

1 *Religion and the Religions*

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to offer a survey of the world's religions. We must ask ourselves at the outset what is the general character of the thing the more specialised chapters describe. There are three important questions which must be considered prior to any detailed description of the religious life of mankind in history: What is religion? What kind of unity does it possess? How far is it available for disinterested study? Each of the questions will be considered in separate subsections below.

Before they are tackled it is worth while to note some important features of the context in which they are considered—features which also help to reveal some of the assumptions underlying the approach behind this entire work. So it is vital to understand that what is offered in these pages is a work in the study of religions and not in theology. Theology is an attempt to express or articulate a given religious faith (see Smart, 1973:6). Theology thus begins, and is shaped by, the fundamental beliefs of, say, Christianity. The theologian in his development of these beliefs may offer historical accounts of the scriptures or church of his religion, but such accounts will be part of an attempt to state and defend the fundamentals of his faith for his fellow believers and the age in which they live. The student of religion attempts to offer a reflective account of the various facets of one religion or of many. He aims at detachment and disinterestedness in observation so far as these are possible. In describing the beliefs, practices and institutions of a particular religion he seeks neither to defend nor attack them, but only to understand. So it should be possible to offer a study of religion (or of religions) without committing oneself or one's reader to the truth or falsity of that religion (or religions). Whereas to present a theology is to claim endorsement of some religious beliefs. It is in the spirit of detachment and disinterestedness that the present volume is offered.

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The degree to which a detached study of religions can be successful in reaching a full understanding of religious traditions will be discussed when our third question about the general character of religion is considered below ('How far is religion available for disinterested study?'). We may note now how the aims behind the study of religions, as opposed to theology, give a distinctive sense to these questions about the general character of religion. For the student of religion and the theologian will be inclined, because of their divergent interests, to give quite different answers to the question 'What is religion?'. A typical theological account of the nature of religion is to be found in the writings of the great systematiser of medieval Catholic thought, St Thomas Aquinas (?1225–73). 'Religion' here figures as the name of a moral virtue, the virtue of offering due worship and service to God (see Aquinas, 1974:2a2aeQ81). It is opposed to the vices of idolatry and superstition (see Aquinas: 2a2aeQ92 and 94). Thus one cannot recognise the presence of religion in someone's life without judging the truth and adequacy of his beliefs about God and the theological appropriateness of the forms of worship he engages in. But the student of religion tries to use the concept of religion as a neutral, descriptive category. He neither desires nor needs to judge of the truth of someone's beliefs in deciding that person is engaged in religion. Concerned to give an impartial treatment of religions as important historical and social phenomena, he does not contrast religion with idolatry or superstition, but with those other aspects of individual and social life, e.g. politics, art, science and economics, which are worthy of separate treatment from the student of human nature.

The use of 'religion' to signify a descriptive category is relatively new in European thought, as is the concern for an impartial historical and sociological survey of religions. Three important movements of thought seem to be essential to this use of 'religion' and the study that underlies it. First there is the detachment already remarked upon, which involves a readiness to stand back from the religious traditions of one's own culture. This leads to the second thing: comparison. In standing back from the faith of one's own people, one will be ready to look at the faiths of other cultures and to see one's own as but one instance of a general phenomenon to be found throughout culture. The third underpinning of this approach is an historical perspective upon religion. Detachment and comparison will inevitably bring with it a readiness to see the ways one's own and other nations' religions have changed in the course of time and have been enmeshed in the general progress and decay of human societies.

We are now able to turn to our first question about the general character of religion: 'What is religion?'. We must consider whether the detachment, comparison and historical reflection behind the study of religions presupposes or leads to some definition of religion that will fix its essential nature, or sum up in a sentence or two what we are looking to study in various societies or epochs.

What is Religion?

At first glance it seems as if a clear definition of 'religion' is both desirable and necessary for the study of religion. A clear understanding of what religion is is needed if, in advance of historical and sociological enquiry, one is to know what is to be rightly included within the scope of study. Only with the kind of understanding a definition of 'religion' (and hence of 'a religion') provides will one know what is to count as a religion for the purposes of study. And after a survey of world's religions has been completed it would seem desirable to sum up the general conclusions reached about the nature of religion in the course of the survey by improving, filling out and making more precise the original 'operational definition' on the basis of which enquiry was launched (for this argument see Wiebe, 1981:11–13). The way in which an operational definition of religion might be constructed appears straightforward. One would examine the definition of 'religion' implicit in ordinary usage, adapting it and making it more precise in the light of the scholarly purpose one has in using the word (in this case picking out in a neutral fashion a particular historical and social reality in human life).

The search for definition is common enough in branches of the human sciences, but it faces enormous difficulties in the case of 'religion'. For the rest of this subsection we shall treat of the problems that arise in giving an initial, operational definition of 'religion'. These difficulties begin with disputes arising from the ordinary usage of 'religion' and from the conflicting purposes scholars may bring to the business of defining and studying religion.

The clues to defining 'religion' that come from the ordinary use of the word are best considered by separating the denotation and connotation of 'religion'. The denotation of 'religion' is given by listing all those systems of belief, or whatever, we would normally agree on calling religions or examples of religion. Its connotation includes the properties or features of these systems we take to be constitutive of their being religions. The problem with ordinary usage as a guide to an operational definition of 'religion' is that the denotation and connotation of 'religion' are both confused and contradictory therein (see Ferre, 1967:31–4). There is no question that we could *begin* to set out the denotation of 'religion'. We would start our list of religions with: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism. But we would get no clear guidance from ordinary usage as to whether Confucianism was to be included here or under the denotation or 'ethical systems', or as to whether Voodoo was a religion or a mere system of magic. Further we might, without solecism in either case, say that Maoism in the 1960s and 1970s was the new religion of China *and* that China then had no religion because its dominant ideology was so fiercely atheistical. Reflection upon the connotation of 'religion' will produce similar results. Thinking of items on our list of religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam we might conclude that the chief feature that made something a religion was the

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presence of a given doctrine: belief in God. Reminding ourselves now of obvious instances of polytheistic religions (e.g. Homeric religion) we may broaden the connotation to 'belief in gods or spiritual beings'. But so seemingly obvious a definition will run into trouble very quickly. It will rule out from the denotation of 'religion' things ordinary usage would at the very least have us pause over (i.e. forms of Buddhism which are apparently atheistic, Jainism, Confucianism and Taoism) and definitely include things like magical practices usage would bid us be hesitant about. If we modify the statement of the belief said to be crucial in making something a religion so that it refers now to something broader (say, 'belief in sacred things or things of ultimate value') we will still be in difficulty. For ordinary usage will be happy to list in the denotation of 'religion' tribal or folk-religions ('the religion of the Eskimos', 'the religion of the Nuer' etc.) in which the element of doctrine/ belief may be undeveloped and unimportant. The nineteenth-century anthropologist William Robertson Smith argued that the ancient, tribal religions of mankind were largely systems of rites. They were 'series of acts and observances' in which doctrine and myth were secondary (W.R.Smith, 1927:20–1). And if this is even half true, to define 'religion' simply in terms of a kind of belief may be quite misleading.

Ordinary usage not being clear about the denotation of religion, and giving no sure guide even to the genus into which 'religion' fits, there is plenty of scope for scholars with different interests in the study of religions to resort to different operational definitions. The possibility of bringing different purposes to the definition of 'religion' reflects the fact of their being different kinds of reflection upon religion and different aims and purposes behind these modes of reflection. Thus a definition of 'religion' may be influenced by avowedly theological purposes even though it wishes to treat 'religion' as a descriptive category. When Max Mueller defines religion as 'A disposition which enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names and varying guises' (Mueller, 1893:13) he is modifying an element present in the ordinary connotation of 'religion' (i.e. 'religion is belief in God') to suit a theological purpose behind his study, a purpose which becomes evident when he concludes that all religions place the human soul in the presence of God, despite their surface differences (see Mueller, 1893:192). Equally a definition could be advanced by a sociological theorist of religion to suit the purpose of showing that religion was a wholly social and human construct, as the following definition appears to do:

a religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating concepts of a general order of existence (4) and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1966:4)

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Given that different scholarly interests provide divergent ways of resolving the vagaries of ordinary usage, we must be clear as to the purpose of the study now in hand. Since this purpose is to provide a neutral survey of the broad sweep of mankind's religious life, it seems to call for a definition of 'religion' which does not immediately imply any controversial claims about religion's truth or origin and which preserves as broad a denotation for 'religion' as possible. The definition should allow us to make the necessary discrimination between the religious aspect of human life in history and, say, its economic or political aspects, whilst begging as few questions as possible over which particular forms of belief and practice illustrate this aspect. Boundary questions, such as those concerning the relation between religion and magic, can thus be commented on in the course of surveying tribal religions, rather than being settled arbitrarily in advance.

In producing a definition to meet the above purpose, the first requirement is to establish as broad a genus for 'religion' as possible. So we shall define 'religion' as a type of human institution. It is a complex to be found in human history having the following four important dimensions: the theoretical (e.g. beliefs, myths and doctrines), the practical (e.g. rites, prayers and moral codes), the sociological (e.g. churches, leaders and functionaries) and the experiential (e.g. emotions, visions and sentiments of all kinds). A religion is an institution in human life showing a significant mixture of this complex of theoretical, practical, sociological and experiential dimensions (see Wach's definition in Kitagawa, 1967:41 and Smart, 1971:15ff.). It is an institution which may be further distinguished by three types of differentiae which qualify the dimensions making up its genus. These may be specified as the *object* of this complex, its *goal* and its *function*. The object of the complex of dimensions that make up the institution that is religion is given in describing the content of its theoretical dimension and the focus of its practical and experiential ones. Its beliefs will concern God, or the gods or more generally sacred things. Its practices and characteristic experiences will be devoted to and focus on supernatural beings or sacred aspects of reality. The goal of this complex will be shown in its practical and sociological dimensions (and in part defined by its theoretical). This goal will be salvation or the achievement of some ultimate good or well-being. The function of the entire system of dimensions will typically be to provide an overall meaning to an individual's life, or in the case of the religion of a group, to integrate and unify the society which they form. To sum up: a religion is an institution with a complex of theoretical, practical, sociological and experiential dimensions, which is distinguished by characteristic objects (gods or sacred things), goals (salvation or ultimate good) and functions (giving an overall meaning to life or providing the identity or cohesion of a social group).

A number of points now need to be made about this definition. We may see first that its very broadness provides a way of understanding the great variety of more specific definitions which have competed with one another in

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scholarly literature upon religion. For each of these rivals will usually be found to select only some of the dimensions of religion to provide its genus and to fasten upon some limited differentiae to fix the species to which religion belongs. Thus E.B.Tylor's famous definition of 'religion' as 'belief in spiritual beings' (Tylor, 1903:424) selects the theoretical element as the most important aspect of religion's genus and differentiates it by a particular kind of belief. Religion becomes a kind of philosophy, which Tylor distinguishes from other types by the label 'Animism' (a general view that the world is moved and controlled by superhuman and spiritual beings) and its other dimensions are then but secondary. By contrast the following definition from a recent author initially selects two of our dimensions to provide the genus and picks out the particular function of these dimensions to fix the species:

Religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human aspirations. (Yinger, 1970:7)

Such a difference in selection by Tylor and Yinger leads to a difference in fixing religion's denotation: Tylor's definition will make us hesitate about including the 'atheistic' religions in the denotation, whilst Yinger's will see the downgrading of belief in personal gods as unimportant in the light of the common function the beliefs and practices of theistic and atheistic religions share. These different definitions with their attendant consequences can now be seen to be selections from the dimensions which give religion its genus and from the various differentiae of these dimensions. Such selection can be motivated by a variety of reasons: the impressiveness of a certain aspect of the ordinary use of religion (or of a chosen example of religion) or the bringing of a specific purpose to the business of definition. No such reasons lie behind our definition so it eschews such selection and remains as inclusive as possible.

The inclusiveness of our definition shows that it is in good measure vague. We allow in the first instance that a religion need not clearly show all four dimensions in developed form. We can thus accept that at the penumbra of religion there may be primitive, ancient religions which, as Robertson Smith suggested, display the theoretical dimension in but a weak fashion. We can equally accept the Society of Friends as practising a religion in which the sociological dimension has atrophied to a large extent and in which the ritual aspects of the practical dimension have all but disappeared. We look only for a 'significant mix' of these four dimensions. We have also allowed for a number of diverse differentiae so that we produce yet further species of our genus. Moreover many of these differentiae are themselves vague. Thus one of the most important differentia of religion relates to its object and is given by the great French sociologist Durkheim thus: 'A religion is a unified system of

beliefs and practices relative to sacred things...' (Durkheim, 1976:47). The advantage of this way of fixing the object of religion is that the object becomes broad enough to include religious realities (such as nirvana) which are none the less not divine. But how is the sacred to be defined itself? We may contrast sacred objects and realities with profane on the grounds the former are thought of as transcendent, extraordinary and beyond anything in normal experience, but a full understanding of the nature and range of the sacred can only come with an actual study of the complexity of beliefs about the sacred that can be found in religious history. It is impossible to give an adequate idea of this complexity in some simple formula (cf. Eliade, 1958: xii).

Vague though our definition is, it will still serve to pick out the religious aspect of human life in history from other aspects of that life. It is useful, for example, to be able to distinguish religions in history from systems of belief we say are 'merely philosophies' even though they may have an object, goal and at least personal function which parallel those of religion proper. The demand that the theoretical dimension to religion be significantly linked with at least some of the other three enables us to do this. We might, on the other hand, come across institutions in human life which display the four dimensions of theoretical, practical, sociological and experiential but from which are absent any of the differentiae which mark out religion in the genus. In such institutions there would be no concern with the divine or the sacred, no attempt to rise beyond utilitarian goals and aims and no desire to function as the ultimate source of meaning or identity in life. Political institutions may thus show the dimensions of religion but lack any significant combination of the differentiae of central examples of religion. Some indeed regard the combination of science and technology in the modern world as a significant instance of the displacement of religion by something parallel but different to it. But though our definition has some obvious discriminating power, it will not, because it is vague, sort out the nicer boundary disputes which occur, say, in distinguishing religion from magic. For in some magical systems we may have elements of the four dimensions and at least one of the important differentiae of religion in the presence of belief in spiritual, superhuman beings. Yet other differentiae will be lacking. The goal and function of a system of magic may be entirely mundane and utilitarian, being concerned solely with the attainment of worldly and limited ends. Whether such a system is likened in the end to a crude kind of religion or a crude kind of science/technology (as Sir James Frazer famously does in the opening and closing chapters of *The Golden Bough*) will be left to a detailed study of its relation to central examples of religion.

We may summarise the above points by saying that our definition of religion serves to pick out religion as a recognisable aspect of human life in history but does so in an open-ended way. It serves the purposes of a broad enquiry into religion by giving it a general direction whilst not settling in advance

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important questions which can only be properly decided upon after detailed study has finished. This kind of operational definition of ‘religion’ works by listing the more important features which contribute to something’s being an instance of religion, but refuses to say exactly what combination of such features is essential for something’s being a religion and refuses to define in advance what each feature precisely means (cf. Alston, 1967:142–3). To some this will seem like the abdication of the attempt to define ‘religion’ at all, since the operational definition given does not state in unambiguous terms the necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s being a religion. A statement of religion’s necessary and sufficient conditions would be a list of precise features such that, if an institution lacked them, it could not be classed as a religion, and if it did possess them, it could not fail to be a religion. All that our list of dimensions and differentiae of religion does is allow a number of different statements of sufficient conditions for something’s being a religion to be produced, since we know that the possession of a significant number of these features in varying combinations will be enough to enable something to be a religion. But we neither close the list of possible combinations of religion-making features, nor do we attempt to define each feature precisely. But how may we suppose that ‘religion’ has a meaning we can understand, if we cannot thus state necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of the term?

One answer to the above question would be this: ‘religion’ is a family-resemblance term and religions form a family. Ludwig Wittgenstein explained the family-resemblance idea of meaning in the following way (he is discussing the words ‘language’ and ‘game’):

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all—but that they are all *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘language’... Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games’... What is common to them all?—Don’t say ‘There *must* be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to them all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that...we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family. (Wittgenstein, 1958:31–2)

If the family-resemblance idea of meaning applies to ‘religion’ then we should expect to find the following facts in our understanding of the word. 1. There will be a characteristic set of features found in examples of religion (such as

those described above). 2. There will be no single set of such features to be found in each and every example of religion. 3. There will be no limits to set in advance to the kind of combinations of the characteristic features newly discovered or developing religions could be found to exemplify, nor will there be absolute limits to the additional features such new examples could add to the set. 4. The various examples of religion will be related to one another not therefore by them all sharing a single set of features but through a series of significant overlaps in the features they possess; there will be a network of relationships but no one set of things they all share. 5. The meaning of the word 'religion' will none the less be projectible, that is, having rehearsed the characteristic features of religion in an inclusive definition like that given above or having gained a knowledge of some central examples one will be able to say of newly-found examples whether they are religions or not.

The merit of accepting, at least initially, a family-resemblance meaning for 'religion' is that it agrees with our intuition that religion is an open-ended and ever-developing aspect of life. To think there social existence to be drawn in advance is to falsify our perception that religion will enmesh and intermingle with what surrounds it. Since, too, religion is part of human history it will be ever-changing and therefore it would be wrong not to be open to the possibility that new forms of religion await to be discovered, forms which indeed could extend our apprehension of what religion can be and amount to. The analogy with a family, an ever-developing unity of diverse yet organically-related elements, is more than apt to bring out these facts about religion. We should also be ready to extend the family-resemblance model to the prior picture we have of the particular religions.

This last point is worth stressing. Many believe that to be able to identify different religions and baptise them with names such as 'Hinduism' and 'Christianity' presupposes that there is some easily definable common element that distinguishes them from one another. But if we can legitimately distinguish a host of Indian forms of belief and worship by the term 'Hinduism', this is not because there is some essential unity among them that can be seen on the surface. We have, in fact, coined an umbrella term which refers to a mass of phenomena which does not aspire to be a unity and which is not united by any single item of belief, mode of worship etc. (see Smith, 1978:65–6). The use of the single term to cover all these phenomena rests only on there being a significant family likeness between them of the sort Wittgenstein has described for us. Nor is this lack of unity simply a feature of the religious traditions of India. In Christianity there is evidently a greater desire to present the religion as a unity and its various sects will accordingly tend to present themselves as representatives of '*the* Church of Christ'. But even in this instance, the actual forms of religion to which we give the label 'Christianity' have shown, and continue to show, the most astonishing variety. Consider in this light the difference between the Christian Unitarianism to be found in parts of Victorian England and the Catholic Christianity of the peoples of

Latin America. Even an alleged common feature in all, such as 'the preaching of Christ' (or '...the Gospel' or '...the New Testament') will be found to take different shapes in different examples of the religion and to bring with it no essential likeness. Again we will have to fall back upon a family-resemblance picture.

The reason for the variability within specific religions is the same as that for the variability of the general phenomenon, 'religion'. To speak of 'Hinduism' or 'Christianity' is to refer to aspects of the belief, practice, organisation and experience of human beings. These aspects of human life show the variability that human beings show. We might wish as students of human life that human beings believed and behaved more uniformly but they do not. There is limitless scope for novelty and for receptivity to the differing influences of time and place amongst human beings. It is the humanity of religion and the religions which commands that we begin our study with an open-ended definition of 'religion'.

What Kind of Unity does Religion Possess?

The difficulties in giving a clear operational definition for 'religion' do not reflect an inability to pick out the general area of human life that the study of religion is concerned with. The problems surround the precise description of its distinguishing features and the search for uniformity in those features. We have in this latter source of difficulty a reflection of a general problem in all attempts to classify phenomena, for all classification is an attempt to seek unity in diversity. Many students of religion have thought that the attempt to seek unity in the diversity of religious phenomena cannot stop merely with the acknowledgement of the problems confronted in giving a precise operational definition. These problems, they will argue, show only the great divergence in the outward characteristics of the various things we call 'religions'. Further study will reveal an inner unity amongst them, an identity, or sharing, of fundamental characteristics that only comes to light once one has penetrated the varying outer forms of religion. All religions, they argue, share an inner core of some sort, which underlies their outward characteristics.

The relation between the alleged common core to religions and their outward characteristics can be understood on the model of 'essence and manifestation'. The common core to all religions is then said to be the essence of religion. There are different religions because this essence is manifested in different historical and cultural contexts. The unique features of a particular religion can be explained by showing how the core features of religion would produce the outward characteristics of the religion in question, given the particular setting that this religion is placed in. The core features of religion are thus believed to be its true essence in that they are the unvarying, underlying features fundamental in explaining all else.

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Such a definition of ‘religion’ that arose from a search for religion’s inner essence or core would have two distinct advantages over an operational definition. It could, in the first place, be said to be a true account of the nature of religion. An operational definition on the other hand would at best be a true summary of ordinary usage, but its adequacy would largely be a matter of its suitability to the purposes behind it. But if we discovered an inward core to religion we would be able to describe the true source of religion’s unity and the true explanation of its manifold characteristics. Such a definition would produce a second valuable consequence in so far as it would be the means of settling the boundary disputes over the demarcation of religion in a sure and non-arbitrary fashion. The religions shown to possess the core would have been linked together in fundamental respects. Those things our operational definition had previously allowed to be marginal examples of religious phenomena but which did not possess the core of religion would have been shown to be essentially unlike the central cases.

The power of an account of religion’s essence to produce a strong, clear demarcation of religion points to the way one could test any such account. If the account excludes from the denotation of ‘religion’ central examples of religious phenomena according to a reasonable operational definition, then it is false and inadequate. If we cannot come up with any precise specification of a common core to all religions which does not exclude some such examples, then all religions do not have a common core and religion does not have an essence.

There seem to be two main sources of the belief in an essence to religion, in the belief that all religions share a common core. One we may call ‘theological’, the other ‘scientific’.

The theological source of the belief arises from a concern with the truth of religion. Those who wish to contend that religion in general is correct in its claim that there is a sacred realm beyond the profane or that there is a God will naturally be embarrassed by the apparent diversity and conflict amongst the contrasting beliefs of the world’s religions. Divergence and disagreement will also cast a similar shadow over the belief that there is in human religion a valid concern with a transcendent goal or meaning to life. One way of avoiding the worst consequences of these conflicts is to claim that the differences conceal an underlying unity. In essence, by reference to some inner core of belief, experience or ethic, the major religions at least will be found to be in harmony. Underneath their outward differences they offer the same truth and way. This concern with religious truth and an inner core to religion is frequently felt by those who wish to construct a theology of world religions as part of articulating and expressing their own faith. 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. Many Christian theologies of world religions proceed along these lines and the apologetic value of postulating this deeper harmony is increased if the inner

core is shown to commit other faiths to the perceptions of the Christian religion. Furthermore, a theory of religion's inner core may be of apologetic value if it could be shown that, by reference to the core, one's own religion is the highest, most fully developed example of religion: the specific form of faith in which religion's inner essence is given fullest, most perfect expression. Many Christian accounts of 'other religions' have been inspired by just such theological aims (cf. Smart, 1973:60–1).

Given the terms of this study, we cannot endorse so evidently theological a motive in searching for religion's essence. But we can take cognisance of another source of the search. One might well believe that a truly scientific treatment of religion must be committed to the belief in a common core to all religions, for only if this belief is true will the world's religions be explicable in a truly scientific way. The student of religion will be able to see his investigation into religion by analogy with the way a scientist investigates the nature and properties of a natural substance. If a chemist is investigating the properties of, say, water or gold he knows that, since he is dealing with a natural substance, it is no mere matter of linguistic custom that things are or are not examples of water or gold. We may feel inclined to call substances which look and behave like water and gold by these terms, but it is a question of *truth* whether they are properly so called, for all true examples of these substances will share the common essences of them. A sample of liquid, a piece of metal will either have the molecular structure of these substances or it will not. It is by this criterion that we say no matter how much 'fool's gold' looks and feels like gold it is not as a matter of truth and fact real gold. The real, as opposed to merely conventional, unity of the objects he investigates enables the scientist to delimit the scope of his enquiries in a precise way and to seek genuinely true laws to explain how that which he investigates behaves. There are laws descriptive of the behaviour and properties of water, because all examples of the substance share a common inward constitution which determines their behaviour and properties in a strict fashion. To sum up: we can have a true science of natural substances only because they have common essences as well as common outward properties, for this in turn means that we can classify them in a precise and non-arbitrary manner and explain their myriad properties and reactions in terms of genuine laws.

The attractiveness of the belief in an essence to all religions to those who wish the study of religions to be a true science lies in the thought that a precise delimiting of the object of study and the true laws to explain its characteristics are thereby possible. With a common core there is a real non-conventional and non-arbitrary way of picking out 'true' examples of religion and there is hope of being able to explain the many facets of religion by generalisations from its essence. In considering examples of suggested cores for religion we thus need to bear two questions in mind. We must ask whether any suggested essence really does show a real, inner unity in the central examples of religion. If no account of the core does this, but all force us to

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dismiss from the category of religion some central cases (on our preliminary classification) then the scientific analogy behind the belief in religion's essence is weak. We must further ask if the suggested accounts of religion's essence really seem to explain the many characteristics of the various central examples of religion our operational definition of 'religion' gives us. If no account of an essence to religion seems to have this explanatory power then, again, the scientific analogy is weak.

The entire question of whether a true science of religion is possible is an important one and we shall touch upon it later in considering how far a disinterested study of religion is possible. In now turning to sample accounts of religion's essence or common core, we shall discuss examples of theories which locate the essence/core in religion's beliefs, in its origins and in its experiences.

An early example of an attempt by a Western scholar to find an essence to all religion comes from the work of the seventeenth-century humanist Edward Herbert. Exhibiting very clearly the theological motives that can lie behind the search for a common core to all religions, Herbert argues that, if God exercises a universal providence over the whole of mankind, we should expect to find in all religions a reliable account of how God is to be served. There must therefore be some 'common notions' in religion or 'catholic articles' which all true religions agree in. Herbert thinks he has found these common notions in the following five simple beliefs: 1. 'That there is one supreme God'; 2. 'That he ought to be worshipped'; 3. 'That virtue and piety are the chief parts of divine worship'; 4. 'That we ought to be sorry for our sins and repent of them'; 5. 'That divine goodness doth dispense rewards and punishments both in this life and after it' (Herbert, 1705:3-4). The brevity of the list of common notions in religion, and the generality of individual items in it, points to one of the major problems in attempting to unite all religions around a set of common beliefs. (It is a problem which carries over into other attempts to seek a common core as well.) The set of beliefs has to be both vague enough to stand a chance of being seen to be behind the theologies of many outwardly different religions and yet it must be precise enough to point to a factor which really unites those many different religions. What Herbert has done is to locate this vague but genuinely unifying factor in monotheism and an awareness of right and wrong. To this day this has remained a popular way of seeking a unity in the world religions.

The problem that we have pointed to facing Herbert's attempt at unity shows initially in how he links both Christianity and Classical paganism together by reference to his common notions in religion. The Classical world apparently believed in many gods who were often regarded as being identical with parts of the natural world (e.g. sun, heavens, moon) rather than as supreme and transcendent. Ancient heathenism and Christianity are still linked, however, for, according to Herbert, the heathens' worship of the

sun etc. ‘was symbolical’ (Herbert, 1705:31). Thus he is forced to seek a ‘true’, ‘inner’ meaning behind the outward form of pagan beliefs. Such an inner meaning *ought* to be there if his belief about God’s presence in all religions is correct, but can we follow him in this ‘symbolical’ interpretation of Classical polytheism if we do not accept his theological starting-point? The question here raised about the attempt to see a common theology in all faiths gains force upon noting that Herbert acknowledges *popular* polytheism could not be interpreted symbolically. Polytheistic and pagan beliefs were taken seriously by many with the result that in place of religion, defined by the common notions, we had superstition and idolatry (see Herbert, 1705:381–2). But now all religion is being unified by Herbert’s common core of belief only at the cost of setting aside many forms of theology and worship as superstitious and idolatrous. We have: not an attempt to seek a common core to all religions, but a theological judgement that all correct, worthwhile religions will share certain beliefs. Herbert’s theology is more unifying than some, because it is less specific, but he is none the less trying to establish what is correct in religion rather than what is essential to all its manifestations.

When we reflect, as Herbert could not, on the greater variety of doctrine and myth apparent with the recognition of non-theistic religions, the normative, theological character of attempts to see a single set of beliefs as unifying all religions is even more evident. Only if we are prepared to wield the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ religion with vigour can we hope to unite all religions around a common set of beliefs. But that this is so, shows in turn that this form of the search for a common core to religion has no place in a disinterested, neutral survey of mankind’s religious life throughout the world and its history.

The second form of the belief in an essence to all religions we wish to consider focuses upon the idea that all religions are identical in origin. There is a common essence to all religions because they all spring from the same original root (see Alston, 1967:141). This approach to the search for religion’s essence is popular wherever a strongly evolutionary perspective upon human life is influential. For if one thinks that human life and culture is the product of an evolutionary process, one may be led to conclude that the key to understanding it will lie in its origins. Since it is reasonable to suppose that human culture had similar origins in different parts of the world, one can assume a uniform starting-point for mankind’s religions. Accepting the crucial role of origins in an evolutionary account of any aspect of cultural life, one will conclude there is common essence (i.e. explanatory key) to all religions.

There are numerous examples of this version of the essence theory, for it was particularly in vogue amongst late nineteenth-century scholars in Europe impressed by the success of evolutionism in biology and other fields. Thus E.B.Tylor argues in his famous work *Primitive Culture* that all

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religions share in a common root, which is also their essence, through 'animism'. Animism is the first philosophy of life and nature primitive man can be supposed to have thought out. It shaped the first human societies, the first religions from which all the rest flowed and is still at the heart of the religious faiths found today. It consists of the simple belief in souls (i.e. spiritual, non-material personalities) which animate man and his environment and control nature. Because of the centrality of the evolutionary origins of religion, animism in Tylor's account is the key to understanding the manifold beliefs and practices now extant and is the hidden unity beneath that manifold. Despite the popularity of searching for the essence of religions through origins, there are a number of grave difficulties in this approach. They can be instructively set out by reference to Tylor's theory. How, we may first ask, could we know that animism was or was not the first philosophy of life and nature from which all religions sprung? We have no direct access to the period of human history when culture and religion first arose, for by definition it occurred long before written records were possible. We can investigate the archaeology of the first human communities, but the traces they have left behind are meagre, rarely found and leave only the slimmest basis for inference as to the shape of the earliest human religions. Tylor overcomes this problem by largely basing his account upon the evidence of the beliefs of contemporary primitive peoples. These are tribal peoples who employ a low standard of technology and food production by European standards and can thus be taken to be living examples of the very first human communities. Leaving aside the much debated point of whether their religious life is really united by the philosophy of animism, it may be doubted whether they truly fill the evidential gap that threatens the anthropologist's speculations about the origins of all religions. For how do we know that their material culture has not developed slower than their spiritual? How do we know that either one or both are not degenerations from a state more sophisticated than that enjoyed at present? Even if their religious life were uniform, no sure clue is provided to the earliest origins of all religious life.

In fact the search for origins can be seen as a misleading detour in the search for religion's essence. For granted that all religions originate from, say, the same philosophy of nature, this will not unite them now unless they are all still true to that origin. It is an obvious fallacy (the 'genetic fallacy') to assume that because something originated in X it must still be essentially X and no more. Thus Tylor still has to show that all religions are *still* united in essence by the animistic philosophy (a point recognised in Chapter 11 of *Primitive Culture*). But then the origins theory of religion's essence collapses into one of the other types of theory. In Tylor's case it becomes another version of the view that all religions are united around a common belief or beliefs, but in his case a vague philosophy of nature has replaced the minimal theology Herbert lays down.

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There is good reason to doubt whether any single philosophy of nature is or has been shared by all the central examples of religion. Animism, as defined by Tylor, will not do. For we read that in early Buddhism (to take but one example), though a variety of beings, including *devas* (gods), populate the universe, they occupy a secondary place, being impermanent and subject to a higher, impersonal cosmic law (see von Glasenapp, 1970:30). The ‘gods’, therefore, did not occupy a fundamental role in the theoretical, practical, sociological or experiential dimensions of this central example of a religion.

The two sample accounts of religion’s essence so far considered flounder upon the doctrinal and theological complexities exhibited by the world’s religions. Given these complexities it is hard to find a common set of beliefs shared by all, or a common philosophical outlook in which they all agree. One way of continuing the search for religion’s essence which bypasses the doctrinal and philosophical differences among religions is provided by the notion that we must look for the shared possession of a certain type of experience. A shared mode of experience underlying doctrinal differences is the common core to all religions and the essence of religion, the key to understanding its other dimensions.

Numerous writers have prosecuted the search for religion’s essence in this fashion. One of the most famous is Rudolf Otto, who in his influential work *The Idea of the Holy* describes the numinous experience and of it concludes ‘There is no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core, and without it no religion would be worthy of the name’ (Otto, 1950:6). This experiential essence to religion is described by Otto as having three essential features: mystery, power and love. The religious experience is firstly an experience of something ‘wholly other’, that is, of something felt to be totally different from mundane objects of awareness. It is of something alien, foreign and transcendent. It does in addition strike those who have it with a sense of immense power. Before it awe, dread and fear are appropriate. The human subject of the experience feels himself and the objects around him as nothing in comparison with what is revealed in the numinous experience. The third important feature of the experience is shown in the way that, despite the mystery and power given in it, it draws and fascinates those who have it. They are not repelled, but rather their interest and concern is demanded by what is shown to them in the experience.

There are reasons for believing that something like Otto’s numinous experience is present in many religions otherwise different in points of doctrine or explicit philosophical outlook (why this is so will become apparent below). Despite this there are a number of grounds for doubting whether we have stumbled upon the essence or common core to all religions. Some of these grounds relate to the specifics of Otto’s account, others apply generally to accounts placing religion’s essence in experience.

A specific point of criticism comes from the difficulty of seeing that Otto's analysis fits the character of many types of mystical experience. In mysticism the object of religion is sought through contemplation and inner quest. The characteristic result is a unitive experience in which the object is not felt as 'wholly other' but as identical with, or somehow within, the self. A concentration upon numinous experiences has been held to come from over-attention to the strand of worship in the religions, worship being a religious attitude or discipline which encourages the idea of a gulf between the believer and the object of his devotions (see Smart, 1964:129–31).

A further question mark over the status of the numinous as the essence to all religion casts doubts about the validity of any search for religion's unifying essence in a mode of experience. The reason why the numinous experience looks like an important unifying feature, binding together at least all those religions in which worship is an important strand, is because its description captures many of the general features of man's experience of the sacred. But 'the sacred' is not the name of a *specific* object common to all religions; no more is it the name of a *specific* experience. Otto's description is unifying because it picks out some of the *generic* features (transcendence, power and attraction) that specific experiences of the sacred exemplify. We must be clear, however, that specific experiences of the sacred exemplify these generic features in different ways. This is not an accident. It arises through the mutual interaction of experience and doctrine in the religions. Those religions which all may be said to have as their generic object 'the sacred' differ enormously in the beliefs they hold about what specifically for them is sacred, and these idiosyncratic beliefs naturally colour in part how the sacred is experienced in religion. Otto's appearance in *The Idea of the Holy* of presenting a precise, specific, non-generic experience is created by the concentration upon Jewish and Christian sample experiences used to illustrate the numinous, for here we have experiences coloured and shaped by similar and overlapping beliefs about the object of experience. Otto himself affirms that the true essence of religion is not the numinous in isolation but the category of 'the Holy' (see Chapters 14 and 17 of *The Idea of the Holy*), this being the numinous experience mediated, interpreted by some definite conceptions and beliefs. They turn out to be elements of conception and belief associated with the concept of God as we find it in the philosophical theology of the Christian tradition. No wonder then that, if organisation around the category of the Holy is the mark of the full development of something as an example of religion, 'we find that Christianity...in this as in other respects, stands out in complete superiority over all its sister religions' (Otto, 1950:142). Here, then, we have a general point of principle against any attempt to seek a specific religious experience that will unite all religions despite their doctrinal and philosophical differences. There is no such specific experience because doctrines shape experiences, so the specifics of doctrine will affect the specifics of experience. Only if experience and doctrine in religion were sharply

separable (with perhaps differing doctrinal structures floating free above a unifying, specific experience to be found in all religions) could this be otherwise.

There are other ways of seeking an essence to religion than by the three modes we have illustrated (belief, origin and experience). Another important approach, for example, undertakes to discover a common, unifying feature in the function religion might have in personal and social life (see, e.g. Durkheim, 1936). In the course of discussing our examples of the quest for religion's essence we have noted one crucial problem that faces all such attempts. They have to locate religion's essence in something sufficiently precise enough to have a real unifying and explanatory force, but sufficiently general not to be tied to the specifics of some central examples of religion rather than others. Our discussion also throws up another general difficulty for all forms of the quest. We see that it is hard to find a core with the right combination of precision and generality in any of the beliefs of the religions or in anything that is fundamentally affected by their differing beliefs (such as their different philosophical outlooks or modes of experience). The measure of the difficulty in finding a core to religion which bypasses doctrine and belief may now be shown. For we can hope to find a common essence to religion only if we can hope to demonstrate that the theoretical dimension to religion is strictly secondary in making institutions examples of religion and in explaining their fundamental characteristics.

One may feel that this goal of relegating to the secondary and consequential the theoretical dimension in religion is too far-fetched to make the task of seeking an essence and common core to all religions seem at all attractive. Abandoning the task, one may still hope that the study of religions will produce interesting facts from one religion which illuminate our general conception of religion, and through that, other religions as well. One will have given up, however, any attempt to discover an absolute, definitive unity amongst religions or to explain the characteristics of religion by universal laws modelled on those in science.

Is Religion Available for Disinterested Study?

If our brief discussion of the search for religion's essence raises a question mark over a fully scientific explanation of religion, it remains to be considered how far a more modest scientific approach to religion is possible. In offering this volume as a work of detached, disinterested scholarship we have in fact been claiming that an acceptably modest scientific description of religion in history is possible. This is a description free of doctrinal commitment and bias, based upon objective, scholarly research. Such an approach, being distinct from that of theology, presupposes that one may seek to understand the world's religions without

being a committed participant in them. It assumes, in short, that understanding a religion is possible without believing it.

Whether belief and understanding can thus be separated is something we must now pursue, as well as the related issue of how the historian's or sociologist's description of a religion is related to the beliefs of those who actually practise it. Many have thought that a neutral understanding of religion is impossible in some degree or other. This may reflect either a worry about a neutral approach to any human institution or doubts arising from the specific institution religion is. To tackle these doubts we must remind ourselves that we have defined 'religion' in terms of genus and differentiae. Its genus is a human institution—a complex of theoretical, practical, sociological and experiential dimensions. Its differentiae are provided by the characteristic object, goal and function of this complex. Our question about whether it is possible to have a neutral, outsider's understanding of religion now divides into two: Is it possible to have a neutral understanding of *any* complex of human belief, behaviour etc.? Can we have such an understanding for the *specific* types of belief, behaviour etc. that we find in religion?

The general question about the relation between understanding and belief raised here is important because of the common recognition that human behaviour has an 'inside' as well as an 'outside'. This distinction is evident if we reflect on the difference between the behaviour of an inanimate object and even a moderately complex piece of human behaviour, such as a gesture of greeting. The difference between say, describing a kettle boiling and describing something like the latter is shown in the way an account in terms of mere externals will do in the first case but not in the second. A kettle's boiling is a sequence of physical changes and to describe it is to do no more than plot these changes. But a description of the externally observable events that constitute one person's act of greeting to another would leave out some vital features of the act altogether. It would ignore those features which gave it its meaning as this act rather than another. It is an act of greeting because it has a certain kind of point. Its having this point is a matter of its being informed by beliefs and desires of a given kind and of it conforming to accepted conventions and rules for giving expression to those beliefs and desires. Unlike a sequence of mere physical changes, we may say that a piece of human behaviour has an 'inside' as well as an 'outside'. It is informed by beliefs and desires, and is related to conventions and rules of a human community. This 'inside' to human behaviour is even more apparent if we consider the experience and feelings that accompany behaviour and which also inform and shape it. Attention to both the externals and the inside of human behaviour is necessary if its meaning is to be discovered and hence if it is to be understood.

We might seem able to conclude quickly that an understanding of any human institution cannot be separated from the beliefs of those who participate in it. For any such institution will have an inside as well as an outside. Discovery

of its inside will be necessary to determine the meaning of its component parts but will include precisely the beliefs of its participants. The beliefs of the participants will shape the meaning of the institution. But we must note the very limited nature of this conclusion. If to uncover the meaning of a human institution is in part to uncover the beliefs of those who participate in it, this is not to say that we must *share* those beliefs. It is only to say that we must describe them in describing the ‘inward’ side to the institution on pain of missing its meaning. As non-participating observers we should look to the beliefs and conventions present in the institution in helping us complete our description of it. We need sympathy, imagination and insight to uncover these beliefs, but this does not entail that we share them. We need to describe the beliefs of the participants to describe the institution in its fullness, but we do not need in addition to hold them.

If we equate a scientific approach to the description of religion with one that is neutral, scholarly and disinterested, we have not ruled it out in noting the importance of the ‘inside’ to any human institution. A scientific approach would only have been defeated if we assumed that neutrality, scholarship and disinterest meant being confined to the externals of an institution only. But there is no reason to suppose that the elements of objective study exclude the sympathetic and imaginative insight needed to penetrate beyond the externals of an institution. In the case of human belief and behaviour sympathy and imagination turn out to be the preconditions for the discovery of the whole range of data needed by objective scholarship.

This conclusion about the relation between belief and understanding drawn from the general character of a human institution can be applied to the specific case of a religion in the following way. Consider a scholar describing the meaning of the ritual of the Eucharist in a particular Christian denomination. No adequate description of this rite could confine itself to the externals of what goes on. It would have to mention and delineate its point—let it be an act of remembrance of the Saviour. In characterising the point of the rite many beliefs about the object of Christianity (i.e. God-in-Christ) would have to be mentioned and explained. The worshippers’ beliefs about the object of their religion would thus need to be called upon to make up the description of the rite. But this does not entail that the scholar himself shares these beliefs, only that he be ready to uncover and use them in his account. All the beliefs about Christ and the Eucharist mentioned in his account would be in reported speech, and thus neither endorsed nor denied. Though the object of the religion would figure very considerably in the observer’s account, it would, to use the technical expression, be ‘bracketed’ (see Smart, 1973:57). All the statements about God and Christ in the description of the Eucharist would, on this score, be preceded by an explicit or implicit ‘The participants believe that...’ The nature of the object of religion would figure in the description only in and through the participants’ beliefs about that object. So the ‘inside’ of the ritual could be grasped in the scholarly account without committing either the

scholar or his readers to the actual existence of a religious object having that nature.

Our brief discussion of the general difficulties in describing human institutions has revealed a complexity in the relationship between an outsider's understanding of them and a participant's beliefs and experiences. The latter are crucial in yielding an understanding of the institution but not because endorsing them is a precondition of understanding them. Rather, uncovering and describing them will reveal to the outsider the full meaning of what goes on in the institution. The object of the outsider's reflection and, he hopes, understanding is in large measure the participant's beliefs. If we wish to restrict the possibility of an objective, neutral study of religion we must seek something more specific in religion to block this kind of approach to it.

One common way of arguing from the specifics of religion to the impossibility of a neutral understanding of it has been found in its experiential dimension. Thus it has been argued that religion's essence lies in its experiential dimension and that in the case of religion the experiential dimension is beyond definition or description (see Wiebe, 1981:9–10). If this were the case, the only means of understanding the 'inside' to the institution is actually to have the experiences which determine it. Since they are beyond description nothing believers say or write can help the non-participant understand religion. Only by becoming a participant can one understand the unique, inexpressible experience that lies at the heart of religion. This line of thought is suggested by Otto's comments on the numinous experience:

This mental state is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other, and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined. There is only one way to help another to an understanding of it. He must be guided and led on by consideration and discussion of the matter through the ways of his own mind, until he reaches the point at which 'the numinous' in him perforce begins to stir, to start into life and into consciousness. (Otto, 1950:7)

No doubt part of the reasoning behind Otto's conclusion that we can understand religious experience, and thus the core of religion, only if it is awakened in us lies in his stress upon it as the experience of something 'wholly other'. The observer of religion doesn't merely confront beliefs about and experiences of objects he happens not to have met himself, but could still understand. For he cannot be apprised of the character of these alleged objects by the use of general categories of which he has had experience in other cases. The objects of religious belief and experience, being transcendent, are not well described by general categories of description into which objects of common acquaintance also fit. Thus the believer himself feels the presence of a gap between the descriptions he offers and the object of his religion, just 23 because those descriptions are drawn from ordinary things. Here we have a

point which reflects the general character of the sacred as a class of objects of belief, ritual and experience. The sacred is other than the ordinary, the mundane, and thus not easily defined by ordinary descriptions and classifications.

There can be no question that the content of religious beliefs and experiences is out of the ordinary in a quite special sense and that this creates peculiar difficulties in understanding. The resources of imagination, sympathy and insight that the neutral scholar must employ will have to be greater than in the description of many other aspects of human life. Further reflection, however, will show that he is not without important aids in understanding even the content of beliefs and experiences focusing on the sacred.

One source of interpretation comes from the fact that beliefs and experiences concerning the sacred do not exist in isolation. It is, for example, clear from Otto's discussion of the numinous experience that it is in concrete cases always found connected with a web of notions and doctrines in particular religions. It is shaped by these connections and in turn contributes to the concepts and beliefs that surround it. In its developed forms it is not a bare experience but an encounter with the object of a specific religion. Thus its character can in part be ascertained by noting the connections established between it and other things in the various dimensions of a religion. The fact that particular beliefs and experiences concerning the sacred are connected with other beliefs and experiences, and with practices and sociological structures, brings with it a further source of understanding for the non-participant. These connections entail that such beliefs and experiences are parts of a publicly shareable and shared human institution. Experiences of the sacred may in a manner be private and unique but they are bound up with dimensions of belief, behaviour, experience and social organisation that define a human, cultural phenomenon (see Wiebe, 1981:9–10). Being a cultural phenomenon religion exists as a public entity. The experiential dimension to religion does not militate against this fact. For what makes an individual's experiences of the sacred *religiously* significant (as opposed to being merely private experiences of one knows not what) is that they do connect with and contribute to the public phenomenon that is a religion. To be counted as experiences of the sacred they must be characterised as experiences of something, where the relevant concept used to delineate the object is recognisably drawn from some system of religious thought or other, even if it is a system initiated by the experience itself. This entails that all experiences of the sacred have the public connections described if they are to be counted as experiences of the sacred. If someone had an experience that was literally indescribable or literally of nothing, there would be no more reason to classify it as a religious experience than there would to classify it as belonging to some totally different area of life.

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One cannot deny that there are esoteric experiences in the religions. There are experiences (sometimes associated with forms of mysticism) described as being of the Ineffable or of Nothingness. Such experiences do of course create a problem for the interpreter. But it should be noted that words like 'Ineffable' and 'Nothingness' do function here as descriptions: they are means of positively characterising the experiences in question, which in turn connect the experiences with doctrines, rituals etc. in comprehensible ways. Thus 'Ineffable' gets its force from associations with doctrines to the effect that the sacred object surpasses and is distinct from all mundane things. 'Nothingness' as a characterisation may be connected with doctrines and practices associated with the religious importance of the extinction of the self or of the emptying of mind of all discrete, finite objects of consciousness. Such characterisations do not, then, blunt the force of what has been urged concerning the publicity and connectedness of individual religious experiences and beliefs. In the last analysis the force of these characterisations is derived from what comes before and what comes after them in the life of religion.

A further source of help to the observer trying to understand the character of beliefs and experiences comes from the undoubted fact that the sacred connects with the mundane in countless ways. Thus, to cite Otto's particular account of the sacred again, it is evident that both the numinous experience itself and the concepts used to rationalise it are connected with experiences and descriptions of the ordinary and everyday. Otto notes how the numinous experience has 'numerous analogies' with other experiences, despite being qualitatively *sui generis* in some sense. He mentions the experience of the sublime in nature as a closely analogous feeling (Otto, 1950:44). If the experience is rationalised in the manner of Christian theology (in terms of an all-powerful, all-good creator God), then it is being shaped by concepts derived from public conceptions of mundane things (power, goodness, making). For all the unique and 'wholly other' character of the numinous, one who has not had experience of it is not without bearings in understanding it. A general truth about the character of the sacred here emerges. The characteristic objects of religion may be regarded as distinct from ordinary, mundane things in various and varying respects. But they are all regarded as connected with and related to ordinary things in important ways.

There are two strong reasons from within the dynamics of religion why the sacred should thus be connected with the ordinary. In the first case: if it were not it would be of no interest and importance. Religion does not merely focus on realities felt to be extraordinary but on ones which are vital to human life. They must be realities which suggest a goal for human striving, the following of which will have an important role in human individual or social life. They must therefore be thought of as interacting in important ways with ordinary life and its concerns. In addition, if the sacred were not

related to ordinary things and realities there would be no route into religion for even those who aspire to be participants. Religion would be a completely closed book quite incapable of being comprehended by anyone. Nothing else in human culture would provide a means for being able to understand or participate in it. Not only the phenomenon of conversion, but also the obvious interpenetration of religion and the other aspects of human culture shows the connectedness of religious belief and experience with other things. If religion were completely esoteric, it would be of no interest to anyone; and it would not exist. We do not, again, deny that religion may speak of the 'ineffable' or the 'utterly mysterious'. One way of relating a felt reality to ordinary things may be the way of differencing and distinguishing it from them. The importance for us of the religious object might lie in its unlikeness to anything ordinary. We can describe and relate one thing to another by stressing unlikeness and difference.

If we consider the differentiae of religion as a human institution, we must conclude that it has many aspects which will stretch the sympathetic and imaginative resources of the neutral scholar to the utter-most. We have not, however, found anything to suggest that, unlike other phenomena in human culture, it is not available for disinterested study. 'Disinterest' and 'neutrality' are not labels for 'lack of sympathy' or 'external observation'. The scholar must get to grips with the living 'inside' of religion, but he need not share the beliefs, experiences etc. which make up that 'inside'. Nor need he govern his research and observation by the desire to make them prove preconceived theological commitments.

Conclusion

Much has been said in the last section of the difference between a theological approach to religion and an approach of disinterested scholarship. The point of view of the believer has likewise been distinguished from that of the non-participating observer of religion. It would be wrong to leave the impression that such distinctions were hard and fast.

It may, for example, be very important for one who is a committed participant in a particular religion to adopt on occasion the stance of a disinterested observer of the religious scene. The fruits of others' neutral scholarship may equally be of great importance to the participant. No one is any the better for being ignorant of the actual historical or sociological details of his own religion. To stand back from one's own faith, to examine it and other faiths with disinterested scrutiny, may be of great importance in fully understanding what one believes and why one believes it. Scholarly enquiry into one's own faith may be the means of uncovering beliefs and assumptions about one's religion that are best dismissed as prejudiced and harmful. Looking at the faiths of others may give one a new insight into one's own, in revealing how people of different cultures have coped with common problems, such as

suffering and death. It may be a powerful check to the parochialism which assumes that one's own culture represents the experience of humanity as a whole.

For the kind of reason mentioned above much theology has in fact been engaged in scholarly historical and critical research. Much of the pioneering work in the West in the global study of religions was undertaken by theologians interested in discovering the facts of the relationship between Christianity and the larger religious life of mankind. The best theologians have understood that one cannot articulate one's faith without understanding it. Acts of disinterested reflection which take in what others have thought and believed may be an aid to such understanding. An understanding of one's own religion, and of religion in general, is not given just in being a participant in it.

As we reflect upon religion in the contemporary world it is with a heightened sense of the facts of the historical antiquity, and geographical variety and extent of human culture. More and more we will come to realise accordingly the truth of Max Mueller's dictum of 100 years ago: he who knows one religion, knows none (Mueller, 1893:13).

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