

ERIC Sharpe, Understanding Religion  
(London: Duckworth, 1983).

## Seven

### Four 'Modes' of Religion

We have seen that in principle, practically any religious tradition contains within itself sufficient variety to occupy a normal student during a normal lifetime, but that parallel studies between one tradition and another are both useful and necessary, even when those traditions may sort under the same textbook heading. But religion is not one simple thing, nor does it fulfil one single function. As well as the customary geographical and historical divisions between one 'religion' and another, it is therefore advisable to keep in mind the possibility – indeed the certainty – that wherever we look in the world of religion, different needs are being met and different functions fulfilled.

It is not always easy to convince people that religion is, in fact, multi-functional. All too often the talk among intellectuals has been of 'the essence of religion' – a single powerfully compelling idea which is taken to be absolute and final, a sentiment, a notion, an attitude which is self-authenticating and without which religion cannot exist. Philosophically or theologically speaking, the discussion about 'Essences' is not without its point. Functionally speaking, however, the discussion has to be carried on in different terms. It is less a matter of what function or functions religion might, or *ought to*, fulfil when it is at its best, than of the possible range of functions which it *actually* fulfils under varying circumstances.

To the functional question, many of the existing textbooks have very little to contribute. Commonly they divide up their material tribe by tribe, country by country, culture by culture, and follow each separate path as it winds its way through its own history. In terms of straightforward chronicle, this is reasonable enough. Without the kind of elementary historical knowledge which this kind of study provides, whatever else there may be to the study of religion is bound to be at best elusive, and may at worst be totally

inaccessible. There is an elementary craft involved in the study of religion, which is as indispensable as the practising of scales is to the budding musician, and it is hard to imagine how else this craft can be learned than by the assimilation of a certain amount of factual historical information. But the acquisition of such information can never be an end in itself, since even when a great deal of it has been absorbed, the student may still be at a loss to know what to make of the *totality* of the phenomenon 'religion'.

Nor is the problem necessarily solved through the division-of-labour approach which shares the field of religion out among technical subject specialists – philosophers, psychologists, historians, sociologists and the rest. The division is certainly convenient, and many functional questions can be dealt with by this means. Where a company of specialists in one or another of these areas meets together and talks together in a language which all can understand, much may be achieved, and inter-disciplinary projects are becoming more and more common. But whatever the more flexible and sensitive scholars may from time to time say, the main drawback here is simply the intrusive 'human factor', and the tendency of some scholars to want to defend their own territories, perhaps even by refusing the very cooperation which would place their individual efforts in perspective.

But there is another drawback here. This division of the field of religion has been made less on a basis of the nature of the material to be dealt with than by the accidental criteria of the recent history of western scholarship. Philologists who study religion, for instance, can only study its verbal expressions: when they pass beyond the texts, they cease to be philologists, and run professional risks. Psychologists of religion tend to want to hold up their heads in psychological, and not only religious, company, and set their sights accordingly. And academic reputation being a fragile thing at the best of times (particularly to scholars without tenure), a necessary and fruitful specialisation can all too easily become a nervous clinging to a set of 'respectable' techniques and a failure to appreciate (sometimes even to understand) the techniques of others.

I am not saying that technical specialisation of this kind has no role to play in the study of religion. Clearly it has. But if religion as a subject for study can be tackled only on the basis of arbitrary or conventional divisions of the kind I have been describing, what hope is there of anyone ever arriving at an 'integral understanding' of

religion, given the vast range of its manifestations, its long history, and the need for so much specialist knowledge in dealing with its separate parts? Is it not true to say that none of us, strictly speaking, can ever know enough or stand far enough away to view the totality? And this being so, is it not better to leave such matters to the seers (or to the dilettantes), meanwhile cultivating our own little gardens?

Certainly, if the operative criteria are all quantitative, then we must all, sooner or later, retreat in shame and confusion, since we can never know enough of this side of human history. If they are academically professional, then few of us have the opportunity, let alone the specialist training, to master more than one or two techniques. But what if there are other criteria, which are functional rather than quantitative or narrowly professional, which divide the field without distorting or destroying it, and which are applicable to religion both in its local and its more general manifestations? I believe that there are such criteria, and the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an attempt to explain them.

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Religion, whatever its ultimate origins in this world or outside it, involves human beings in a variety of attitudes and types of behaviour. We may be more or less elaborate in deciding how many of these there may be, but as an *irreducible minimum* I shall propose four, which I shall call (not being able to think of a better word) functional *modes* of religious belief and behaviour.

I do not wish to claim any particular originality for my fourfold division of the field. Many similar attempts have been made in the past, and I had been using my classification for some time before I found that the Swedish scholar Helmer Ringgren has a practically identical four-part scheme in his book *Religionens form och funktion* (1968). Other scholars have produced more elaborate patterns, and I should like to quote one such example.

In his book *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968) and elsewhere, Ninian Smart has put forward a theory of a six-dimensional structure of religion. His six 'dimensions' are divided up into two groups of three. The first he labels as *parahistorical*, that is, going beyond the bounds of history as normally understood; the second comprises that which has to do with the *historical* phenomena

of religion as these appear in the world. Smart's total scheme looks like this:

- |                    |                           |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
|                    | 1. Doctrinal dimension    |
| The parahistorical | 2. Mythological dimension |
|                    | 3. Ethical dimension      |
|                    | 4. Ritual dimension       |
| The historical     | 5. Experiential dimension |
|                    | 6. Social dimension       |

This scheme, perhaps because at the time when it was put forward it represented a new and creative way of looking at the totality of religious belief and practice, has won considerable support and is often quoted. But I have never been altogether happy with it, for two reasons.

The first is the way in which it is set out, which leads one to suppose that the lower the number, the more important the element in question: the parahistorical appears to be more important than the historical, doctrine more important than myth and ethics, and so on. Perhaps in Smart's view there is a scale of values involved, and certainly most students have distinct preferences. But in most cases these days it would probably be argued that 'Dimension 5' is the most important of all, and 'Dimension 1' perhaps the least important. This impression may be wrong, and in any case popular preferences ought not to force the student into dangerous value-judgments. But if a scheme like this is to be adopted, it perhaps ought to be set out differently.

But more seriously, I wonder whether all of these 'dimensions' in fact fall into the same type of category. Two of them at least, the 'mythological' and 'ritual' dimensions, appear to me to be more matters of *content* than do the other four. If myth and ritual are to be accepted as 'dimensions' of religion (and far be it from me to deny that they are genuinely part of a religious totality), then there are other, similar 'dimensions' which demand to be taken into consideration as well. It could be said, for instance, that there is a legal dimension, a musical dimension, a symbolical dimension, a spatial dimension, and many more such dimensions. But it would be hard to maintain that there is a musical or a legal *mode*, which is an intrinsic part of the structure of religion, without which it cannot be understood. Myth and ritual can be taken out of religion altogether, and though religion may suffer in the process, its basic fourfold

structure will not be threatened. Myth and ritual I in fact believe to be phenomena, observables, and therefore part of that which we are trying to analyse rather than categories or functions. ('Dimension' in Smart's scheme does not easily translate into 'function'.)

My four-fold scheme I should therefore like to present as follows: religion operates, humanly speaking, in four functional modes. Opinions may differ as to what to call them, but we may perhaps use the labels:

1. Existential
2. Intellectual
3. Institutional
4. Ethical

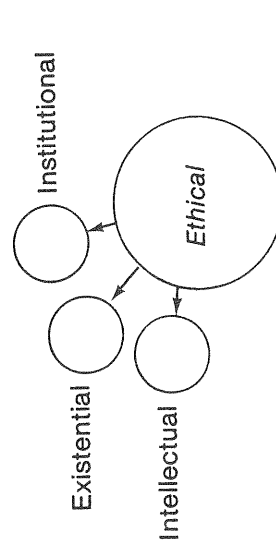
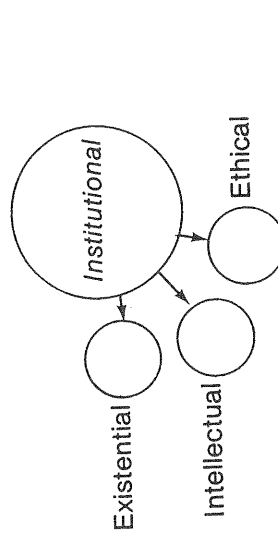
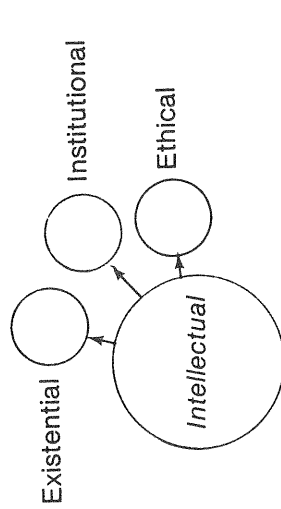
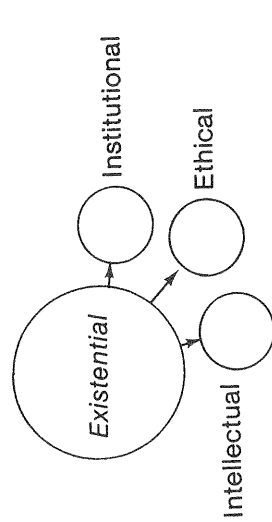
Each has an appropriate noun, characterising its dominant content. Again we may choose from among the available options:

1. *Faith* in the sense of *fiducia*, 'trust'
2. *Beliefs* in the sense of those statements which one gives conscious assent (*assensus*)
3. *Organisations* within which (1) and (2) are held and maintained, and by which they are transmitted
4. *Conduct vis-à-vis* the members of (3) and others.

I am not saying that from the point of view of the one who is attempting to understand religion, any one of these is intrinsically any more important than any of the others. However, individuals, whether believers or students, have their own characteristic emphases.

Taking believers first, in the life of the individual or the community, one mode is very often regarded as being more important, 'central', 'essential' than the others (either by deliberate choice or by inherited tradition). In such cases, one of the following patterns is likely to emerge: (see diagram on p. 96).

This diagram may not be entirely self-explanatory, but what it is intended to show is the way in which, in the life of the individual believer (or the community of which he is part) one or other 'mode' of religion serves as a gateway to all the others. Shortly I shall proceed to a brief discussion of the various ways in which this principle operates. For the moment let me merely say that, in terms



of the supernatural or the transcendent, in each case it is through the dominant element that (to use a Swedenborgian term) the 'influx' of the unseen world comes. Each, in other words, supplies the symbols by means of which that world is described and evaluated.

Since this pattern extends to ideologies and to human value-systems generally, it is equally one which the student ought also to be able to recognise as operative within other segments of the society of which he or she is part. Politics, too, might be analysed in a similar fourfold fashion, as might those various pressure-groups to which most have belonged at one time or another. What this means in practice is that there are very few students (or others) who do not have a built-in preference for one 'mode' of religious life over against the others – even though, as far as they are concerned, the preference may have originated from other sources entirely. But this preference will very often then carry over into the study of religion – not always with the best or most desirable results.

Now, however, we must consider in general terms the characteristics of each 'mode' separately.

#### *The existential mode: the circle of faith*

This is the purely individual aspect of religion: the dominant factor here is the unquestioning acceptance of the reality of the supernatural/transcendent order (under whatever set of images), and a sense of dependence upon and trust in the influence of that order. It involves the emotions and the will, 'faith', 'trust', 'love', 'fear', 'devotion', 'confidence', 'security'. At one pole it may be a simple fear in face of the workings of an incomprehensible 'power'. At the opposite pole it gives rise to the mystic's sense of oneness with the Real. In between, there are all the varieties of individual 'religious experience'.

It is hardly necessary to stress what a great value is placed on 'religious experience' in our day, at least by those who verbalise their religion. Perhaps the tendency is strongest in Protestant Christianity, where it is not uncommon to find such expressions as 'conversion experience', 'born-again experience' and even (somewhat oddly) 'worship experience' being used. There are fairly obvious reasons why this should be so – among them the individualism of the later Protestant tradition and the indirect impact of the psychology of religion in investigating the inner

workings of what was once called 'the religious consciousness'. But that is incidental to the point at issue.

The point is that there is in religion a deep, and perhaps in the last resort inexplicable, conviction on the individual's part of the existence and reality of a non-natural, non-sensory order of being; and an equally deep conviction that it affects his life, and that he can make contact with it. What 'it' may be called, and how 'it' may be described, are on the other hand infinitely variable. Usually the images resorted to are not plucked out of the air, but are related to whatever the individual may have been taught to expect with regard to the unseen world – and here the individual aspect of religion passes over into the corporate area of tradition. What is experienced may be well defined – for instance in conforming to well-known icons or quoting an already known sacred scripture; or it may be totally amorphous, and communicate nothing save an inexplicable sense of 'wholeness' and well-being. But whatever the details, the experience itself is, so far as the subject is concerned, entirely self-authenticating. It does not permit of analysis or even discussion, though it may be compared with similar experiences which others have had.

Clearly, however, not all those who belong within the general orbit of religion *have* had self-authenticating personal experiences of this kind. It is not uncommon, therefore, to find within religious traditions many who simply refer, in the matter of experience, to the experiences of others – kings, priests, prophets, gurus, 'charismatic' leaders, even (oddly enough) academics. But of course the act of submission, allegiance and acceptance which this involves is also an experience, though it might be argued that it sorts rather under the social mode of religion than under the existential. Nor would most want to claim that 'collective experience' or 'the experience of belonging' is very likely to lead in the direction of mysticism.

A very brief word about 'mysticism' may not be out of place at this stage.

The term 'mysticism' itself permits of no precise definition, and its use in almost any discussion leads to untold confusion – so much so, that I have sometimes felt that it ought to be, if not strictly excluded from scholarly discussion, at least used very sparingly and with the greatest of care. All that one can say is that in so far as it may be taken to refer to anything definite within the phenomenology (rather than the psychology) of religion, it is to the area of 'religious

experience' – to a subjective sense of oneness with the ground of all being, to visions, voices, and 'altered states of consciousness' in which the human senses cease to function normally. Mysticism, we may say, is related to individual, subjective religious experience quantitatively, rather than qualitatively. If we may accept that, in Evelyn Underhill's words, mysticism is '... the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order', and is to be shunned as an excuse for 'dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism' and other spiritual disorders (Underhill, 1930: xiv), then on the one hand it is not something unnatural, being 'innate'; while on the other, since it strives for 'complete' harmony with the transcendental order, doubtless there are many intermediate stages, in which a measure of harmony, or temporary harmony is felt to have been reached.

As between 'religious experience' and 'mysticism', the student is faced with precisely the same problem, however: that of knowing how to evaluate the first-hand testimony which is the only possible source of information. To the statements 'Last night I saw a vision', 'I have heard the voice of God', 'I know that my sins have been forgiven', no response is possible, save respectful attention. Since these statements can be neither proved nor disproved by reference to any external authority, it is totally impossible to brand them 'true' or 'false', though perhaps some reference may be made to the consequences, if any, to which they lead. What must not be done, on the other hand, is to regard statements of this kind as of no consequence in the study of religion. Without such experiences – perhaps more especially experiences involving 'altered states of consciousness' – it is very probable that there would be no religion to study. Again it must be stressed that this does not mean that every 'believer' has actually had such experiences. But they clearly provide an initial impulse without which religion could scarcely have begun; and in their total absence, religion in the end becomes transmuted into something else – an ideology, a club, a pressure group – since its members are able to relate only to one another, and not to any supernatural or transcendent order whatsoever.

Probably, therefore, the experiential mode of religion will always tend to be regarded (in theory at least) as of more importance than other modes – by those who have had what they believe to be direct experience of the supernatural/transcendent, since it injects the certainty of personal conviction into the world of customs, rules and

theories; and by those who have not, since in many cases they may wish that they had (even, let it be said, to the extent of pretending to have had experiences when they have not).

Even the religiously indifferent, or the outright enemies of religion, tend to share this view in a slightly topsy-turvy way, it being part of socialist ideology that religion can be tolerated only to the extent that it remains discreetly hidden and keeps itself out of the public arena. The believer is entirely free to believe, and to have whatever experiences he chooses, provided that his beliefs do not spill over into the area of 'real' power – public life, politics and economics.

But this is not to say, either on the positive or the negative side, that 'experience' is the whole of religion, or even that it is the 'essence' of religion. Those who claim that 'experience will decide' in this matter have already defined religion in terms of their own personal experiences, or what they take the experiences of others to be. Often, therefore, there is a tendency to undervalue and distort whatever else there may be to the totality of religious life. Intellectual beliefs – doctrines, dogmas, creeds, theological statements – are classified as unnecessary accretions, which serve to obscure rather than to illuminate the Real. Organisational forms are criticised on similar grounds, while even the ethical may in extreme cases be either ignored or left to the individual's personal insight to settle (the position of 'situation ethics').

#### *The intellectual mode: the circle of beliefs*

The dominant factor in the second functional 'mode' of religion is the formulation of statements *about* the supernatural or the transcendent order. To these statements, individuals and groups give their intellectual or formal assent (or not, as the case may be). Those who do so, thereby qualify themselves as members of the community ('of the faith'); those who do not, are heretics, foreigners, barbarians, 'lesser breeds without the law'. It is here that there are formed doctrines, dogmas, theologies and philosophies – attempts to say something precise about God, the gods or Ultimate Reality, deduced from individual and collective experiences of the kind we have been discussing, interpreted as acts of revelation.

It is useful to distinguish between the kind of attitude which is held to these statements and that which is held to the Ultimate

Reality itself. The latter is best called 'faith' (*fiducia*, trust); the former 'belief' (*assensus*, intellectual or conventional acceptance and acquiescence). Not that the two are always distinguished in practice. Very often they are not, or they appear not to be. Christian creeds in English have oscillated between 'I believe' and 'we believe', though the Latin form of the Nicene Creed begins *Credo* [I believe] *in unum Deum*... The intention is here both formal and personal. Alternatively, one might draw a distinction between the prepositions used: the 'existential mode' involves faith, trust, or belief *in* a revelation or hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred; the 'intellectual mode' has to do with faith, trust or belief *that* a statement *about* the hierophany is a trustworthy statement. It is proper to refer to these acceptable statements in the plural, as 'beliefs'. Faith and trust, on the other hand, hardly allow themselves to be cast in plural form.

Formulated beliefs arise just as soon as it becomes desirable or necessary to communicate the content of a tradition to coming generations, or to outsiders. They also arise where it is necessary to state what a tradition does *not* contain – which is one of the reasons why the early history of any tradition is apt to contain a good deal of controversy over doctrinal points.

The anti-intellectualism which condemns theologies and philosophies as attempts made by cunning and unscrupulous priests to pull the wool over the eyes of (or blow holy smoke in the eyes of) ordinary believers is well enough known. ('When priests quarrel among themselves, that's theology, and that's something ordinary folk don't need to worry their heads about.') It does not need to be taken too seriously, however, as an argument. Not that it has never happened. But it has happened far less often than the opponents of religion suppose. Any attempt, as we have said, to communicate any religious impulse to the young, to students, to outsiders by way of mission, leads very soon to intellectual formulations – and artistic and dramatic representations – of its meaning and implications. An attempt has to be made to systematise teachings, to explain the role of the founder-prophet, to describe rituals and the correct way to carry them out, and to draw out the implications of all this for life in the community and the everyday world. That this leads in the course of time to a somewhat specialised vocabulary is neither reprehensible nor even remarkable. For one thing, it is not intended to replace, but merely to draw out the consequences of, faith and

devotion. Although in some cases there may be a certain element of secrecy involved, in that the deepest levels of the faith may be hidden from the uninitiated, total secrecy in these matters is in fact very uncommon. And thirdly, the intellectual constructions of every religious tradition are based on cause-and-effect categories: if A and B are 'true' (within the circle of trust in a revelation having taken place), then the logical consequences are C and D.

Admittedly, though, there are many believers whose minds work most easily on this level, and who regard the 'objective' deliverances of an intellectual orthodoxy as preferable to (and above all safer than) unbridled 'subjectivism' in religious matters. The subjective is all too liable to be non-rational, if not irrational, and is feared accordingly by the rational mind. Within the circle of beliefs there are both those who adhere firmly to what their tradition prescribes, and those who to some extent go their own individual way, pursuing their own intellectual quests at a level of theoretical abstraction. In the former case, the community and its rituals and conventions may be all-important; in the latter, the community may be of value chiefly as a phenomenon to react against. In the former case, there will be a strong emphasis on the faithful performance of duty; in the latter, the individual's chief duty is the duty to think.

#### *The institutional mode: the circle of organisations*

Within the orbit of religion, there are natural organisations and voluntary organisations. The former begin with families and extend to tribes, castes and nations: those into which the individual is born or incorporated legally (by marriage or naturalisation). The latter are assemblies of individuals and families who have at some stage chosen to join them – though these very soon begin to grow naturally, as children are born and incorporated into the community. Natural, or ethnic, organisations are normally closed to outsiders. At the 'primal' level, one cannot join a tribe to which one does not belong (save, perhaps, by marriage). In Hindu terms, one cannot join a caste. But the greater part of religious organisations of the present day both permit and encourage outsiders to join, under certain conditions. Usually this is a matter of personal conviction leading to conversion and initiation. In today's partly secularised western society, the 'voluntary principle' has been so long established that it is virtually impossible to argue for any other:

either one belongs to a community of 'believers' whose principles one has accepted fully consciously, or one does not. All else, it is supposed, is mechanical and second-best.

Here we may merely note that, in world terms, the voluntary principle is both recent and local. To be sure, there have been times in practically every part of the world where a new religious tradition has made its appearance and individual or (more usually) mass conversions have taken place. The spread of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have all followed this pattern. Most past conversions took place as a consequence, not of a vast number of individual decisions, but of a ruler's decision on behalf of his (or her) people. The head of the 'sacred community', in other words, chose to give allegiance to a new god or a new teacher. On the lower level, families and tribes were hardly disturbed. Sacred rituals continued to be observed (not least those involving reverence paid to ancestors); sacred sites remained sacred; seasonal festivals were still celebrated. In many cases, individuals were simply not in a position to make a decision on their own behalf, without reference to the remainder of the social organisation to which they 'naturally' belonged. This was the pattern of early mediaeval Europe, as Germanic paganism gave way to Christianity, and it has applied to many 'mass movements' – to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam – in many parts of the world since then.

But in post-Reformation European Christianity, and throughout the whole of American history, only the individualistic, voluntary principle has obtained. To be sure, in time even 'voluntary' organisations develop something of a 'tribal' character; but movement from one to another is fairly common nevertheless.

It is an aspect of religious life to which students have in the past given far too little attention, that voluntary religious organisations offer human fellowship before they offer anything else. They may well function as a 'substitute family', under the guidance of a 'father' or 'mother', offering a mixture of authority, guidance, discipline and human warmth to individuals who feel alienated from other (often 'natural') communities. This pattern – which is most powerful in the case of today's 'new religious movements' – may mean that the individual is attracted for reasons having little or nothing to do with what the group actually believes or claims to believe. Only gradually will he discover the faith and beliefs of the community, and very often these will ultimately be accepted as a mark of self-

identification with its values, along with such outward symbols as dress, taboos, language and scales of values.

Those for whom the organisational mode of religion is the most important (and one suspects that in fact these are legion), are often content with the words 'we believe ...' Direct personal inquiry into the foundations of faith and beliefs is uncommon, partly because it may appear to threaten the solidarity of the group on the one hand, and the individual's place in the group on the other. 'Heresy' (wrong beliefs) and 'syncretism' (mixed beliefs) are both dangers to be avoided, for the same reasons. Ethical conduct will again very often follow the lines which the group accepts as a mark of identification, and there is a very real fear of stepping out of line.

All these characteristics are to be seen very clearly in the case of migrant communities, who retain their identity in a new and sometimes perplexing environment partly by means of the collective values which membership in a church, synagogue, mosque or temple provides. Otherwise they are as dominant in everyday western religiosity as they are in the 'primal' or 'tribal' context. But they are little understood and even less appreciated by the intense and the intellectual.

#### *The ethical mode: the circle of duties*

For something like two centuries now, western religion has been overwhelmingly concerned with matters of ethical conduct, sometimes to the virtual exclusion of all else. Not that the ethical was previously unimportant: on the contrary, the gods have always made demands of men and women in respect of the way they must behave toward one another. But the process of secularisation (to be discussed more fully in our next chapter) has led to this result among many, that even when the gods have been expelled from their sanctuaries, the laws which they once were believed to have laid down continue in force.

In 'primal' and 'archaic' societies, law is almost inevitably inseparable from religion (prompting some scholars to wonder whether religion might not have begun chiefly as a matter of 'supernatural sanctions' lending authority to precept). To the question, 'Why act in a particular way?' the final answer will always be, 'Because God (or the gods) has decreed it'. The gods and their messengers are the law-givers, the priests their interpreters. But laws

such as these commonly operate only within a well-defined community. On the inside, the strictest standards obtain: to those outside, one may behave without restraint (as the Dark Ages discovered in face of the Huns, Goths, Vandals and Vikings). We for our part speak of universals in the moral sphere – human rights, freedoms and justice – and whether or not we are prepared to consider the possibility of 'universal religion', often assume that there must be some form of global morality, to which all ought to conform.

In modern Western terms, therefore, where a narrowing of the frontiers of religion has taken place, it has very often involved the weakening of the first three functional modes of religion and a great emphasis on religion's ethical mode and function. Where the 'essence' of religion is discussed (and this applies to other religious traditions as well as to Christianity), the final result is often that this is taken to consist largely in an attitude of love, respect, compassion and helpfulness to human beings as such, virtually irrespective of the communities to which they may happen to belong. Other important consequences follow – for instance, that the religious believer is expected to be committed to non-violence, if not to absolute pacifism, and that the practicalities of religion are closely related to programmes of social action.

It is here that a serious difficulty arises for today's student, for the simple reason that in human history very few religious traditions have ever thought in these terms. As we have pointed out, in the vast majority of cases, strict ethical standards have been operative only *within* the community of believers. Over against 'the others', on the other hand, no ethical restraints need apply. 'Holy' or 'just' wars have been assumed to be inevitable and in some cases indeed desirable if individuals and groups can be identified as aggressors – and human nature being what it is, there are always aggressors to be found somewhere. At times, this age-old attitude has divided co-religionists (between 1914 and 1918, all the major belligerents save Turkey were outwardly 'Christian' countries, praying for victory apparently to the same God), which fact may incidentally serve as a brake on the text-book assumption that, at the time, Christianity was *one* religion, in the terms discussed in our last chapter. But we cannot pursue this line of reasoning further on this occasion.

To the religionist whose chief categories are ethical, almost all the other functional modes of religion tend to be pushed to the periphery

and not infrequently ignored altogether. Personal religious experience, particularly that involving 'altered states of consciousness', is disdained as a self-indulgent flight from 'reality'. Intellectual reflection is permissible only to the extent that it addresses itself to the ethical question: otherwise it is 'irrelevant'. The social forms of religion are wherever possible reshaped into pressure groups, and where this proves impossible they are condemned as 'ghettos', 'God's frozen people', 'the comfortable pew' and the like, and abandoned for more responsive organisations. These are of course extreme conditions; but even in much less extreme cases, the individual and collective conscience is perhaps today's most powerful religious instrument. I am sure that there is no need to elaborate the point further. The evidence is there for all to see.

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These, then, are the four major functions which religion has filled, and fills, in human experience. To avoid misunderstanding, it must be emphasised that none of the four commonly exists in total isolation from all the others, and that in most cases, a tradition (or a community, or an individual) will exhibit all four in varying degrees. To take two examples from present-day Christianity, on the Conservative Evangelical side the main emphasis tends to be placed on a combination of the first and the fourth – personal faith leading to ethical seriousness. On the liberal wing of Protestant opinion, on the other hand, the most important are probably the fourth and the second, in that order – ethical concern supported by intellectual arguments.

Among the rank and file of believers, however, there can be little doubt that it is 'the circle of organisations' and the experience of belonging to a familiar and concerned family of faith which is of the most importance.

For the student's part, since there will always be varying temperaments and personal preferences to be taken into account, it should finally be stressed that religion always involves all four, and that each needs to be given due attention when evaluating the whole. It goes without saying that this will not always be easy. A student strongly attracted in today's terms to an ethical interpretation of

religion may find it hard to investigate the ecstasies of the mystics, the rituals of a mediaeval cathedral, and much else besides. But the attempt must be made if religion is to be grasped in its full range of expressions and functions.

