

NOTES ON THE NATURE OF RELIGION

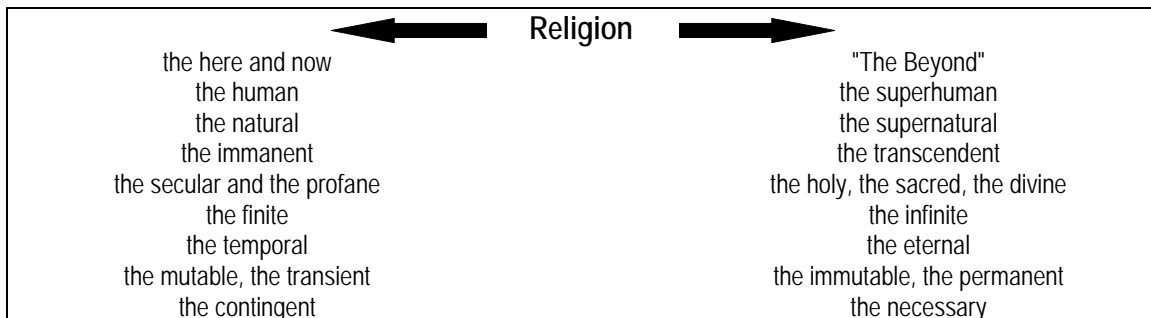
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What is Religion?

Religion as a "binding together"

The English word "religion" (Middle English = *religioun*) is derived from the Old French *religion*, which in turn is derived from the Latin *religio*, which means beliefs about and reverence for the gods. Apparently, the Latin root of *religio* is the verb *religare*, "to bind together." The idea is that religion is a *relationship* between the religious devotee and that which is the object of religious devotion (the gods, God, the Tao, the Holy, etc.), a relationship that binds the two together. Secondly, but very importantly, religion is also a binding together of all those who share the same or similar religious attitudes. In this way, religion gives rise to a *community* of devotees, a *collectivity* (church, synagogue, brotherhood, sisterhood, etc.) that is itself related to and bound together with the object of its devotion (the gods, etc.).

Thus, through religion, devotees are bound together with one another, forming a community of devotion; and they are, even more importantly, bound together with the supreme reality to which they are devoted. The "here and now" is joined to "The Beyond;" the human to the superhuman; the natural to the supernatural; the immanent to the transcendent; the secular and profane to the holy, the sacred, the divine; the finite to the infinite; the temporal to the eternal; the mutable and the transient to the immutable and the permanent; the contingent to the necessary. These contrasts are depicted in the following chart:



Definitions of religion

John MacQuarrie has written that there are "almost as many definitions and theories of religion . . . as there are authors on the subject." Consider the following list. What do you think of the definitions presented below? How would you define religion?

Webster's New World College Dictionary (4th ed.): Re-li-gion . . .

1. (a) belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe [and] (b) expression of such a belief in conduct and ritual
2. (a) any specific system of belief and worship, often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy [the Christian *religion*, the Buddhist *religion*, etc.] [and] (b) any system of beliefs, practices, ethical values, etc. resembling, suggestive of, or likened to such a system [humanism as a *religion*]
3. the state or way of life of a person in a monastery, convent, etc.
4. any object of conscientious regard and pursuit

The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia: "Religion . . . is a system of thought, feeling, and action shared by a group that gives members an object of devotion; a code of ethics governing personal and social conduct; and a frame of reference

relating individuals to their group and the universe. Usually, religion concerns itself with what transcends the known, the natural, or the expected; it is an acknowledgment of the extraordinary, the mysterious, and the supernatural.

"The evolution of religion cannot be precisely determined. In addition to the more elementary forms of belief and practice, such as **animism**, **ancestor worship**, **totemism**, and **spiritism**, there are the commonly termed higher religions, which embody a principle of transcendence. These include **polytheism**, in which there are many gods; **cosmic dualism**, which posits equally powerful deities [or cosmic forces] of good and evil; **monotheism**, in which there is a single god; **supratheism** [sometimes called **transcendent monism**], in which the devotee participates in the religion through a mystical union with the godhead [i.e., supreme reality, ultimate being]; and **pantheism** [also associated with **transcendent monism**], in which the universe [cosmos] is identified with God.

"Religions are also classified as **revealed** (i.e., by divine agency) or **nonrevealed** (i.e., the result of human inquiry). JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, and ISLAM are revealed religions, and BUDDHISM, HINDUISM, and TAOISM are largely nonrevealed religions."

Paul Tillich (1886-1965), *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (1963): "Religion is the state of being grasped by an **ultimate concern**, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life." [Should we add that this ultimate concern is directed at "the Beyond" (the holy, the sacred, the divine, the transcendent, etc.)?]

Ian S. Markham, from *A World Religions Reader*: "Religion . . . is a way of life (one which embraces a total world view, certain ethical demands, and certain social practices) that refuses to accept the secular view that sees human life as nothing more than complex bundles of atoms in an ultimately meaningless universe."

Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, from their *Theological Dictionary* (1965): "Religion in general . . . can be described as man's relations with the holy; subjective religion is veneration and adoration, which becomes objective religion when embodied in creed, word, actions (gestures, dance, ablutions, blessing, sacrifice, sacrificial meal), and law" (italics added).

James Martineau: "Religion is the belief in an everlasting God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the universe and holding moral relations with mankind."

Friedrich Schleiermacher: Religion is "the feeling of dependence . . . , the consciousness that the whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside of us."

Anthony Wallace: "Religion is a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man or nature."

Emile Durkheim: "Religion is only the sentiment(s) inspired by the group in its members, but projected outside of the consciousnesses that experience them, and objectified."

James G. Frazier: "Religion is a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life."

Lawrence S. Cunningham: "Religion signifies those ways of viewing the world which (1) refer to a notion of sacred reality (2) made manifest in human experience (3) in such a way as to produce powerful and long-lasting ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (4) with respect to problems of ordering and understanding existence."

Karl Marx: "Religion is the sigh of the afflicted creature, the soul of a heartless world, as it is also the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people . . . [It is] the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself."

Here is a comment by Ninian Smart (from his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on the study of religion) on the problem of formulating a satisfactory definition of the nature of religion:

An acceptable definition of religion itself is difficult to attain. Attempts have been made to find an essential ingredient in all religions (e.g., the numinous, or spiritual, experience; the contrast between the sacred and the profane; belief in gods or in God), so that an "essence" of religion can be described. But objections have been brought against such attempts, either because the rich variety of men's religions makes it possible to find counterexamples or because the element cited as essential is in some religions peripheral. The gods play a very subsidiary role, for example, in most phases of Theravada ("Way of the Elders") Buddhism. A more promising method would seem to be that of exhibiting aspects of religion that are typical of religions, though they may not be universal. The occurrence of the rituals of worship is typical, but there are cases, however, in which such rituals are not central. Thus, one of the tasks of a student of religion is to gather together an inventory of types of religious phenomena.

Approaches to the Study of Religion

There are three main scholarly approaches to the study of religion: (1) the historical approach; (2) the phenomenological approach; and (3) the social scientific approach. John MacQuarrie describes and comments on these as follows:

The historical approach deals, of necessity, with texts, whether these be the doctrinal, devotional, or ritual texts that stem from the religious community per se or secular documents such as statistics through which the historian attempts to reconstruct the religious life of a community. The historians may weave both types of documents together to create a rich sense of the role of religion in the life of a people as a whole

The phenomenological study of religion, although often starting with the results of the historian, is directed toward discovering the nature [or essence] of religion — the fundamental characteristics that lie behind its historical manifestations The phenomenological tradition has been criticized, both by the historians and the social scientists, for losing sight of the details of particular religions in overly general comparison and speculation, but contemporary scholars are attempting to overcome these problems by dissolving the artificial boundaries between the disciplines.

A clear example of this tendency may be seen in the rise of social scientific studies of religion in the last hundred years. Psychology, sociology, and especially anthropology have contributed great depth to the understanding of religious phenomena. In the psychology of religion, the two most important figures remain William James and Sigmund Freud. James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) established a set of topics and approaches to those topics that set the overall tone for much later work in the field. While James dealt primarily with conscious expressions of religious experience, Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition stemming from him attempted to fit the various forms of religious experience into the framework of a general theory of the unconscious. C.G. Jung in particular has been influential among interpreters of religion

One problem usually associated with the psychological approach is the difficulty of moving from the individual's experience to the structure and experience of the religious community. This problem has been confronted by the sociological and the anthropological traditions since the last third of the 19th century

[O]ne thing should be made clear. Any approach taken in isolation from the others will lead to distortion and bias. The attempt to integrate a number of theories stemming from a wealth of traditions is necessary to grasp the character of the religions of the world.

Typical Components of a Religious Belief System (or World-View)

There are several elements contained in all or most religious systems, elements that are, in essence, responses to certain "big" questions that human beings have raised throughout the ages. These common or typical components of a religious system are (1) a vision of reality, (2) a doctrine of salvation, (3) a doctrine of right conduct, (4) a doctrine of the ultimate destiny of all things, and (5) a delineation of the nature and membership of the religion's community of devotion.

1. Every religion contains a *vision of reality* purporting to portray "things as they really are." In philosophy, a theory of reality is known as a "metaphysics." A typical religious metaphysical perspective includes three components: a *cosmology*, a *theology*, and an *anthropology*.
 - a. A *cosmology* is a theory that provides answers to such questions as the following: Why does anything exist at all? Did the universe (cosmos) come into being, or has it just always existed? If the cosmos came into existence, how did it originate? Did something other than the cosmos *cause* the cosmos to be? What is the true nature of the cosmos? Is the cosmos "all there is, all there ever has been, and all there ever will be" (Carl Sagan), or is there a reality (or are there realities) above and beyond the cosmos itself?
 - b. The word *theology* means literally "theory of god" (Greek, *theos* = god; *logia* = theory or study). However, in this context, the term should be understood to refer to that part of a religious system that sets forth a theory of *Supreme Being*, i.e., a theory of what is ultimately real, whether that highest reality be God (monotheism), or the gods (polytheism), or the *Tao* (Taoism), or the Supreme Buddha-Nature (Buddhism), etc. What is the highest, supreme level of being? What is its nature? Is it "personal" (i.e., alive, conscious, self-aware, intelligent, rational, capable of communicating meaningfully with other persons such as human beings, etc.); or is ultimate reality an impersonal power or force of some kind? Is there a relationship between the supreme reality and human beings? If so, what is the nature of that relationship?

A key aspect of a religion's theology (or "Tao-ology," or "Buddhology," etc.) is the idea of "the Holy" (the sacred). According to John MacQuarrie, "The holy is usually in opposition to the everyday and profane and carries with it a sense of supreme value and ultimate reality. The holy may be understood as a personal God, as a whole realm of gods and spirits, as a diffuse power, as an impersonal order, or in some other way. Although the holy may ultimately be nothing but the social order, a projection of the human mind, or some sort of illusion, it is nevertheless experienced in religion as an initiating power, coming to human life and touching it from beyond itself Response to the holy may take the form of participation in and acquiescence to the customs and rituals of a religious community or of a commitment of faith. Faith is not merely belief but an attitude of persons in which they commit themselves to the holy and acknowledge its claim upon them. In a deeply religious person, faith commitment tends to shape all of that person's life and character."
 - c. *Anthropology* is the study or theory (Greek, *logia*) of humanity (Greek, *anthropos* = man, human). As a social science, anthropology is the scientific study of the variety, physical and cultural characteristics, geographical distribution, customs, social relationships, etc., of humanity. In philosophy and religion, anthropology is the general (speculative, not scientific) theory of human nature and human existence. A religious anthropology includes a definition of human nature, a description of the basic (universal) conditions of human existence (e.g., aging, disease, famine, war, death), and a characterization of the major threat(s) to human well-being and happiness. What is human nature? Do human beings have souls? What is the relationship between the body and the soul? Is the soul immortal or not? If the soul lives beyond death, does it progress through a process of reincarnation, or does it go straight to heaven or to hell, or does it have some other destiny? Is the will free, or does Fate rule? Are human beings basically good or basically evil? What is it that blocks us in our pursuit of fulfillment and happiness? Why do we suffer? Does suffering have meaning? If so, what is it? Just what is the nature of "the human condition"?
2. Following from its theory of human nature and human existence, and especially in response to its diagnosis of the human condition or predicament, a religious system typically sets forth some **doctrine of salvation, deliverance, or liberation** (technically, a *soteriology*). How can we transcend the trials and tribulations of the human condition? How can we achieve lasting, *ever*-lasting, peace and happiness, in this life and in the life to come (if any)? What is the path to the "promised land"?
3. Another typical component of a religious system is a **doctrine of right conduct**. This will include both **moral** and **ritual** requirements. What is the right way to behave in the **moral sphere**, in relation to other people and in relation to society at large? Morally speaking, what am I free to do, and what am I forbidden to do? What is

the moral difference between "right" and "wrong" conduct? **Ritual** (sacrifice, sacrament, pilgrimage, prayer, fasting, etc.) has to do with conduct toward the object(s) of religious devotion (i.e., toward the Holy). What religious ceremonies am I obligated to perform or to participate in? What is the right or proper way to act within the ritual context as opposed to wrongful or improper ritual behavior? What taboos or prohibitions must I observe as I attempt to carry out the required rites of my religion? (According to MacQuarrie, "Participation in communal rituals marks a person as a member of the community, as being inside and integral to the community that is articulated in the system of beliefs. That in many traditions the disfavor of the community is expressed in its barring a person from the important cultic acts is not surprising because these acts insure the proper standing of the individual and community in relation to the holy.")

Within the religious mindset, both the moral and the ritual components of the religion's code of conduct are understood to derive from and to be sanctioned by Supreme Reality (God, Tao, etc.).

4. All religions speak to **the ultimate destiny or final culmination of all things** (*eschatology*). Where is it all going? Where am I going to end up, i.e., ultimately? Will my death be the end of me, or will I live on beyond death, perhaps forever? Will I go to heaven or to hell, to nirvana or to annihilation? Is the human race as a whole scheduled for final destruction or for a transcendent vindication and fulfillment, a "Kingdom of God" or perhaps a heaven on earth? Will the world "come to an end"? If so, is the end near? What will it mean, a final nothingness or a grand beginning to a new and glorious phase of existence? Will the "end of the world" be succeeded by the coming of "a new heaven and a new earth"?
5. Most if not all religions are embodied in a **community** of believers and contain a conception of what constitutes membership (and non-membership) in that primary collectivity as well as a theory of how the community is related to the ultimate reality (God, Tao, etc.) that is the object of the community's religious passion. What constitutes membership in the community? Who is in, and who is out? How should the community be organized? What are the proper relationships between the members of the community (clergy-laity, husbands-wives, parents-children, teachers-disciples, etc.)? How is the community as a whole related to that which is venerated or worshipped (God, Tao, etc.)?

John MacQuarrie has made the following comment on the element of community in a religious system:

"Although religious solitaries exist, most religion has a social aspect that leads its adherents to form a community, which may be more or less tightly organized. In earlier times the religious community could scarcely be distinguished from the community at large; all professed the same faith, and the ruler was both a political and a religious leader. In the course of time, however, religious and civil societies have become distinct and may even come into conflict. In modern secular states — India and the United States, for example — a plurality of religious communities coexist peacefully within a single political entity. Each religious community, whether in a pluralistic or homogeneous society, has its own organized structure. A common though by no means universal feature of these religious organizations is a priesthood [or other religious leadership] charged with teaching and transmitting the faith and performing liturgical acts."

Why Do People Turn to Religion? Religion as a Response to "the Human Condition"

The pursuit of happiness

A human being is an embodied being — a physical presence in the world — who is, by nature, related to the world and to other humans. Each human being is endowed with a psycho-spiritual self that endures through time (i.e., a continuing personal identity), that is relatively free and creative with reference to its world, and that possesses highly potent intellectual-rational powers. Human beings naturally seek to maintain themselves in existence, to perfect their relationships with their world and with each other, to express and develop themselves freely and creatively, and to understand themselves and their world. That is, every human being seeks to become a "whole person," to achieve total well-being. As Aristotle pointed out, it is natural for human beings to desire happiness (*eudaimonia*).

But human beings cannot achieve their existential goals; they cannot attain the happiness they seek. They exist in a state of alienation, cut off from the fullness of being, separated from their own desired fulfillment. The "human condition" is such that human beings are necessarily prevented from completing their pursuit of happiness.

The human condition and "breaking points" in the human pursuit of happiness

1. Self-consciousness, alienation of self and other, and the need for relationship (or union)

Human beings are self-conscious individuals. That is, they are aware of themselves as distinct from that which lies outside and beyond their minds and bodies. Self-consciousness is the experience of oneself as an individuated being, separate and different from other beings. Within the horizon of self-consciousness, the self recognizes a discontinuity between "inside" and "outside," between ego and other, between "I" and "It." This discontinuity between the "I" and the "It" means that the individual's relationship with the world is problematic. There is a "brokenness" at the very core of human existence, a "primal split" between self and not-self, an experience of estrangement or alienation in which the individual feels "cut off" from the world — from other persons, from the natural environment, from the universe, from being-in-general. This "brokenness" of human experience might be characterized as "ontological alienation," an alienation from being (*ontos*) that is grounded in the very conditions of human existence itself. Thus, a basic need and central task of human existence is to establish a meaningful and harmonious relationship between the individual and the world, between the "I" and the "It," between the human person and being-as-such.

In attempting to work out a meaningful and harmonious relationship between self and world, the human individual is faced with enormous difficulties. One's relationships with other persons are undermined by competition, distrust, envy, hostility, hatred, rejection, and other kinds of interpersonal conflict. One's relationship with the physical world is menaced by economic scarcity, by natural catastrophes such as floods and famines, and by bodily pain and disease. And finally, the relationship between the individual and the world is ultimately and absolutely threatened by the loss of life itself, by death. Given the tensions of interpersonal relationships, the limits of economic and ecological well-being, and the realities of pain, disease, and death, the human individual inevitably experiences psychic suffering in the form of anxiety, confusion, self-doubt, guilt, grief, dread, despair, and so on. And yet, in spite of these obstacles, the human race has never ceased its searching for integration, fulfillment, and meaning. Throughout history, human beings have sought to transcend the limitations of their existences by turning to a wide variety of religious and philosophical systems; and through these systems, they have attempted to interpret, to comprehend, to "live with," and to "hope beyond" the structures of the human condition. But still, the relationship between self and not-self, between the individual and being-itself, remains problematic; the "primal split" remains unhealed.

2. The insufficiency (finitude and incompleteness) of human existence and the quest for fulfillment

Humans are finite and incomplete beings who desire infinite completeness. Human finitude shows itself in the fact that the powers and indeed the very existence of the human individual are restricted and limited; and human incompleteness is manifest in that the individual lacks wholeness, is not self-sufficient, and has an existence that is dependent upon forces outside the self. Thus, the human individual is not "at home" in the world, never satisfied with "what is." Human beings are always questioning their existence, their cultures, and their views of the universe. They are restless beings, continually moving (both in thought and in action) beyond themselves, beyond their cultures, beyond their accepted definitions of reality. The human individual is forever moving into "the open," toward "something undefined" (and perhaps indefinable). Radical discontentment and restlessness are manifestations of human estrangement from the fullness of being and are also the motivating forces in the human search for fulfillment, for wholeness and integration. Human discontentment and restlessness are symptoms of human finitude and incompleteness; and they represent an "ontic gesture," a movement toward being, toward the plenitude of infinite completeness. But within the framework of their worldly existence, finite and incomplete human beings cannot complete their "ontic gesture" — they cannot achieve the infinite completeness that they so deeply desire. They remain "homeless," deficient in being, discontented, and always restless.

3. Guilt, meaninglessness, and death versus the human search for righteousness, meaning, and immortality

Human beings seek to live righteously, meaningfully, and (if possible) forever. But in seeking to live righteously, they encounter the phenomenon of guilt, i.e., the awareness that one fails repeatedly to fulfill the requirements of the "moral law" (those moral principles that one recognizes as, in some sense, authoritative and binding upon oneself). Again and again, one

fails to do what one regards as right, both with reference to oneself and to others. In taking morality seriously, in seeking to live a truly ethical life (a life of duty, obligation, and responsibility), one is confronted with one's own moral insufficiency, one's "sin." Guilt renders one's righteousness illusory.

In seeking to live meaningfully, the human individual must face the problem of meaning — must ask, "What is the meaning of existence in general, and what is the meaning of my own existence in particular?" And then the individual must acknowledge that there is no simple answer to this twofold question and that perhaps there is no answer whatsoever to the question of meaning. The problem of meaning is a problem that is never definitively or finally solved. It must be faced again and again as one moves through one's life. Human existence involves a search for meaning, but not necessarily a discovery of meaning. There always remains the possibility that life is, in fact, meaningless, that the search for meaning is "a chase after wind."

In seeking to live forever, in hoping for immortality, the individual is threatened by death. Human life is a movement toward death; the human individual is a "being-toward-death" (Heidegger). "As soon as a human being is alive, he is old enough to die" (Heidegger). Death, the threat of nothingness, is the ultimate sign of humanity's lack of the fullness of being, of their "ontological alienation." The fact of death is an absolute threat to human hope and to the quest for meaning in life because death is the effective end of both hope and meaning. "Whether hope is a meaningful attitude toward existence or the most extreme foolishness is ultimately decided in the question about whether there is something to hope for beyond death All hope appears to be foolish, if death is the end" (Pannenberg). "Death is never that which gives meaning to life: it is, on the contrary, that which actually deprives life of all significance. If we have to die (and if death is the absolute termination of human existence), our life has no sense because our problems do not receive any kind of solution and because the very meaning of the problems remains undetermined" (Sartre). If death is the absolute end of human existence, then humanity's need for immortality will never be met, and the human movement toward the fullness of being (toward infinite completeness) will never be completed. "He who laughs has not heard the dreadful news" (Bertold Brecht).

The human need for transcendence and the promise of religion

There is, then, a deep human need for deliverance from the structures of the human condition. The human individual longs for a transcendence of the ontological alienation that separates the "I" from the "it" and thus deprives the individual of a meaningful and harmonious relationship with being. One longs to transcend the finitude and incompleteness, the homelessness and restlessness, the insufficiency of the human condition; one thirsts for the infinite completeness of Absolute Being. Finally, the individual craves liberation from guilt, the threat of meaninglessness, and the oblivion of death.

Religion offers itself as a solution to the problems of the human condition. Bringing the individual into a meaningful and harmonious relationship with Ultimate Reality (God, Tao, Buddha, etc.), religion overcomes the primal split between self and other, "I" and "it." Through religion, the finite and incomplete individual is "made one" with an infinitely complete Supreme Reality, and the individual thus comes to participate and share in a plenitude of being in which there is fulfillment and an end of homelessness and restlessness. Religion also offers forgiveness, a remedy for guilt; meaning, a negation of meaninglessness; and a life in relation to (or literally *in*) the eternal life of Supreme Reality, a transcendence of death.

In his book, *The Sociology of Religion*, Thomas F. O'Dea lists the kinds of questions that arise out of the human condition: "Why should I die? Why should a loved one die, and in unfulfilled youth? Why did that venture, in which our heart's desire reposed, go awry? Why illness?" O'Dea then continues: "Such questions demand meaningful answers. If they are found to be without meaning, the value of institutionalized goals and norms is undermined. How can morale be maintained when disappointment lurks at every step, and death, the ultimate disappointment, strikes at our utter defenselessness in the end . . . ? [O]ngoing human activity and the continued functioning of the social system require some answer to the problem of meaning. If a 'larger view' which transcends empirical experience in the here-and-now in which we encounter these evils can be formulated, if norms and goals which work hardship upon us appear justified in such a view, then misfortune and frustration will make some ultimate sense. Then life can be viewed as having meaning, a meaning supplied by a view of it which transcends empirical experience in the finite human situation of the here-and-now. The here-and-now becomes meaningful by being fitted into a beyond. Religion, by its reference to a beyond and its beliefs concerning man's relationship to that beyond, provides a supra-empirical view of a larger total reality Religion answers the problem of meaning"

As people struggle to make sense of their lives and to relate to their world in a meaningful manner, religious systems arise, become institutionalized in the social process, and serve to establish a harmonious integration of individual, society, and the universe.

Thoughts on Religion in the Contemporary Age

Traditionally, human beings have looked to philosophy and religion – and especially religion – in the hope of finding a means of transcending the obstacles to human fulfillment that have been outlined above. In the modern world, however, humanity tends to look to science and technology rather than to religion or philosophy for solutions to the problems of existence. To understand this development, it is necessary to examine the process of modernization and the climate of thought and feeling to which that process has given rise.

The process of modernization

The modern world has been a long time in the making. The Commercial Revolution, which began as early as 11th century in the mercantile cities of northern Italy, brought into existence the modern capitalist economy, created a new geography based upon a developing world-wide commercial system, and made the commercial middle-classes and the emerging nation-state two of the most fundamental features of modern world politics. The Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries laid the groundwork (in art, literature, philosophy, and politics) for a modern secular, humanistic, and individualistic view of life, a perspective on humanity and the universe significantly different from the Catholic-Christian world-view of the Middle Ages. With the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries and the rise of various forms of Protestantism, all standing in opposition to Roman Catholicism, the religious unity of Western "Christendom" was shattered; and this fragmentation of Western Christianity led, in the long run, to the disestablishment and peripheralization of religion in modern culture.

The secular view of life which had emerged during the Renaissance was given even firmer grounding as a result of the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. The "new science" was an attempt to understand the world via "natural reason" and on the basis of experimentation, observation, measurement, and "scientific" (i.e., naturalistic) explanation. The leading ideas of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution were given wide circulation during the 18th century Enlightenment period by the *philosophes* in France, by Newton and Locke in England, and by Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson in America. The process of modernization received political expression in the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century. And the Industrial Revolution, which began in the middle of the 18th century, was a further and highly significant phase of the modernization of Western (and world) culture in that it made technological development a fundamental component of social and civilizational progress.

The process of modernization may be defined in summary fashion as follows: In economic development, modernization requires heavy investment in improved transportation and communications systems. "This produces a transition from a localized subsistence economy to a regionally or nationally integrated market economy." High priority is placed on technological innovation and on the substitution of machines for human labor (automation), and this results in a significant rise in productivity. Decentralized handcraft manufacturing is replaced by a centralized industrial system in which emphasis is placed upon the highly technological mass-production of standardized commodities. Industrial (as opposed to agricultural) production becomes the predominant form of economic activity.

In social terms, "modernization is marked by a growth in education, literacy, and mass communication and by a transition from a static, predominantly rural populace to an urbanizing population in which farms and villages become cultural as well as economic satellites of the urban/industrial market." In political life, modernization involves the rise of nationalism and the centralized state, as well as the creation of 'the masses' as a major political force. Ideologically, modernization gives rise to world-views emphasizing change rather than tradition. "In sum, modernization is the transition from a rural, village-oriented system of traditional personal and family ties to a dynamic, urban, market-oriented system of impersonal relationships."

Modernization and change

A modernizing society is inevitably subject to rapid, radical, and continuing change. As suggested in the preceding section, the process of modernization transforms the economic, social, political, cultural, and intellectual conditions of human existence. Customary ways of life, traditional values and beliefs, historically evolved social and political institutions, are all subjected to critical and rationalistic analysis and are (either intentionally or unintentionally) altered by the progression of

modernizing change. The nation-state and large-scale social organization ("bureaucratization") emerge as predominant forces in the lives of individuals, and traditional social and cultural institutions (such as the family, the church, the local community, the voluntary association) are at least to some significant degree eclipsed by the "larger" social and political powers of the modern age. The small world of personal relationships is encompassed by a much larger world of impersonal forces and interactions (the transition from *Gemeinschaft* [community] to *Gesellschaft* [society]).

One result of such change is significant social alienation, which expresses itself in a large number of ways: the experience of rootlessness; the crisis of individual identity; loneliness and lack of relatedness between persons; a sense of powerlessness; the experience of normlessness (*anomie*); a sense of meaninglessness; a pervasive discontentment; radical deviance (rising crime, alcoholism, drug-abuse, mental illness, and suicide rates); and, in general, a widespread sense of disorientation, confusion, insecurity, and anxiety. But modernizing change also has what might be considered positive or "progressive" results: growing recognition of the existence, rights, and liberties of hitherto "forgotten" groups (racial and ethnic minorities, women, the poor, etc.); a greater range of economic, social, and political opportunities and choices for an ever-increasing number of individuals; better medical treatment; a "higher" standard of living for more and more people; and so on.

Modern thought

The predominant ideological outlook of modern age is based upon a combination of three theoretical perspectives: (1) the attitude of scientific reason; (2) the doctrine of philosophical naturalism; and (3) the philosophy of secular humanism.

The attitude of scientific reason, in accordance with common sense, assumes the reality of the world; but unlike common sense, the attitude of scientific reason seeks to distinguish the **objective reality** of the world from the **merely subjective** "realities" of human experience. The attitude of scientific reason (or scientific rationalism) is a methodological predisposition to approach and appropriate the reality of the world on the basis of experimentation, observation, and quantification. On the basis of the experimental, observational, and mathematical methods of modern science, natural events are to be explained, predicted, and controlled. Confining itself to the quantifiable aspects of the observable (or phenomenal) world, scientific rationalism is preoccupied with the **purely objective** dimensions of world.

The attitude of scientific reason tends to support *the doctrine of philosophical naturalism*, i.e., the view that reality is **nothing but** the world of nature that is observed, measured, explained, controlled by the theories and methods of modern science. Philosophical naturalism is a form of "scientism," holding that all truth is scientific truth and that scientific method is the only reliable means of acquiring authentic knowledge of reality. For the philosophical naturalist (e.g., Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, B. F. Skinner), science gives us truth about the **whole** of reality (i.e., there are no realities not subject to scientific analysis), and, indeed, it gives us the **ultimate** truth (the "last word") about reality-as-such. From this point of view, anything that is not subject to scientific observation, explanation, and control is not to be regarded as real. Thus, for the philosophical naturalist, to believe in the existence of God, or in the immortality of the soul, or in the spiritual destiny of humanity, or in any other *supernatural* reality, is absurd and meaningless. Reality is basically physical, and the domain of "spirit" (subjectivity, valuation, consciousness) is merely epiphenomenal (i.e., causally dependent upon physical objectivity). Humanity is itself ultimately to be subjected to the objectifying techniques and methods of the natural sciences. Humanity and the world can be understood in strictly scientific terms; and from the standpoint of scientific rationalism and philosophical naturalism, natural realities (quantifiable observables) are the **only** realities.

Secular humanism is the anthropological correlate of philosophical naturalism; it is, in effect, the application of philosophical naturalism to the questions of human existence. As such, secular humanism is the doctrine that the world of nature and society is the only real world; that human beings are nothing but products and members of that natural-social "environment;" that humanity is the supreme being for humanity; and that happiness in this (natural-social) world is the greatest good that a human being can achieve. Most secular humanists will agree, at least in general terms, with the view of Karl Marx, that the human individual is, in essence, a natural, social, and creative being, and that the actualization of the individual's natural, social, and creative potential should be the primary object of human existence.

There are, of course, large numbers of people living today (both intellectuals and non-intellectuals) who would reject the above-described ideology, who do not accept the principles and implications of scientific rationalism, philosophical naturalism, and secular humanism. Many "modern" people continue to subscribe to traditional (and non-traditional) religious perspectives which are non-scientific (not to say un-scientific), *supernaturalistic*, and theocentric rather than anthropocentric. Still, the ideology outlined in this section has been tremendously influential in shaping the intellectual, cultural, social, and

political outlook of the contemporary age. And for that reason alone, the philosophical content, historical development, and cultural impact of the doctrines of scientism, naturalism, and humanism deserve serious and critical study. Without such study, the contemporary structure and evolution of human civilization is utterly incomprehensible.

Science and technology in the modern world

If the ideological basis of the contemporary age is to be found in scientism, naturalism, and humanism, the practical foundations of modern life are to be found in science and technology. Modern society is a scientific and technological society in the sense that it is based upon the application of scientific principles of organization, management, and control to the problem of ordering nature and human life in an attempt to create the (natural-social) conditions of human fulfillment and happiness. A fundamental feature of the process of modernization is the effort to define and understand the world in scientific terms and to alter and control the world by technological means

The problem of meaning in modern culture

The process of modernization, as has been argued in preceding sections, has given rise to a world-wide system of nation-states and mass-societies. It has produced a vast and complex world, grounded upon scientific and technological "progress" and subject to rapid, radical, and continuing change. Traditional sources of order and meaning are undermined and weakened by the dynamism of modernization. This is especially so in the case of **traditional religion**. As the world undergoes the process of becoming modern — via the scientific and technological organization, management, and control of human society — secular ideas and values tend to overshadow traditional religious perspectives. It is difficult for traditional religions throughout the world (tribal religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) to adapt themselves to the structures and values of modern culture without so compromising their historical principles that they adapt themselves out of existence. It is therefore modern science and technology and the secular ideologies which have sprung up in modern culture (e.g., secular humanism, Marxism, Positivism, Liberalism, Capitalism, etc.) that are the major directing influences in contemporary society. Traditional religion is no longer the central ideological force in human society; it has taken a back seat to modern secular thought.

This is, however, a development with very serious consequences for modern man's sense of meaning. For traditional religion (e.g., Judaism and Christianity in the West) was the major source of the human sense of the meaning of existence. And with the decline of traditional religion as a major formative influence in human society, a **crisis of meaning** has developed which has, to a large extent, shaped the psychological climate of contemporary life. Both Nietzsche and Sartre have stressed the existential importance of this development: the "death of God" is also the "death of meaning;" and an authentic, open-eyed recognition of this fact brings with it the knowledge that one is on one's own, abandoned by God, and faced with the task of creating one's own meanings — a task fraught with difficulty and conducive to a deep sense of anxiety in the human soul. Without the objective values and meanings proclaimed by traditional religion, mankind must either create values and meanings or learn to live with a sense of normlessness and meaninglessness,

The "decline" of traditional religion, as well as several other aspects of the process of modernization, has left modern humanity seriously threatened by the thought that the world is without meaning and that human existence is ultimately absurd; one asks the twofold question, "What is the meaning of existence in general, and what is the meaning of my *own* existence in particular?," and can arrive at no fully convincing and satisfying answer. One cannot discern the overall purpose of life, and, indeed, one doubts that there is such a general purpose at all! Thus, a central experience of contemporary life is a "crisis of meaning" which is apparently irresolvable.

Concluding Note

In spite of my "pessimistic" thoughts in the above section, it remains true that religion in general and many particular religions are "alive and well" today. Religion has, in many ways, been "under siege" for the past few centuries; but its ability to survive in spite of it all is quite amazing.

What do you think about all this?