think to conceptualize their world without much tremulous sense of the numinous or much dissolvent sense of historical flux. Now that the presuppositions of that particular time and place are superseded or outflanked, we may well seek more appropriate terms than theirs in which to depict man's variegated and evolving encounter with transcendence. In our final synthesis we shall argue that the two considerations are two faces of a single issue, with both of which my essentially personalistic interpretation will endeavour simultaneously to cope. In the meantime, we may look at the points one by one.

The first score on which I see the concept of a religion as tending to deceive the observer of a community's religious life is, basically, that the concept is necessarily inadequate for the man who believes and therefore cannot but be misleading for the outsider who does not. There is a serious and tricky problem here. We noted in our introductory chapter the position of those who hold that only a Christian can understand the Christian faith, only a Muslim can understand Islam, and so on. Although I hope to surmount this problem presently, I do not wish to underestimate it. The observer's concept of a religion is beautifully suited to ignore it. The participant can see very clearly that the outsider may know *all about* a religious system, and yet may totally miss the point. The outsider may intellectually command all the details of its external facts, and yet may be—indeed, as an outsider, presumably must be or demonstrably is—untouched by the heart of the matter.

There is a difference between knowing a doctrine of salvation, and being saved. There is a difference between knowing that Islam involves submitting one's will to God's will as revealed in the Qur'an, and actually submitting one's will. There is a difference between having in one's mind an accurate picture of a sacrificial pattern, and actually sacrificing what one values, or being sacrificed. All this is evident enough (though it has sometimes not been stressed). And indeed the student may not merely know the doctrines and patterns, but know also that that difference exists. The relevant point here is that the significance of their involvement for those who are religiously involved lies on the far side of that difference. To know "a religion" is not yet to know the religious life of him whom one observes.

Christian life is a new life, lived in a supernatural context. To understand Christianity, or to think that one does, is not yet to understand Christians. This latter requires an understanding of that supernatural context, in which what the outsider calls Christianity enables them now to live. The Christian may affirm that no one can understand it who has not known it, and that no one can know it who has not been salvaged out of men's innate limitations by the only procedure in the universe capable of doing that. One may

challenge the validity of either of these two propositions; but not their relevance. No amount of attention to the procedure's outward form, which is what concerns the outside student of Christianity, can give, or is even designed to give, an understanding of that transformed life in its spiritual dimensions.

The above argument will in most cases not carry much weight with those who are not believing Christians—a fact that in itself illustrates the very point that I am making. We shall return to this. In the meantime, one may make the further point that the outsider, if he is a sceptic, may reject the statement that the Christian life is lived in a supernatural context on the grounds that no supernatural exists. If so, then for him the Christian is induced by something called Christianity to live in an illusion. Here one must insist that the significant point to understand about this Christian is still not that something called Christianity but what it is like living in an illusion.

The important matter in the life of any religious community is what their religious tradition does to them. This is not easy for an outsider to ascertain. Yet if he is to succeed at all, he will need to conceptualize it in personal, not impersonal, terms.

What is profoundly important in the religious life of any people, and elemental to all our discussions, is that, whatever else it may be, religious life is a kind of *life*. Participants know this, consciously or unconsciously. Observers may have to learn it. In learning it, they find that they must leave behind the distraction of congealed concepts postulating entities different from the living persons before them, or even theoretically independent of them.

Not only do reifying concepts of "a religion," in terms such as "Buddhism" and "Zoroastrianism," misrepresent by freezing the inherently personal, living quality of men's religiousness. Further, they do so by omitting not only the vitality but the most significant of all factors in that vitality, namely its relation with transcendence. The observer's concept of a religion is by definition constituted of what can be observed. Yet the whole pith and substance of religious life lies in its relation to what cannot be observed.

The significant thing about a Christian's life, we have remarked, is that it is lived in a supernatural context. What signifies is not what the Christian does, but that he does it as a child of God; not what he believes, but that God has granted him the gift of believing; not that he is in the Church, but that in the Church he is in living communion with Christ as a personal friend and with fellow members in a fellowship not merely human, not merely social; not that he loves, but that he loves because of Christ; not that he sins, but that he sins to Christ's hurt, and yet forgivably.

The same consideration applies with equal force to other communities. The Muslim theologian al-Ghazzali learned (he phrases it, "God taught me") something of the shallowness of mere theology from an old peasant woman who, unlike al-Ghazzali with his formidable dialectic by which he controlled a score of proofs for the existence of God, knew no proofs at all and yet lived in God's presence.

It is quite possible and even easy for a modern Western graduate student to know more "about Islam" than that woman with her simple faith ever knew—or ever wanted to know. The question as to whether he understands *her* is a different sort of question.

Being a Muslim means living in a certain context, sociological, historical, ideological, *and transcendent*. The significance of being a Muslim lies in this fact, not in some prolegomenon to it. The concern of the observer with something that he calls Islam shifts attention from the heart of the matter, namely people's living within this context, to the context itself, which is damaging enough; and disrupts the whole procedure still farther by omitting from his purview the context's transcendence. It does this not perversely but inherently; since the observer by the very fact of being an outsider, a non-acceptor of the context, has ruled out its transcendent quality in theory *a priori*. He has conceptualized what for the man of faith does not exist, namely a context for his life shorn of its most significant dimension. The concept "Islam" in the mind of a nonbeliever

has represented at best an element in the life of such Muslims as have lost their faith.

"Islam" comes alive for the Muslim through faith, which is not an item in a religion but a quality in some men's hearts—a personal quality in several senses, including that of varying from person to person and even from day to day. Once it has come alive, it is *ipso facto* no longer what it appears to be to him for whom it is not alive. The commands of God, for instance, which for an observer appear to control and even to confine a Muslim's behaviour, for the Muslim himself, in accord with the degree of vitality of his faith, rather liberate that behaviour. They free it from the confines of purely human floundering and the ignorance of mundane device; and elevate it to a quite new plane—the in one sense unbounded, certainly eternal plane of cosmic appropriateness and validity. To live a life of which even the apparently petty details now have ultimate significance, of which even the humdrum routine has been raised to cosmic stature and touched with divine splendour; to live in a community of which only the less interesting, mundane side is open to outsiders' observation while one can oneself catch at least a glimpse of its real import, its cosmic role; all this, at least, is part of the meaning of a Muslim's faith. Those of us on the outside who would interpret to ourselves the Muslim must understand not his religion but his religiousness.

So for the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Tierra del Fuegan. If we would comprehend these we must look not at their religion but at the universe, so far as possible through their eyes. It is what the Hindu is able to see, by being a Hindu, that is significant. Until we can see it too, we have not come to grips with the religious quality of his life. And we may be sure that as he looks around him, he does not see "Hinduism." Like the rest of us, he sees his wife's death, his child's minor and major aspirations, his moneylender's mercilessness, the calm of a starlit evening, his own mortality. He sees these things through coloured glasses, if one will, of a "Hindu" brand. He sees also certain gods and institutions that may carry this label, though the deeper and more sophisticated his faith, the more he sees through these. His neighbour, also Hindu, sees the foreground differently; if their vision finally converges, it is because both have been sufficiently penetrating to see through and beyond their foreground to a Reality that, if not yet altogether attributeless, is certainly quite without the attribute of being in any sense *Hindu*.

Of primitive peoples the religious system often seems, to sophisticated outsiders, grotesque. They have not appreciated the religious life of such peoples if they have not grasped the point that it is constituted not only of that system but at least equally of the fact that through it the participants are enabled, one might be tempted to say, to feel at home in the universe (which is anything but grotesque!). Yet one has not truly construed the situation unless one can go beyond this and recognize their life as one in which, by being religious, they not only feel at home in the universe but indeed are at home in it. To omit this fact from one's apprehension is sorely to misconceive.

We return, then, to the Christian's flat assertion: "The Christian faith is not one of the religions of the world." Students of comparative religion have been wont to decry such sentiments, even dismissing them as ridiculous. I, in contrast, would argue vigorously that the Christian who says this—for instance, Brunner—is profoundly and critically right. Only, I would go on to assert, with equal vigour: *Neither is the faith of any other people.*

Those who ridicule have failed to understand all faith. Brunner has failed, as has his community generally, only to understand the faith of other men.

We are now in a position to recognize that it was not fortuitous that the religion concepts, having arisen in Western Europe, are inherently depreciative. For the Christian tradition, particularly in its Protestant form, has historically been unusually disparaging of other religious traditions; and the rationalist academic tradition has been skeptical, if not disparaging, of all. The concept "a religion," and the conceptualizing of named religions, omit, we have argued, the tran-

scendent dimension from what they seek to represent. This has to do with the fact that Christians have regularly failed or refused to recognize that the faith of non-Christians has that transcendence; that God does in fact encounter men in Buddhist, Muslim and Hottentot forms, as he does in the Christian. Secular academics have regularly failed or refused to recognize that there is a transcendent dimension to human life at all. (The very notion of transcendence will, I realize, disquiet them not a little.)

Both these groups, therefore, surveying the religious history of man, could attempt to interpret it, leaving out of account the very quality that gives it significance. They have suspected, or affirmed, that that significance just is not there.

All religions are illusory, they have held; or, all religions other than ours.

Thus also many Muslims. More appreciative or tolerant traditions, on the other hand, such as those of India or farther East, have accordingly not developed this sort of concept not only for interpreting their own faith but also not for interpreting that of their neighbours. (Something similar has been true also of the mystics of all traditions—including Sufis and Christians—who, it is well known, have been the one type in their communities most successful in understanding men of divergent faiths.) Hindus, Buddhists, and their like, whatever their other faults, have usually not failed to recognize those who differed from them in outward pattern and formal grouping as nevertheless engaged on fundamentally the same enterprise, as attuned to the same kind of melody. In the positive hypothesis that I shall proffer in our subsequent chapters, in an attempt to handle religious diversity without distorting it, informed students will perhaps detect elements suggesting the influence on my thinking of certain Indian and Chinese orientations. At the same time I hope that the concepts proposed will also be serviceable within the Western academic tradition, and will be recognized as methodologically continuous with it, and indeed in part derived from it.

Among the Christian writers cited above as protesting sharply against the application of the concept "religion" to their own faith, none was hesitant to apply it to other people's. These men have not criticized or protested against the concept in itself, but have been content to reject it as applied to themselves, insisting that it does not do justice to that in which their own group is involved. Indeed they reject it in their own case because it compromises, and apply it to others because it compromises. Emil Brunner writes: "The God of the 'other religions' is always an idol." This judgement can be seen as expressing the arrogance of a narrow-minded Christian. I would suggest that it can also be seen as a perceptive remark, more universal than its author himself intended—but at another level.

The concept "other religions," religions of other people, inherently turns their gods into idols, into false deities, the product of human phantasy. This applies also to the Christian case. For those for whom Christianity is an *other* religion, for example Muslims, the Christian God is an idol, at least the second person of the Trinity.

Once again the concept serves those who would deny to the religious life of those whom they observe transcendent involvement. Actually, no one in the whole history of man has ever worshipped an idol. Men have worshipped God—or something—in the form of idols. That is what idols are for. Yet that is quite a different thing. "The heathen in his blindness," sang the nineteenth-century hymn, "bows down to wood and stone." Yet it is not the heathen here who is blind, but the observer. Even at his most restricted, the "idolator" worships not the stone that I see, but the stone that he sees.

Outsiders, then, in their conception of other men's religions, have tended to drain these of any but mundane content. They have done this by throwing a conceptual boundary around their interpretation, thus imposing on other people a limit to which their own mind has given birth. Yet the point of man's religious life lies in man's being introduced in it to that which is without limits. Any attempt to conceptualize a religion is a contradiction in terms.

The student's first responsibility is to recognize that there is always and in principle more in any man's faith than any other man can see. . . .

So much for my first point. My second is at a more mundane level. Those down-to-earth readers who may have been restless at my concern for transcendence will be the first to recognize the cogency of our next, historical consideration. If one rejects the fixity and neatness of formulated patterns because they presuppose some definite upper limit to men's faith, one rejects them also because they presuppose definiteness all round, whereas every historian now knows that in fact there is flux.

Neither the believer nor the observer can hold that there is anything on earth that can legitimately be called "Christianity" or "Shintoism" or "religion" without recognizing that if such a thing existed yesterday, it existed in a somewhat different form the day before. If it exists in one country (or village), it exists in somewhat different form in the next. The concepts were formed before the ruthlessness of historical change was recognized, in all its disintegrating sweep. They have in practice been being abandoned as awareness has since grown. It is time now definitely to reject them theoretically, as inherently inept.

Aristotle, in his *Posterior Analytics,* remarks of a mythical animal that one may give the meaning of the word that names it but it is not possible to give a definition, since there is actually no such animal. A term such as "unicorn" is used, and its meaning can therefore be stated; but there is no entity in the objective world to which it corresponds, and therefore no statement of what a unicorn is is possible. The implications of this analysis and the outlook that it implies were fundamental for much of Greek thought, and have been influential throughout much of Western civilization since, not least among those not self-consciously philosophizing: the idea that reality is definable. Language, in such a view, consists of words that can be explained; the real world, of things that can be defined.

In the modern age our embarrassment is the other way around. We are learning to reverse Aristotle's assessment; though confusion reigns when we do so unwittingly, or in a fashion that falls short of being explicit or rigorous. For us, words and concepts are to be defined, while things cannot be. We can speak with precision and elegance in our definition of imaginary constructs: an irrational number, or any of the notions in mathematics; model types in sociological theory; concepts in physics; abstractions of all kinds. In the realm of ideals something similar may perhaps obtain. The world of objective reality, on the other hand, is recalcitrant to our schematizations. We may define anything at all, provided only that it does not exist. Once we are talking of empirical objects, our minds move from the neatness of rational intelligibilities to the more humble approximations of an awareness of what always transcends our exact apprehension—and, in any case, is changing even while we try to apprehend it.

The sciences, while developing their own modified or novel meanings of definition, have abandoned the concept of *essence,* its original concomitant. Science is not interested in essences. A modern physicist cannot define matter; but he can handle it, and can do so because his predecessors eventually learned that the essence does not signify. He understands the behaviour of matter not because he knows what matter is—for he does not; but because he has learned how it operates, and how it changes.

The world of the natural sciences, however, is itself considerably less complex, less phased, than that of man and society. Here more than ever we have discovered that on close scrutiny boundaries shift if they do not actually dissolve. We are learning that we do not live in a universe that can be tidily and finally arrayed in a series of packaged items each intellectually dominable, and the whole kept in neat and docile order. The philosophic revolt against essentialism has followed the discovery that the objective world itself revolts against its pigeonholing dominance.

The point is valid generally, it would seem; it may be illustrated lavishly in the area of man's religious history. Understanding in this realm was seriously disrupted, we suggest, when last-

century thinkers set out in chase of an essence of religion, an essence of Christianity, of Hinduism, and so on. The knowledge that has accrued over the past century or so as the reward of massive work in the academic field called History of Religions, has made those essences not more but less ascertainable. That work and that knowledge have not unearthed what religion, or one of the religions, is; but they have contributed something else, of revolutionary import. The History of Religions has taught man incontrovertibly that "the religions" have a history. This may sound tautological but actually is crucial. Many religious people have realized it, if at all, only peripherally. Even scholars have not taken it quite seriously.

For essences do not have a history. Essences do not change. Yet it is an observable and important fact that what have been called the religions do, in history, change.

What exists cannot be defined. What obstructs a definition of Hindusim, for instance, is precisely the richness of what exists, in all its extravagant variety from century to century and from village to village. The empirical religious tradition of the Hindus developing historically in the minds and hearts and institutions and literatures and societies of untold millions of actual people is not a form, but a growing congeries of living realities. It is not to be compressed within or eviscerated into or confused with any systematic intellectual pattern.

As an ideal, "Hinduism" might conceivably be defined (though only by a Hindu), but not as an historical reality. The sheer facts, in all their intractable toughness, stand in the way.

"Hinduism" refers not to an entity; it is a name that the West has given to a prodigiously variegated series of facts. It is a notion in men's minds—and a notion that cannot but be inadequate. To use this term at all is inescapably a gross oversimplification. There is an inherent contradiction between history and this order of idea.

I do not mean merely that to define Hinduism, or Taoism, or Protestantism is difficult. That, everyone knows. My point rather is that it is in principle impossible, and almost perverse. One has radically misunderstood our world if one imagines that things can be defined; and especially living things, and especially human involvements. Not to have recognized that mundane reality—in its complexity, its particularity, and its givenness—outpaces our conceptualizations of it is not yet to have adopted that humility before facts that normatively characterizes modern study.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that what men have called the religions do not exist. The point is rather that, as every historian of them knows almost to his bewilderment, they exist all too copiously. It is the richness, the radical diversity, the unceasing shift and change, the ramification and complex involvement, of the historical phenomena of "religion" or of any one "religion" that create the difficulty. What has been called Christianity is, so far as history is concerned, not one thing but millions of things, and hundreds of millions of persons. "Islam" could perhaps fairly readily be understood if only it had not existed in such abundant actuality, at differing times and in differing areas, in the minds and hearts of differing persons, in the institutions and forms of differing societies, in the evolving of differing stages.

And even if somehow one came to know all that Judaism has been, how is one to make room for what Judaism may yet become?

For there is this further point, of great significance. Not only has the past been various; a future also must somehow be taken into account. And it is inherently unknowable. There is no more befuddling misconception of human history than not to recognize that it is free; if not absolutely, at least free from any limitations that our intellects may attempt to impose upon it. To define is to set limits; but no man can set limits that other men cannot transcend.

To define Hinduism is to deny the Hindu his right to the freedom and integrity of his faith. What he may do tomorrow no man can say today.

It might be felt that, by considering the Hindu case, I have unduly favoured my contention, selecting the admittedly freest, least definable, most

amorphous of all the world's "religions." Let us look, then, at "Christianity." Some might hold that St. Thomas Aquinas, or the framers of the Westminster Confession, or someone, has defined Christianity. I myself would not phrase this so, nor would those named; but we have already treated at sufficient length the question of the inadequacy of these concepts for the man of faith, and I do not wish here to press into service again that side of the argument. For present purposes, let it even be conceded; it would still be an ideal Christianity that was defined, not the empirical Christianity of history, not the actual religious life or the actual institutions of Christians in all their ramifying and diverse objectivity.

This would corroborate my contention that one cannot define what exists. A Christian theologian who attempted to define Christianity would be attempting to define it as it truly is in an idealistic sense, up in the sky; not as it historically has been in concrete actuality. The definable is the pure; and purity is to be found only in theory and in God. Whatever exists mundanely cannot be defined; whatever can be defined does not exist.

Some few have indeed taken refuge in this kind of intellectualist idealism, conceiving a religion unsullied by the world, a transcendent form. To the unserviceability of such a concept for the historian's purpose, on many counts, we shall return. For the moment, we simply note that it evades rather than solves our problem, which would then become that of understanding (and somehow conceptualizing) the ever varying impingement of such a transcendent entity on man, caught in the sublunar flux. In the ambiguity between the ideal and the actual, not only is the manward side of even the most transcendentally conceived "religion" involved. More heroically, to be involved in it is presumably its very business and significance. . . .

The Cumulative Tradition

THE MAN of religious faith lives in this world. He is subject to its pressures, limited within its imperfections, particularized within one or another of its always varying contexts of time and place, and he is observable. At the same time and because of his faith or through it, he is or claims to be in touch with another world transcending this. The duality of this position some would say is the greatness and some the very meaning of human life: the heart of its distinctive quality, its tragedy and its glory. Others would dismiss the claim as false, though not uninteresting. However that may be, the duality raises problems not only for the man of faith himself, for the formulator of faith whether theologian or artist, and for the philosopher. It raises problems also, we have seen, for the student of religious history. My suggestion is that these latter issues might be treated differently from what has been customary and more effectively, in such a way as to enable the more ultimate questions to be appreciated in truer perspective, and not prejudged.

We speak of the life of religious man seeming to be somehow in two worlds, the mundane realm of limiting and observable and changing actuality and a realm transcending this. What is the nature of that transcendent sphere, and what the nature of its relation to this mundane one, are questions on which, to put it mildly, there is no general agreement. Whether the transcendence is the human imagination at work or the fantasy of subconscious neuroses, or the meaningless patter of language gone awry, or the ideological superstructure of a particular economic situation; or whether it is a real world, or more real than this immediate one, or is this immediate one perceived more truly; and whether, if it is real, it is personal, Jesus-like, rational, formless, moral, punitive, unknowable—all these are questions on which intelligent men have taken varying stands. It would seem evident that if the study of man's religious history is to make progress at all as a cogent scholarly pursuit, it must do so without waiting for, or presupposing, agreement on these matters. In fact the divergence of answers is one part of the very matter that one is trying to understand. Room for this multiplicity must therefore be provided in the conceptual framework with which one approaches the task.

The nature of the mundane world, on the other hand, is becoming increasingly known, in a fashion that admits less and less of divergence. This is true also of the mundane aspect of man's own living. Men may differ as to the content of faith or as to its validity, but there is in principle little room for differing as to its overt manifestations across the centuries in their resplendent or grotesque variety. The unobservable part of man's history, especially his religious history, may and indeed must be acknowledged an open question so far as scholarship is concerned. Meanwhile the observable part, including that of his religious history, is because of that very scholarship accessible to open scrutiny.

From this ambivalent quality of religious life, our difficulty ineluctably stems. What is needed, then, is a device to give the ambivalence full play. Such a device is in fact fairly readily to hand. It may seem disarmingly simple, and at first blush just a trifle evasive, although this in fact is part of its virtue. For as scholars we cannot but also as scholars we need not and must not begin by "solving" the problem of the relation between transcendence and the world. It is both possible and rewarding to postpone it. Our academic and intellectual skills are not capable of letting us climb over a mountain whose summit is in the skies. While staying on the ground we may, if the road that I discern does not deceive me, quietly outflank it, and so get on with our task.

This is because, whatever the relation between our two realms may be metaphysically or theologically, so far as the historian is concerned the link is quite clear. It is man.

The history of what has been called religion in general and of each religion, is the history of man's participation in an evolving context of observable actualities, and in a something, not directly observable by historical scholarship.

Any historiography, we suggest, distorts what it is reporting if it omits either of these two aspects; and yet is doomed to flounder if it attempts to combine them. My suggestion is the basically rather simple one that we separate them in intellectual analysis, retaining both.

Phrased more historically: the study of man's religious life has in the past been inadequate in so far as its concept of religion has neglected either the mundane or the transcendent element in what it has studied, and has been confused in so far as its concept has attempted to embrace both. I ask whether these studies may not proceed more satisfactorily in future if, putting aside the concept "religion" or "the religions" to describe the two, we elect to work rather with two separate concepts.

I propose to call these "cumulative tradition," on the one hand, and "faith," on the other. The link between the two is the living person.

By "faith" I mean personal faith. I shall endeavour to elucidate this in our next chapter. For the moment let it stand for an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person; the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative or real. By "cumulative tradition" I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe.

It is my suggestion that by the use of these two notions it is possible to conceptualize and to describe anything that has ever happened in the religious life of mankind, whether within one's own religious community (which is an important point) or in others' (which is also an important point). Also, so far as I can see, it is possible for these concepts to be used equally by sceptic or believer, by Muslim or Buddhist, Episcopalian or Quaker, Freudian or Marxist or Sufi.

These are rather sweeping claims. They would seem pretentious, did one not remember that I do not pretend to have solved vast problems that have outwitted better men; I am suggesting rather a method that will humbly yet deliberately allow man's long wrestling with those problems to be investigated without prior solution.