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Studying Religion

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Religion as a Complex System: Ethics, Metaphysics, and the Numinous

What is religion? For centuries, scholars have analyzed and compared countless historical texts, systems of philosophy and theology, and different cultures and societies from around the world to attempt a definition. Yet despite their efforts, religion has remained a challenge to explain: how can we boil something that plays such a crucial role in the life of each individual human down to a few sentences that supposedly capture its entire essence? Conceptions and experiences of religion vary from culture to culture, person to person. However, there must be some way in which one can differentiate religious beliefs from those of other worldly ideologies which propose their own theories of reality and human existence. In order to successfully achieve this distinction, I am daring to propose the following definition, which I believe encompasses those aspects of religion which make it a category unto itself: religion is a system of symbols and beliefs which define ideas of a general order of existence and acknowledge a metaphysical reality which can be recognized to be uniquely true through individual experience.

a system of symbols and beliefs...

According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, all religious faith comes from “the social and psychological workings of religious symbols” (Geertz, 365). Although this is not entirely true and I will delve into why in the following pages, it is impossible to deny the important role that a defined system of symbols and beliefs plays in the upkeep of religious sentiments, and that an interaction with these symbols can spur individual religious experiences. These symbols

include any rituals, art, objects, or texts which are specific, provide context and meaning to religious beliefs, and have the potential to directly lead participants into intimacy with the kind of metaphysical existence that their religion acknowledges. In terms of what these symbols represent, there are innumerable examples throughout history.

The first kind of religious symbol is one which directly represents or interacts with the metaphysical existence, or “other,” which a certain religion promotes. This includes depictions of a god or another kind of higher power. In Catholic Christianity, the Eucharist, or consecrated bread and wine, is regarded as the genuine presence of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and third person in the Holy Trinity, and consumption of it is believed to be the sole means of achieving a type of ideal relationship with him. In religions where no such defined deity exists, symbolism takes on a more personal and exclusive meaning. In Hinduism, symbolism is regarded as a sign or emblem representing “something else,” and is special only to the one who understands its significance. Many Hindus believe that religious symbols are incarnate with a kind of divine or spiritual essence, and are thus sacred in and of themselves. Hence the symbolic *murti* (sacred image) or *prasada* (sanctified food) not only point to a kind of transcendence but “become that transcendence” if invoked with the correct admiration and devotion to the subject (The Heart of Hinduism, see also *Bhagavad-gita* 4.24). Other examples include totems in primitive cultures that allow them to communicate with or utilize the “other” for more functional purposes, such as predicting the future. E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s description of the Azande tribe’s poison oracle from his studies in Africa takes on this kind of functional significance through its purpose of revealing the play of mystical forces. Members of the Azande consult the oracle by feeding poison to a bird while asking their petition and take the bird’s resulting survival or death as their answer.

Religious symbols may also be associated with a founder or other important figures of the faith, certain locations, or specific historical events. Symbols of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, hosts of heavenly angels, or saints populate almost all Christian churches and texts as a way to remind believers of the divine reality that their religion is consistently participating in. Constructions of the cross of Jesus's death are made in varying sizes and can be placed in almost any location as a perpetual reminder to Christians of the sacrifice Jesus made for their salvation. Mosaics of Abraham, who is thought of as the father of the Jewish faith, have been preserved throughout history as significant to Judaism and its practitioners. Followers of Islam are instructed to face Mecca, the birthplace of the prophet Muhammed, five times daily in prayer, as it is universally considered the most sacred place in the Muslim faith and a symbol of Islamic spirituality for all believers. Jerusalem continues to be a place of constant conflict due to historical importance as a holy site for Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Religious texts are another one of the important ways in which symbols aim to connect practitioners with a religion's gravity in time and space.

Specific texts are one of the primary ways religions throughout history have established a set of values or beliefs about existence that are directly connected to a historical context. These do not necessarily need to be considered some kind of scripture, but are written under some kind of metaphysical inspiration or in reference to it. According to Josef Pieper, this is what makes religious or sacred tradition unique: the divine origin of the "traditum" can be matched by no other form of tradition in respect to its authoritative character and power to create an obligation to the faith amongst believers (Concept and Claim, 41). The Bible is the most commonly known example of this in Western culture, but all other major world religions have used text for this purpose, such as the Torah in Judaism, the Quran in Islam, the Tripitaka and other various texts

in Buddhism, and the Veda, the Mahabharata, and other texts in the Hindu tradition. Max Müller's dissection of the Vedas showcases how recording beliefs, values, songs of worship, certain symbolic stories, or specific historical accounts have always played a role in religious practices. While his goal was to prove that what he deems as correct religious sentiments have been present since the beginning of religious thought, a theory which can easily be put up for debate, he actually accomplishes something else: a description of the important ways that writing and language have contributed to the upkeep and evolution of religious thought.

Another type of religious symbols, and perhaps the most important, are rituals themselves. These play a special part in religions where the founder is especially revered or considered particularly important to the faith. Practitioners can participate in rituals as a way to engage in the original charismatic experience of the founder which first defined their religious sentiments. Charismatic experience is the center of what becomes a religious tradition for these faiths, and thus for subsequent generations, the practice of the religious must involve some sort of felt connection with the charisma in order for deeply felt participation to be achieved. I will again reference Catholic Christianity's belief in transubstantiation as an example of a ritual which fulfills this purpose. Catholic church services always include a distinct set of prayers which a priest reads over wine and a host of bread in order to consecrate them to God so that they may be transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. Through the rite of transubstantiation, Catholics are able to continuously participate in what they believe was and is the means to an eternal life with God after death.

... which acts to formulate conceptions of a general order of existence ...

Now that I have demonstrated some of the kinds of religious symbols and their numerous aspects, I will move onto the nature of the beliefs that these symbols promote. Conceptions of a

general order of existence most significantly include ideas about morality or character ideals, such as correct versus incorrect behavior or categories of right and wrong. This can be ideas of a kind of code of conduct established by a higher power outside of humanity, such as the beliefs and regulations listed in books like the Bible and the Quran, as well as ideas of certain universal ideals that should be strived for, such as Buddhist and Hindu conceptions of self-cultivation.

Religion also tackles the questions of the purpose of human life and the role of human beings in the world, as well as an explanation for where we come from after death. During his time in Africa, E.E. Evans-Pritchard described “witchcraft” amongst the Azande tribe as fulfilling this purpose. To them, it is a natural philosophy that explains the events of many in the world, as well as how he should act. It interprets particular conditions in a chain of causation which relates an individual to natural happenings in such a way that he sustains injury (Evans-Pritchard, 313-314). Mircea Eliade’s characterization of “eschatological gnosis,” or the secret knowledge of the end of time that religion presumes, also fits this definition (Eliade, 294). Examples of this are ideas of heaven and hell, reincarnation, or accounts of the end of the world as an explanation for what will happen to humanity at the end of time and what humans will experience individually once their earthly lives are over.

Ideas of a general order of existence also designate elements of life into categories, separating what is believed to be connected with a metaphysical reality from what is not. More than one scholar has adopted this notion that the world takes on a kind of duality under religious beliefs. Emile Durkheim’s studies of totemism in Australia led him to the belief that religious phenomena “always suppose a bipartite division of the whole universe” and classify everything into two groups: the sacred and the profane (Durkheim, 105). To him, religion is a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” or “things set apart and forbidden”

(Durkheim 106). The distinction between sacred and profane things is not one between good and evil, but rather between what is consecrated and what is ordinary. This approach is also taken on by Eliade, who defined the sacred and profane as “two modes of being in the world.” Through his lens, religion is based around the existence of “hierophanies,” or the manifestation of the sacred (Eliade, 275). The worldview of man and the characteristic of religious beliefs is defined by whether or not and how something sacred shows itself to us. Examples of this are chosen areas of sacred space, such as churches or holy sites, in which man is obligated to act differently out of respect for the sacred thing revealed itself there.

... and acknowledge a metaphysical existence...

The acknowledgement of a metaphysical existence is the core aspect which separates religious beliefs from other ideologies which propose their own general order of existence. Without it, systems of thought like Marxism might as well be considered the foundations of a religious tradition. A metaphysical reality does not necessarily imply a deity or a higher power, but rather something “other,” a power or spirit that exists outside of humanity and yet has either as direct or indirect impact existence. Marxist philosophy provides ideas about man’s purpose in the universe, correct and incorrect behavior, and a worldly hierarchy, but denies the belief in an “other.” For Karl Marx, everything we can perceive about ourselves and our environment is based in materiality, and religious beliefs are simply the superstructure which has been imposed upon mankind as an instrument of control and oppression. For the religious however, man cannot be the “highest being for man.” In Eliade’s word’s, “space is not homogenous” (279) for the religious believer, and the acceptance of the reality of the sacred is what defines their manner of being in the world.

... which can be realized to be uniquely realistic through individual experience.

In order for a religious system to be legitimate, its beliefs must contribute to the truth about human existence in a way that the participant believes nothing else can. In other words, the sacred must reveal and share in “ultimate reality” (Eliade). It is this which separates a religious tradition from a religious person. While one could engage in a system of religion without this belief, the nature of the religion must have the potential to foster this kind of consciousness amongst its population. In order for religious concepts to be fully accepted as true and unique in and of themselves, one must accept them willingly (Pieper) on the basis of personal conviction rooted in some type of individual experience. I find Rudolf Otto’s description of the “sense of the numinous” in his book *The Idea of the Holy* to be especially fitting. His chosen word “numinous” comes from the Latin *numen*, meaning spirit or divinity. Sensing it is the experience of something “wholly other,” which Otto dubs with the Latin term *mysterium*, that which is extraordinary and unfamiliar. Religious experience is “sui generis,” a thing entirely of its own kind because of its connection with metaphysical reality. The numinous is not necessarily something holy, which implies a kind of moral goodness, but simply something in connection with this “other.” The only way for a person to fully accept any system of beliefs that are based around metaphysics must require a kind of individual experience.

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