MEANING IN RELIGION AND THE MEANING OF RELIGION

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Colloquium Paper: December 1969: University of Lancaster

The present paper is a first draft: but here presented wants at all.
The aim of this paper is to show:

(1) That 'religion' can be defined;

(2) That there is point in defining 'religion';

(3) That the meaning of 'religion' raises important questions about
    the methods to be employed in exploring religion.

Section 1 deals with difficulties in the definition of 'religion' and
suggests a way of defining the term relevantly to the study of religion.
Section 2 expands on the motives that we might have in defining
'religion', in relation to various enquiries such as the sociology of
religion, the psychology of religion and so forth. Section 3 draws
some further morals about meaning in religion.

SECTION 1

1.1 There is a prevalent feeling that religion cannot be defined.

1.11 First, because there is no such thing as religion, but only
    particular religions, which have what Cantwell Smith has called an
    'inebriating variety'.

1.12 Second, because even the notion of a religion is misleading, and
    is a relatively recent Western invention leading to the tacking on
    of the suffix '-ism' in wild ways ('Hinduism' -- is there any such
    thing?).

1.13 Third, because religion has to be defined in terms of its goal --
    God, nirvana, the religious ultimate: and this goal is indefinable.

1.14 Fourth, because lots of definitions have been attempted, all
    seemingly unsuccessful.

1.15 Fifth, because even if a definition were successful it would be
    empty because of the variety of the phenomena it would have to fit
    (note for instance the emptiness and question-beggingness of the
    phrase I have used, 'the religious ultimate').

1.2 There is also a question about the point of attempting a definition.
    We can in general use words without having them formally defined. And
    further, we would want to know what aim is in view before framing a
    definition -- defining is not a contextless activity.

1.21 Against this latter objection, I would simply point out that
    various people are institutionally engaged in various activities,
    such as the sociology of religion, the philosophy of religion, the
    history of religions, religious studies and so forth. Both from a
    theoretical and from a practical point of view there is advantage in
    being clear about the scope of these enquiries.

1.211 Theoretically, because if we find that a religion has various
    marks or typical characteristics and that some of these are shared
    by a political movement, it is not a priori ruled out that the
    ideas and techniques of, say, the sociology of religion will be
relevant to political sociology and conversely.

1.212 Practically, because the institutionalization of enquiries
should not simply be determined by tradition but also by the 'logic'
of the situation. It is not altogether clear that academic investment
in this country, for example, has been very logical in relation to
the study of religion.

Returning however to the first set of objections, the following
ripostes are in order:

1.111 The notion that there might be something like religion in
general, forming a substance worked into various molds in actual
religions, in part arises from an essentialist approach to definition,
and in part to the notion that an essence must be relatively simple.
The latter notion does not follow from essentialism -- a definition
and can be as long as you like, running to three or four pages. In any
event essentialism may not be the correct approach to definitional
problems.

1.112 In part the search for 'religion in general' has been assisted
by the desire to find the essence in experience -- consider the
tradition of Schleiermacher and Otto. The question of whether there
are universal religious sentiments (universal at least in the sense
that they are detected centrally in religions or among religious folk)
is doubtless a vexed one. But it does not follow, even if there
were a core of religious sentiment, that this by itself enables one
to talk of religion in general, since other factors than experience
may be equally or more important. Yet all this is by the way: for
even if there are only religions and no such thing as religion in
general, it in no way follows that there can be no definition of
religion. Thus in one sense no such thing as pictorial art in
general but only particular paintings, but it may still be possible
to give a general account of what pictorial art is.

1.113 Another source of the drive to discover religion in general is
the hook-up between definition and explanation. The fashion for
trying to discover the origin of religion, whether in time or
structurally, has depended on trying to pinpoint central characteristics
of religion. These can easily be selected in order to conform to a
theory, or even a theological diagnosis. For example, the treatment
in some contemporary theology of religion as a human projection, a
product of human culture, etc., depends on excluding from religion
those elements regarded as being a human projection, etc. It is
wise, in my view, to define religion in a manner which is initially
independent of any theory, so far as that is possible, to avoid
the possibility of circularity in explanations -- or, to put it more
bluntly, cheating.

1.111 An exponent of this objection is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who
concludes that at the end of the day it is religious persons we have
to deal with, not reifying constructs called religions. A
lot of what he says about 'isms' and so forth is sound and refreshing.
However, to say that we only have to deal with religious persons is open to criticism.

1.1211 Thus, persons can be more or less religious. It is not clear that a religion can be more or less religious. To say that a person is very religious may mean that he is assiduous in religious practices, sincere in his quest for God, etc.; but it does not make much sense to say "Christianity is a very sincere religion".

1.1212 Secondly, a religion typically has institutions, and in dealing with (say) the Church Assembly one is not dealing just or at all with a mere collection of religious persons. Again, a religion has teachings and rites handed down, buildings and what have you. Cantwell Smith's account, then, is not sufficiently sociological and corporate.

1.131 Even if we have to define a religion in part by reference to its goal and though the goal may be in some sense indefinable, it does not follow that the definition of religion is impossible.

1.1311 First, because the goal is not totally uncharacterized, directly or indirectly. If it were totally uncharacterizable it could not be a goal because there would be nowhere to turn, no path to tread, no worship or prayer which was relevant to it.

1.1312 In any case, something itself indefinable may enter into a definition. Thus colours may be held to be indefinable (save ostensibly, a queer case), but I can define 'brindled'.

1.141 The fact that there have been lots of unsuccessful definitions should not trouble us unduly.

1.1411 First, because the study of religion in the modern sense is still very young.

1.1412 Second, because often people have attempted epigrams rather than definitions proper. Epigrams can be illuminating, but not as definitions (consider Whitehead's epigram).

1.1413 The subject of religion bristles with axes being ground and with strong expressions of deep-seated feeling. It is not surprising if there is a certain lack of professionalism in many approaches to the subject.

1.151 Success at the price of emptiness is not the necessary outcome. But here the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

2.1 There are different approaches to the problem of definition. One is what I have called 'essentialism'; namely that there is a common essence of the various phenomena to be defined -- or more linguistically, that there is a form of words not including disjunctions, which applies to the things to be defined, such that it does not apply to those which do not properly fall under the word which is being defined.

2.2 The second is the family resemblance theory, owing much to Wittgenstein, which could be crudely represented as meaning that if a, b and c are things falling under a 'general' name, it is in virtue of the fact that properties P, Q, R, S apply to a, Q, R, S, T to b and P, Q, R, T to c. (But that is a very crude account,
such that a quasi-essentialist disjunctive definition could take care of family resemblance. Of this, more anon.)

2.3 The third is to present a model of the definiendum, relying on the typical and not too worried by the odd exception.

2.11 The trouble with essentialism is that it may sacrifice the crucial for the general. Thus Melford Spiro defines religion as 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (Banton, 96). He is reacting here against a too doctrinal and idealistic account of, e.g., Theravada Buddhism, which he has encountered deeply as an anthropologist. Yet to use this definition to cover Theravada Buddhism is to miss the main point that 'superhuman' beings are not strategic in the faith. Consider some problems here.

2.111 Less importantly, there is trouble with the word 'superhuman'. Does it mean those endowed with power greater than men's (or believed to be), as Spiro suggests (Banton, 98)? But not all spirits are like this in Theravadin countries. They may be threatening or beneficent, but what of the king, for a start? It can hardly be said that all spirits were thought to be more powerful than Parakrama Bahu, etc.

2.112 More importantly, the Buddha and other liberated followers are culturally postulated as being superior to superhuman beings. They are human not superhuman. The definition misses the main point about nirvana and liberation.

2.113 One major conclusion about definition of religion follows from these criticisms (and others that could be made of Spiro's attempt). One should not be too influenced by what the majority of adherents seem to believe, looking at them in one particular context. This is, however, a dangerous conclusion and can raise questions about the essence not of religion as such but of a particular tradition. At any rate, it would look as though Spiro has sacrificed the crucial in relation to Theravada Buddhism.

2.12 Conversely, essentialism can sacrifice the actual for what is taken to be crucial. It is not uncommon to treat Buddhism as a philosophy rather than as a religion, on the ground of looking only to the 'commanding heights' of the doctrines (actually not so much philosophical as something else -- our Western categories do not easily fit). This move is to neglect the actual instantiation of Buddhism as a religion with rituals, myths, institutional embodiment and so on.

2.13 Thus it is necessary to drive a middle path between the actual and the ideal. This is not absurd: since the ideal is itself actualized in the principles adhered to, in the sense of being recognized. In brief a religion is both itself and its idea of itself. This follows from its very nature, as will be seen.

2.21 The family resemblance theory is a licence for disjunctions in definition. But it can only be a final solution if there are analogies (rather than straight similarities) between the major items in the disjunctions. To simplify: If religion a has crucial properties A and B, while religion b only has A and religion c only has B, the three can only be clustered together if there is a
reason why A and B should go together in religion a -- an analogy. To take a non-religious example: Government a is described as fascist because it shoots workers and is capitalist; government b is described as fascist because it is capitalist; government c is described as fascist because it shoots workers. The 'fascist' bracket only works if there is some intrinsic connection between being capitalist and shooting workers. Otherwise one should entertain the possibility (to put it no more strongly) of categorizing the three governments in different ways. The disjunction incidentally is this: a fascist government is defined as one which either shoots workers or is capitalist or both.

2.22 The family resemblance approach is not itself convincing, but there is no reason why disjunctions should not be used partially in a definition of religion. One could have a mongrel between essentialism and family resemblance, in principle, so long as there were different crucial aspects of religion, some to be treated essentially and some to be treated disjunctively.

2.31 The reason for not taking family resemblance as too convincing is that the model theory does its job better. The point of a model is that it typifies the definiendum: it can also 'ride' counterexamples, provided that the latter can be shown to be atypical, marginal.

2.4 We can now move in the direction of providing a model. But first there are some important observations to make about types of religion and religiousness.

2.41 First, there are several sorts of problem about identifying a religion.

2.411 Thus first religious rituals, sentiments, etc., may be built into the life of a tribe or ethnic group in such a way that it is artificial to distinguish the religion from the rest of the activities of the group, as though they were institutionally separable. Religion could here be treated as an aspect of the group's life not institutionally separable from other aspects. This type might be called 'group-tied integrated aspect of life'. Our hesitation about calling such a phenomenon a religion simply arises from the fact that we think of a religion more often as a cross-societal tradition to some extent separately institutionalized. And one does not get converted to a group-tied integrated aspect of life: one is simply born into a group which has this aspect.

2.412 Second, a variant on the group-tied aspect type is found in conditions where the religious aspect is in principle group-tied, but where not all members of the group may practice or recognize the validity or importance of the aspect. Thus one could treat Judaism as group-tied, but not all Jews practice Judaism. This would be a case of a group-tied separately institutionalized religion, such that the institution is identifiable within the activities of the group but not coterminous with it. For short I shall call this a 'group-tied institutionalized aspect of life'. 
2.451 It is realistic to say that some rituals are an ingredient of all actual \textit{xx} religions which are indisputably \textit{xx} religions. This is a small step in explaining the function of the institutional aspect of religion — it exists partly for the continuance of the rituals. The way in which this occurs \textit{xx}, of course: there may be ritual specialists, such as priests; or there may in effect be little specialization. Where rituals themselves are seen strongly as effective in themselves, and not as means to existential encounters with ultimate reality, etc., the institutional aspect of a religion tends to be more specialized and more sacred in itself.

2.452 Embodying the ritual dimension then in our characterization of religion, we can say: a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized activities of a ritual kind. But this is of course a very inadequate model of religion, partly because to understand what religious rituals are we have to move on to sentiments and beliefs.

2.45 But here we must pause for a moment to consider briefly the role of morality and social custom in religion. Although it is possible to have people who possess a non-religious morality, in the sense that their moral attitudes are not integrated with ritual activities, religious sentiments and religious beliefs, it is obvious that moral beliefs and social customs typically form part of the fabric of a religion (or of the religion of a group). I shall count a moral attitude as religious where it is affected by and seen in the light of religious beliefs — for instance Christian \textit{xx} as distinguished from humanist love of fellow men (as fellow men and not also as children of God, brothers \textit{xx} in Christ, etc.). Similarly marriage is a religious custom when it is also interpreted in the context of ritual, etc: for instance \textit{xx} Christian marriage seen as a sacrament). Thus in the ensuing list of sentiments which may be taken as typically religious it must be remembered that those which are also moral attitudes are held \textit{xx} or \textit{xx} etc.

2.46 The following sentiments can be counted as typically religious: awe, dread, peace, exaltation, compassion, zeal, \textit{xx} sense of sin, trust, etc. Some of these sentiments are aroused by rituals or in the context of rituals; and some thing or person with a propensity to arouse these sentiments will tend to acquire a religious aura. More dramatically, certain experiences, such as conversion, prophetic experience, the sense of mystic union, the achievement of higher gnosis and so forth \textit{xx} will both incorporate and stimulate such sentiments. Though Otto's delineation of the numinous is not enough to cover properly some crucial cases, such as the attainment of \textit{xx} in Theravada Buddhism, it catches a lot of the flavour of many typical religious sentiments. What it tends to underlay is the sense of gnosis and of peace and insight in that context. What is needed is a category to unite and bring together everything from \textit{xx} dread and fear to a sense of beatitude and serenity. Of course, it is not only hard to characterize human sentiments in isolation from their typical objects,
but also over-optimistic to try to define religion from a psychological point of view. How often does it then become necessary to say: Not any sort of trust, but religious trust -- and so forth.

2.461 However, let us cheat a bit and invent a category to cover the spectrum from fear to serenity. Let us call these 'sacral' sentiments, being one major aspect of the existential impact of rituals. What is being achieved here is merely a nomenclature concealing that family resemblance of sentiments is being used. The justification -- namely the demonstration of the analogies between the numinous and the contemplative-mystical sentiments -- would take long here: but I would claim that the justification is available for those who wish to read it.

2.462 (following 2.442) The stage of definition now to be reached is this: a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized ritual activities expressing and evoking sacral sentiments.

2.4621 I leave aside for a moment the objection that a religion is identified with ritual activities. Later we shall need to adjust the wording rather considerably in any case.

2.47 But one cannot hang everything on sentiments, and the sentiments need to be hung on to their phenomenological objects. What are the typical objects of religious belief?

2.471 It is too easy to begin by saying 'gods'. For one thing are we concerned with entities or, say, events -- God rather than the Exodus? However, let us begin with entities and the like. We shall see later the way that these enter into the fabric of religious beliefs. Of entities or quasi-entities that one might list as typical foci of religious activities and sentiments the following are a selection: Creator-God, gods, spirits, ancestors, holy men, cows, sacred mountains, the Self, nibbana, demons. Some of these, however, are rather incidental. Let us leave aside mountains, demons and cows as being mere parts of a wider fabric: they enter into stories and rites, of course, but the rites and stories point to a wider fabric of belief.

Let us say that an entity or group of entities form the central focus of a given religion (or of the religion of a group). By 'central focus' I mean that the religion tends to interpret other relationships in the light of our relationship to this focus. Sometimes the focus is a set of gods, sometimes one God, sometimes a liberated state (nibbana, for example), sometimes a set of different sorts of entities -- God, a holy man, liberation, for instance. What do these entities have in common?

2.472 The difficulty of saying what they have in common is a reason why we tend to take flight in empty place-filling phrases, like ultimate reality, the transcendent and so on. It is doubtful whether such phrases fit the gods of Olympus, in any case.

2.473 If, then, we are going to be empty let us be so consciously, for the time being at least. Let us simply talk about 'the central focus'. A religion (or the religion of a group) is so far then: a set of ritual activities expressing and evoking sacral sentiments, etc.
which are related most crucially to a central focus. (Remember that the focus can be a set of entities.) But we immediately here wish to ask: What sort of focus must it be if rituals are appropriate to it?

I do not pray to my pyjamas.

2.474 Here we begin to arrive at a solution to the problem of emptiness. For it is a common observation that a god is the sort of entity one would expect to worship (conversely a demon the sort of entity to ward off ritually). The problem only arises because some entities or quasi-entities are not properly speaking divine -- e.g. nibbana and sunyata. But by a happy coincidence such entities or quasi-entities at least transcend the gods: they are of more worth, if realized, than anything else and they lie 'beyond' the realm of the gods. (Thus too the Buddha, who displays enlightenment, nibbana, sunyata, transcends the gods.) We also arrive at a solution which gets over the Spiro defect. It would be realistic to say of the central focus of actual religions that it either is divine (god or gods) or transcends the divine.

2.4741 Thus religion is: an institutionalized set of ritual activities expressing and evoking sacral sentiments which are centrally directed to a divine or trans-divine focus.

2.48 But why how and why does the direction occur?

2.481 First, as to the 'how': the rituals somehow are instrumental in bringing about a good relationship of the group or of some individuals in the group with the central focus -- this may be because they express and evoke appropriate sentiments, where the relationship is considered psychologically. But this in turn typically implies that the rituals derive their validity from the focus in some way.

2.4811 Such a derivation is above all understood in terms of myth (later, doctrine -- but not all religions are much doctrinalized). Thus the rituals often are the repetition of a mythic event (consider Eleusis and the Eucharist); and often they are, though not repetitions, validated by reference to origins (thus homage to the Buddha is justified by the fact that from his enlightenment there stems the whole possibility of our attaining nibbana). By 'myth', of course, I mean sacred stories, which can be historically true or non-historically true -- or false in both ways too.

2.482 Hence we can say that the 'why' of direction has to do with a scheme of mythic belief which shows how the beneficial central focus has entered into relationship with men.

2.483 Thus a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized ritual activities expressing or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus which is partially described by myths.

2.484 However, it has to be noted that the beneficial central focus is naturally conceived as having relationships with things and beings other than men: for instance the gods have to do with the environment. This environment has to be regarded not merely as the actual
environment but rather as the phenomenological one. Thus the world of a
given group is not necessarily the planet earth (it depends on their
education) or more generally the cosmos, but the world-as-conceived-by-
them. A whole spectrum of myth and doctrine will concern the relations
of the central focus with the phenomenological environment. This may be
one of virtual identity or inclusion -- for the cosmos itself may be
treated as divine, and the gods may be an important part of the
phenomenological environment.

2.48 Thus more fully: a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set
of institutionalized rituals expressing and evoking sacral sentiments
directed towards a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of
the human phenomenological environment and partially described by myths.

2.49 It is worth noting that as a number of religions, including the
major world faiths, tend to have evolved a doctrinal scheme which refines
and metaphysicalizes elements of and presuppositions of the mythic
stories. This is especially obvious in religions aimed at a trans-divine
focus. It is not unreasonable to add this point on to our definition:
a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized
rituals expressing and evoking sacral sentiments directed towards a
divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenol-
ogical environment and partially described by myths or by myths and
doctrines.

2.50 But we still need to tidy things up. What is not brought out here
is the fact that a religion has a history, a biography so to say (for it
must be seen that in many cases a religion still has the rest of its life
to live, and the future has to be taken into account). In talking of
the Christian religion or of the religion of the Kikuyu we are not
simply talking about what happens now -- this time-slice. But it is not
enough to say that the institutionalized rituals are traditional -- or
rather it is too much to say this: for rituals and beliefs and so forth
change, while the implication of 'traditional' in such a context is that
the rituals are simply the same as they were. We can perhaps overcome
this objection, and simultaneously bring out a point about identification
made earlier, by saying that: a religion (or the religion of a group) is
a set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition and
expressing and evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-
divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment
and partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.

2.51 It might be objected throughout this discussion that rituals have
been over-emphasized. But I hope that it is clear that these can be
very informal (like a meeting of Friends). Further, differing religions
place differing emphases, as do differing groups within a given
religion. Thus some religious movements, etc., stress ritual, some
experience (sentiments, etc.), some the institution, some myths, some
morality. Here (with regard to definition) we do not need to give an
account of differences of emphasis, save that they are there.
2.60 Our definition then: a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.

SECTION 2

3.1 The point of a definition such as the above is that it calls in question of a number of studies defined in terms of religion, such as the psychology of religion, the history of religions, the sociology of religion (theology need not be called in question, because it ought to be the systematic expression of a religious position, namely a phenomenon rather than a direct constituent of the study of religion).

3.2 Thus we meet a nice dilemma. Two positions here could be adopted.

3.21 It is possible, firstly, that a definition such as the above is a 'tight' definition. Religion is tightly definable or the edges of the study of religion are squashy. But if they are squashy then the study of religion has a wide reach, because (for instance) there is no determinate sociology of religion, but rather the sociology of various factors which are in differing contexts common to religion and to other things (e.g. ideology).

3.22 Or we rely on analogies to knit together family resemblances. This is in effect what has been done in the above definition. In brief the conclusion is as foreshadowed in 3.21.

3.3 The conclusion is this: that the study of religion has at least analogical connections with the study of ideologies, non-religious rituals, and so on. In brief, the study of religion should not be exclusively institutionalized. There is, for instance, no a priori reason for thinking that the sociology of religion should not throw light on the sociology of Nazism. Again, there is like to be an analogy between religious sentiments and 'others' -- for the simple reason that religious sentiments as above described do not uniquely collect their phenomenal objects. Once the sentiments are operative, so-called non-religious objects may be invested with a religious aura (consider charisma in politics).

3.4 Consequently, the definition of religion raises the question of the relation between so-called religious studies and other fields. Here I am not talking about theology in the proper sense, but religious studies. Theology in the proper sense can talk about anything, because it is itself an expression of a religious position -- it is part of religion -- and religion can have attitudes to virtually everything, as being the human phenomenological environment.
SECTION 3

4.1 The definition used above is intentional. It is not possible to determine what its constituent parts mean without seeing that the rituals (for instance) are 'directed' at a 'focus' and so forth.

4.11 It follows that the study of religion, if it is the study of religion as here defined, involves ineluctably the study of the intentional.

4.12 Or to put it better: in studying a ritual or other activity it is necessary to understand the focus at which it is directed -- in brief the 'student' must in imagination mimic the adherent. (He may not need, however, to mimic, if he is peradventure an adherent of the religion in question.)

4.2 If the student participates imaginatively in the phenomenon he studies, then he lives methodologically in imagination. That is, he takes the focus seriously, even if it be imaginatively bracketed (to use a term of continental phenomenologists). His methodology thus is, negatively, strictly agnostic. It is not the 'methodological atheism' of Peter Burger, for instance.

4.3 All this has to do with method and the terms of reference of the 'scientific' student of religion (note how the term 'science' has to suffer a sea-change with the subject-matter: quite rightly, for 'science' is methodologically defined, not institutionally in terms of the present big brothers in science, such as physics, which does not have to bother with intentionality -- electrons not having sentiments). But the method itself cannot determine who is good or bad at the study of religion. This is a more personal issue. All that can be said is that commitments, whether religious or atheistic, can be of a quality to prevent the persons in question from being sensitive and effective in the study of religion. But most actual commitments are not of this quality.

4.4 At any rate methodological stances should not be confused with selection criteria for students of religion. Methodological agnosticism is at quite a different level from theistic, atheistic or any other sort of ideological commitment.