

Defining Religion, Spirituality and Human Experience

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This paper is a thought-experiment, less a research endeavor, more an essay or analysis. It seeks a context for the Oxford Round Table discussion “Allusions to God in Literature.” It searches for the infra-structure which makes such a topic possible. It weaves together three broad and gossamer threads of thought, not easily or absolutely definable: religion, spirituality, human experience. It assumes that the tapestry cannot hold together unless all the strands are intact.

We organize this thought-experiment in three categories:

1. Misdirected Assumptions
2. Defining Religious Experience
3. Corollaries and Conclusions

1. Misdirected Assumptions

A. Freudian Synthesis

Since Sigmund Freud was a comprehensive thinker, he considered religious and spiritual questions. Moses and Monotheism, Totem and Taboo, and The Future of an Illusion conclude that religious and spiritual systems derive from a universal, obsessional neurosis, an Oedipal complex and illusionary projection.

The universal neurosis is the fear of death. Such fear leads to obsessional thinking and behavior. The only recourse from this terror is religion, apparently, because no other institution in society promises relief from annihilation. A believer clings to religion tenaciously, irrationally, because it is the sole alternative to non-existence. Thus, Freud argues, religion has had a hold on us from the beginning. Religion endures because the fear is persistent. Post-Enlightenment rationality does not assuage the fear, indeed, it often intensifies it.

There is more. The Oedipal complex adds to the neurotic fear a measure of guilt. We do not live our lives without guilt. Religion promises, as no other resource does, that guilt can be absolved and that we can begin anew. This brings comfort and tranquility at a level no

alternative quite achieves. Religion enlists God as the guarantor that we are forgiven and guiltless.

The final element in the Freudian synthesis is illusion. We begin life with a sense that omnipotent, omniscient, infallible, benign care-givers answer our needs and bring us happiness. As we come of age, we replace these increasingly inadequate care-givers with a cosmic parental figure, God, who is omnipotent, omniscient, infallible, benign. This God rescues us from death and brings us into bliss, to a paradise where we are known and loved, healed and immortal. The illusion is intoxicating.

Religion, Freud observes, derives its meaning and its endurance, its influence and its irreplaceability from its ingenious capacity to address the universal neurotic fear of death, the anxiety generated by guilt, and the existential loss created by the dispelling of our early illusions.

We might note, in passing, that Freud provides us with a brilliant insight into dysfunctional religiosity. Some believers all the time and most, if not all, at various times turn to religion out of fear, guilt, and disillusionment. Where Freud appears deficient is in his inability to account for religious affirmations which follow upon critical thinking and which lead to the enormous creativity religion regularly inspires. Positive consequences of religious affirmation include art and music and architecture, poetry and moral systems and learning, compassion and social justice and personal development. The negative consequences are horrific but the positive consequences are awesome. There is more in the religious equation than fear and guilt and disillusionment. This “more” is not taken into account by Freud and it inspires the positive consequences we have cited.

Nonetheless, the Freudian synthesis has had wide influences. The assumption it works with, however, is inadequate.

B. One True Religion

A further misdirected assumption maintains that only one religion is true and that all the others are false or seriously flawed. The religions of the West (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) are more prone to make such assertions than those of the East (Hinduism, Buddhism). This may be due to the Western tendency to favor individuality and distinction or difference over inclusivity and homogeneity. The religions of Asia are not immune to this misdirected assumption altogether but it is not their instinctive proclivity.

The difficulty of absolutizing one religious system is the dilemma it causes when comparing cultures and individuals shaped by the supposed superior religion. The results are not convincing. Would Gandhi have been more enlightened had he been a Methodist? Would Nelson Mandela have been more forgiving had he been a Catholic? Would Homer have created a story of greater moral lucidity had he formulated The Odyssey as a Christian?

There is a further dilemma. We have been human for a few hundred thousand years. No world religion is older than about four thousand years. Why would God have kept the one true religion from human beings for almost their entire history? Furthermore, even today, when world religions claim more adherents than ever before, no one of them reaches more than a third of the human family (a more likely figure is a sixth). An absolutely true religious system has been existentially unavailable for hundreds of thousands of years and is functionally inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of people. Can it be that one true religion is a faulty paradigm and an untenable claim? Why is it not sufficient to maintain that a religion is valid and that it provides a way to God or enlightenment for those who affirm its most liberating values? A religion can be true for the individual or culture made spiritual or human by it, without excluding another religion's capacity to do the same in different circumstances. This does not negate the value one places on a true system anymore than loving one person absolutely would require the inferiority of all other relationships and all other couples.

An insistence on one true religion sooner or later involves the protagonists in consequences that are unwieldy, unconvincing, and alienating.

C. The Necessity of God

Belief in God is not a necessary element for a religious or a spiritual life. We have not yet defined these terms. We shall do this in the second major section of this essay. Our task at the moment is disengagement. We are severing the connections often made between religion or spirituality and a number of supposedly conjoined elements. We have seen that religion or spirituality is not necessarily an illusionary escape from fear and guilt. We have noted that a religious or spiritual life is not exclusively normed by a one, true, superior religion. We shall explore now the necessity of explicit references to God.

At the very least, spirituality implies a sense of transcendence beyond solipsism as well as an inner coherence with the self. This is possible in secularized humanism. Conversely, it is absent in some people who make religious affirmations and engage in God talk.

More pivotal for spirituality than the issue of whether or not one believes in God is the reason or the motive for the affirmation or denial. If one lives in a cruel deistic culture, the denial of God, at least formally defined and affirmed, may be imperative for spirituality. If, on the other hand, one confesses God for the sake of selfish advantage, “God” brings no spiritual benefits.

Where one is, is less important than why one is there. It is not the invocation of God which matters as much as the intent and the consequences of this. Thus, it is quite possible, that the secular humanist may become religious and spiritual without any explicit God reference; and that the formal believer may become increasingly irreligious and opportunistic.

D. The Pursuit of Moral Behavior

We have been moving in these four disengagements in proportionally more radical alternatives. Disengagement from Freudian pessimism or from one religion or even from belief in God is less jolting for most people than a relative indifference to moral choices. The adjective “relative” is important.

There is a widespread assumption that moral behavior leads to religious and spiritual experience or that such behavior is a result of this experience. Indeed quite often people suppose that the character and quality of one’s moral life is the most important indication of religious and spiritual development.

Without excluding moral choices and without endorsing immoral behavior, we note that morality is a secondary value. By way of example, let us assess a love relationship. It is love which prompts us to do extraordinary things for the other and it is love which makes exploiting the other reprehensible. One is not motivated by moral behavior but by the intensity of love. Morality is a very secondary result. Indeed, the one in love always feels he or she has not done enough. One is not in love because one is good; one is good because one is in love.

When moral norms are primary, they have a way of concentrating our attention on the self, of making us feel superior, of leading us to become judgmental. St. Augustine once observed: “Love and do whatever you wish.” There is wisdom in this priority.

The Gospel, by way of example, portrays Jesus as a victim of supposedly moral and religious people. He suffers less from the “sinful.” The less moral prodigal son is more admirable than the elder son who never disobeyed and is eager to have everyone know this.

Moral behavior is encompassed in the horizon of our vision but it is neither the horizon nor the vision.

2. Defining Religious Experience

It is time to define the religious experience we have disengaged from escapism, a particular religion, a formal belief in God and the pursuit of moral behavior.

Before we become specific, we must declare two operative principles. First, the elements and norms of the definition must be the same for all. There are no privileged times or cultures, no preferred gender or sexual orientation, no ethnic or racial advantage. The definition must apply equally to all the varieties of human experience.

There is a second operative principle. The definition must be rooted in our humanity but capable of being reinforced by religious or moral behavior or by the rejection of these for the right reasons. There is no essential incompatibility between belief or atheism and religious or spiritual experience.

We begin by endorsing Freud’s observation that the persistency and desirability of religious experience must be addressed by those seeking a comprehensive insight into our humanity. We shall not attribute this endurance to neurosis, guilt or illusion but to the basic tendencies of the human spirit.

We choose five experiences all human beings encounter and, keeping religious or spiritual language to a minimum, we define these experiences as constituting the essence of all religious and spiritual life.

A. The Imperative to Transcend the Self.

From the moment of birth, we reach out for the other. The process continues. We reach for others in friendship and, profoundly, in marriage. We reach for others in the work we do or the careers we pursue and we become bonded with them. We reach for others in the language we speak and the dialogue we seek.

The incessant process of wanting contact with the other derives from a sense of our insufficiency and from awareness that there is a larger meaning beyond ourselves. It is what might be called the transcendental imperative. It compels all of us.

God is a step we take into the realm of a deeper mystery, not disconnected from the myriad ways we reach out through our whole lives. God is, for many, the terminal point of a process all of us begin.

Reaching for larger meaning is a religious and spiritual endeavor, a profound human experience if one prefers this nomenclature. The human, religious and spiritual converge in this universally understandable desire. It has been present with us through the entirety of human history.

B. Unpredictability

We have been hurled onto the seashore of existence, in the powerful imagery of the great philosopher Martin Heidegger. We find ourselves bewildered and overwhelmed by the complexity and mystery which surround us. We are propelled deeply into an existence we cannot control or comprehend. A great deal is scripted already before we are conscious or make choices: the era in which we shall live, our gender and race and ethnicity, our biological and intellectual predispositions, our parents and genetic inheritance, even social and economic class. Indeed, the steps we take from a birth we did not choose, through youth and maturity, to a death we do not want, all these steps are ordered and irreversible.

No mature person is unaware of the unpredictability and precariousness of our situation. Those who seem to be arrogant and reckless. In theological terms, we are surrounded by mystery. The future is a conditional event. The sense of unpredictability is founded on our awareness of mystery and on the larger logic of a universe we neither fathom nor manage.

Mystery is not the same as ignorance. Ignorance is overcome by data; it is the simple unknowing of the knowable. Mystery, however, is made more elusive and unattainable by data; it is an essential dimension of the act of existence and, like existence, near at hand and yet infinitely inaccessible. Examples may help.

We have massive data now on how human conception occurs and how a fetus develops and how birth occurs. Yet the mystery has deepened over the centuries even as the ignorance has diminished.

We have more knowledge of the universe now, even visual images of its distance and measurements of its speed and energy. Yet the mystery is deeper. The more our ignorance is overcome, the more irrelevant data become and the more mysterious the universe appears.

Ignorance ends in clarity; mystery leads to awe. Knowledge facilitates dominance; mystery induces humility.

The transcendental imperative seeks meaning beyond the self; unpredictability envelops that meaning in mystery.

C. Comprehensive Secularity

It may sound religiously charged to state simply that we all seek the sacred unless we define what we mean by that.

For the purpose of this essay or thought-experiment, the sacred invites both practicality and commitment. It is useful and useless at the same time. Love, forgiveness, generosity are useful experiences and yet must be chosen for their own sake, not items in a further agenda. Love is necessary for our humanity but not for the accomplishment of a further task. One may literally choose to die for love. Such a death is judged by humanity as noble and not beyond love's province. Forgiveness and generosity or other sacred values are of the same nature. Commitment to such values does not imprison or limit us but liberates and expands us. We all seek the sacred, in this sense, and give up on it only when we despair of attaining it. When we fear that we are not lovable or that forgiveness is harmful or generosity reckless, we turn from them, not so much out of choice but out of a sense they will not work for us. And we regret the loss of them.

Secularity, on the other hand, invites practicality but not commitment. Shelter, clothing, food, money, fame are necessary, or desirable, and positive experiences as long as we make no commitment to them. They are useful and worthy but must be chosen for the sake of other values or agendas. Commitment to totally secular values imprisons or limits us. At a certain level, the larger one's house is, the less it is a home. Thousands of pairs of shoes is a pathology. To live for food is dysfunctional. Henry David Thoreau tells us, in Walden, that the price of an item is how much of our life it takes from us. If money and fame are the major commitments of our lives, we have little humanity left after them.

We seek instead a comprehensive secularity, one in which we are rooted in the practical and useful but committed only to these realities which liberate us. The human family at large is aware of this. In literature and film, in daily conversations and philosophical reflection, in the wisdom writing of the world, in the way we teach our children or structure our educational systems, we counsel limits on the commitment to raw secularity and dedication to those secular values which allow entrée into the sacred, useless, mysterious, ennobling dimensions of existence. We find satisfaction in secular accomplishment but happiness in the sacred.

D. Belonging

The purpose of the transcendental imperative is community. We do not reach beyond the self as an end in itself but in the hope that connection or community will follow.

World literature testifies that the individual who belongs to no one is bereft. The isolated person is the essence of tragedy.

Easter is not so much an account of life regained, but the search of the Risen Christ for a community to recognize and receive him. Easter without community lacks human value and spiritual significance.

Homer's story is not complete with the Hellenic victory at Troy but in the reunion of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus. E.M. Forster's "only connect" applies here.

Dante's "Inferno" is one of terrifying isolation. Lucifer is one individual, with three heads, alone. This is a parody of the Trinity where God is a community of persons.

The Divine Comedy is saved from being a tragedy because of the shared life portrayed in the "Paradiso."

Belonging ironically is encountered by transcending the self, only to find the self again in a new way. Belonging is an act of "communion," of being one with another. The self, as Buddhism asserts, is only the self when there is room for everyone.

E. Reverence and Revelation

Revelation makes sense in the context of reverence. Otherwise, it is exposure, expose. Such disclosure leads inevitably to making a victim or an object of the other. The difference between sexual love and pornography is not the degree of nakedness but the context of

reverence. Sexual love that does not lead to relationship is betrayal. Pornography that leads to relationship ceases to be pornography.

The difference between journalistic divulgence and sacramental or therapeutic confession is not in the story that is told, but in the context of reverence in which it is situated.

There is reciprocity in reverence and revelation. The more reverent I am with the other, the more the other reveals. The revelation, then, intensifies the reverence. And so on.

No revelation of God is humanly and spiritually possible except in the context of reverence. It is not God as unmoved mover who moves us but God as compassionate, savior, parent, beloved.

The more I am reverent with a spouse or a child, the more revelation occurs. Even a new-born child reveals itself only if it senses reverence in the touch, the voice, the hands that receive it. When reverence leaves a relationship, revelation of the self ceases.

Summary

Religious or spiritual experience is an interlocking relationship of all these elements. It is a transcendental reaching, in mystery, for the sacred in a community where reverence and revelation are balanced. All these elements make equal sense for the secular humanist and the devoted believer. Religious spirituality and human experience, therefore, are inseparable. Religious experience is not the experience of being in a religion but something more; spirituality is not abstraction from the concreteness and jumble of everyday life but something more; human experience is not the feeling of being human but something more.

Religious experience is not enduring solely because of fear and guilt and illusion but because such experience is human experience by another name. We are religious if we are human even if we reject all religion; we are also inevitably spiritual even in the carnal materiality of our physical presence.

3. Corollaries and Conclusions

Granting the descriptive definition of religious experience and its alternative equivalents, three corollaries and conclusions are worth noting.

A. The Utility of a True Religion

Religious and spiritual experience, by their inner dynamics, impel people to gather in institutional structures and communities. We may conveniently call these religions.

There is no harm but, indeed, much benefit if the religion in question enables its adherents to develop more successfully the five characteristics of religious and spiritual or human experience we have delineated. If the religion in question enables a person to more readily transcend the self, accept mystery, find the sacred, enter community and live with reverence, then this religion is a true religion for that person. It is not necessarily a true religion for everyone because it may not have that capacity for others. A true religion need not be universally valid. It does need to be, however, a religion in which a person becomes true to all that is most deeply spiritual or human.

There is no easy way to discern why it is that this particular religion or, perhaps, some sectarian expression of it has the capacity to do what it does for the person in question. Culture, training, character, education, personal experience, chance encounter and many other influences may unalterably lead one to this place and not another. This affirmation does not exclude others because it is premised on principles of extraordinary inclusivity: moving beyond the self, scared and communal striving, mystery and reverence. The affirmation does not exclude any more than choosing one person to love and marry lessens, of its very nature, the acceptance and even bonding one has with others.

B. The Permanency of the Religious Enterprise

If we are correct in linking the deepest human experiences with religious experience, it immediately becomes clear that religion will remain the powerful force in human affairs it has always been. The task we face is not the eradication of religion or the search for alternatives to religion (for example, state or academic or charitable enterprises) but the purification of religion and the alignment of it with its deepest roots. If all the religions of the world were abolished in the present, they would return in similar form in the not too distant future.

There is, of course, no way in which even the most purified religion will be immune to the darkness and cruelty of which human beings are capable. And religion will always be for some what Carl Jung called a refuge from the religious and spiritual experience they choose to evade.

Levels of near hysteria or despair from religious officials about the loss of religion are more often than not a sign of the anxiety they feel about a form of religion they find inconvenient or less personally advantageous.

C. Freedom and Fidelity

A religious system which is confident and which serves others has no need to force or threaten adherents into compliance. There is an analogy here with marriage. A marriage which is healthy and happy does not require that both partners remain. The fact that each may walk away at any time and chooses not to is an essential ingredient in a successful marriage. If one or both partners are married because they are compelled, they no longer have a marriage together but an arrangement.

If a religious system were convinced it were essentially true and valuable for people, it would invite people to leave if they had a better alternative and it would be grateful they were there for some time in their lives.

A religion which rails against those who never join reveals by that very behavior its priorities and its insecurities. There are two insightful instances in the New Testament about freedom and religious experience. One, in the Gospel of John, has Jesus ask his disciples if they choose to walk with him no more. There are no threats. Peter, in response, gives the best possible answer. We are here because there is nowhere else we would want to be.

A second instance is when the brother apostles, James and John, return from a missionary journey and ask Jesus to destroy with thunder and fire those who did not hear their message. Jesus refuses this approach, so often utilized in later religious institutions. Indeed, in one of the rare recorded instances of humor in the New Testament, Jesus calls them subsequently by a nick-name, "sons of thunder."

In any case, freedom is not the preservation of options but the surrender of them in an act of fidelity. One is not free to marry if one keeps all options open. Nor is one free to join a religion if one does so tentatively and with the intention of trying them all. Freedom's privileged moment is an act of fidelity and commitment.

Problems emerge, however, if someone else decides what commitment one's own freedom demands. The problems are compounded if one is then compelled, psychologically or

otherwise, to remain in a religious system with no further thought or reference about how one is treated there or about authentic needs one may have that this religion cannot address adequately.

There is always a danger that one's freedom or personal advantage may be reduced to frivolous choices or self-seeking alternatives. There is no way to eliminate this possibility, even if one remains in the original religion one chooses for life or even if one never chooses any religion. We noted earlier that where we are is less important than why we are there. There is no need to assume the worst case scenario about people and even less need to build a religious system around this supposed eventuality.

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