



THE IDEA OF RELIGION IN THE GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD *

That the idea of religion is both difficult and complex is evident from the discussion of it by the various contributors to our symposium. The full complexity of the idea, however, has not emerged. There are two reasons for this. One is that all four writers (Harvey Cox, E. L. Mascall, Martin E. Marty and M. D. Chenu) share a common belief in Christianity, and to this extent they have more or less the same idea of religion. Then, second, the analysis of the idea has been no part of their task, except incidentally; they have touched on the idea only in relation to their arguments about secularization. The extreme complexity of the idea begins to appear only when one attempts to register the range of its meaning.

William James was one of the first to make religion an object of scientific study, in the modern sense of the term. The results of his study are set forth in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first given in Edinburgh in 1901-2 as the Gifford Lectures on Natural

Religion. Attempting to circumscribe his subject in Lecture II, James observes that it would be simpleminded and misleading to think that all that is meant by “religion” could be caught in any “single principle or essence.” It is, he claims, a conception as complex as that of government and comprises “many characters which may alternately be equally important.”¹

Yet in order to delimit and locate the subject of his investigation, he does attempt to state at least the minimal meaning of “religion.” It is the concern of men, he claims, “so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”² Even this minimal interpretation at once raises the question whether religion necessarily connotes a relation to God. People do sometimes speak of atheistic communism as a “religion,” although theoretically it is committed to denying the existence of God.

James himself recognizes that “there are systems of thought which the world usually calls religious, and yet which do not positively, assume a God.”³ As examples, he cites “Emersonian optimism, on the one hand, and Buddhistic pessimism, on the other.” Both, he claims, are “in many respects identical with the best Christian appeal and response.” From this he concludes that “we must from the experiential point of view call these godless or quasi-godless creeds ‘religions’; and accordingly when in our definition of religion we speak of the individual’s relation to ‘what he considers as divine,’ we must interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not.”⁴ He finally stipulates that “the divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely and neither by a curse nor a jest.”⁵

James is certainly right in observing that the term “religion” is sometimes used without reference to God. John Stuart Mill, for example, in his essay *The Utility of Religion*, attacks Christianity and supernatural religion in the name of what he calls the Religion of Humanity: “The sense of unity with mankind and a deep feeling for the general good may be cultivated into a sentiment and a principle capable of fulfilling every important function of religion and itself be justly entitled to the name.”⁶

¹ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1958), p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶ Ed. George Nakhnikian (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1958), p. 72.

So characterized, religion seems to differ not at all from morality, and the religious man is indistinguishable from the morally good man. The precise relation between religion and morality is, indeed, subject to controversy. Men disagree on whether religion is possible without morality as well as on the extent to which morality is possible without religion. James takes a position widely held, at least in the Western tradition, when he declares that religion supposes some relation to morality and yet also contains “some elements which morality pure and simple does not contain.” In fact, at the end of his long investigation of the manifestations of religion, when he comes to “reduce religion to its lowest admissible terms, to that minimum, free from individualistic excrescences, which all religions contain as their nucleus,” he retains the notion of a “proper connection with the higher powers.”⁷ Thus he retains a reference to the divine understood as a being not only different from man but higher than him.

All the great and classical attacks upon religion, pagan as well as Christian, agree in supposing that religion connotes some reference to the divine. In fact, the main object of attack is what is taken to be a false belief in God or the gods and its deleterious effects upon men’s actions.

Lucretius in the pre-Christian world expresses the most passionate hatred for religion: its teachings are false, and the actions it leads men to commit are horrible and evil, such as Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia on the altar at Aulis (*On the Nature of Things*, I, 80-101; *GBWW*, Vol. 12, p. 2a-b). For Lucretius, religion is compounded of fear based on ignorance. It can and must be overcome by rational understanding of the way things operate without any divine intervention. His attack upon religion is throughout an attack upon the belief that the divine has any power over the affairs of men. Religion, as he understands it, is permeated with belief in the gods, but it is a false and ignorant belief that should be dispelled.

Gibbon is more tolerant than Lucretius but no less certain that the claims of religion are false. He belittles religion by the ironic, even sarcastic, description of the inconsistencies and improbabilities of its beliefs. Yet at the center of these beliefs, as he describes them among both pagans and Christians, there is always some reference to a belief in a god. Although religion for him may amount, in fact, to no more than a human belief and invention, it claims to be more than merely a purely human moral code.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 380, 383.

For both Marx and Freud, religion is an illusion. They would account for the genesis of this illusion in different ways, but both agree that the illusion lies in the belief that there is a god who governs the world and judges man.

The upholders of religion, of course, frequently maintain that its characteristic note is its reference to God. Augustine is typical of these. He observes that the Latin language is poorer than Greek in that it lacks any one word to denote the piety and reverence or the worship and service (*cultus*) that is due to God alone. In his time, the word “religious,” like “pious,” could still be applied to the relation one ought to have toward one’s parents and country. It seems clear that he would have preferred to restrict “religion” to mean “nothing else than the worship of God” (*The City of God*, X, 1; *GBWW*, Vol. 18, p. 299b). Augustine’s wish, of course, has since come true. Both words in their ordinary and normal usage now refer to man’s relation to God.

For both its detractors and upholders, the notion of religion within the tradition of Western thought usually connotes some reference to God. But once we pass beyond this minimum, what religion is depends upon where one stands. It is one thing to those who embrace the religion and accept its belief, and quite another thing to those who reject it or who remain uncommitted. The range or scope of the idea varies accordingly. A good example of this difference is provided by the distinction between religion and superstition.

RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION

If the claims of religion are held to be false and belief in it an illusion, the distinction between religion and superstition tends to break down and disappear. Both, as contrasted with true knowledge, are dismissed together as false, and religion thus reduces to the status of superstition. Freud’s writing clearly reveals such a tendency.

Freud sums up his final position on religion in the closing pages of the *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*. He places totemism and animism in the same line of development as the belief in a supernatural God. All are equally manifestations of religion, it seems; religion, he claims, “is an attempt to get control over the sensory world, in which we are placed, by means of the wish-world, which we have developed inside us as a result of biological and psychological necessities. But it cannot achieve its end. Its

doctrines carry with them the stamp of the times in which they originated, the ignorant childhood days of the human race. Its consolations deserve no trust ... it seems not so much to be a lasting acquisition, as a parallel to the neurosis which the civilized individual must pass through on his way from childhood to maturity” (*GBWW*, Vol. 54, p. 878c). In short, religion, for Freud, is an infantile illusion. There is, therefore, no basis for distinguishing religion from superstition. Nor would there be any point in doing so, although Freud notes that certain manifestations are still “called *superstitions*” and contrasted with religion (*ibid.*, p. 877b). In his view, “the truth of religion may be altogether disregarded” (*ibid.*, p. 878c).

For the religious, however, superstition, far from being indistinguishable from religion, is contrasted with it as its polar opposite. Thus, according to Aquinas, religion is the virtue by which man renders to God the honor and service that is due him (*Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q81, A4). Superstition, on the other hand, is described as a vice—the very opposite of virtue. Religion, for Aquinas, establishes a norm for what man owes to God. One may depart from this norm either by excess or defect. Irreligion is the vice opposed to religion by defect, in that through contempt and irreverence one fails to render to God what is his due (*ibid.*, II-II, Q97). Superstition is the vice opposed to religion by excess. It is not that superstition “worships God more than the true religion,” Aquinas writes, since superstition is not just too much religion, but rather that “it pays divine worship to whom it is not due or in an undue way” (*ibid.*, II-II, Q97, A1). Thus to worship the creature rather than the one true God is the superstition of idolatry. So also to worship God falsely or in a way that leads neither to his glory nor to man’s subordination to him is likewise superstitious (*ibid.*, II-II, Q98, A1-2).

In this account, what is common to both religion and superstition is the notion of divine worship. This by itself is not enough, according to Aquinas, to characterize religion. He demands in addition that it be directed to the true God in the proper way. If, however, we were to limit our understanding of religion to worship alone and put to one side its object and manner, then we could speak of superstition as a religion. The difference for the religious man would then involve the distinction between false and true religion.

But whichever way we make the distinction—whether between religion and superstition, as Aquinas does, or between true and false religion—it still presupposes that truth can somehow be reached in matters of religion. If this were impossible, there would

be no way of distinguishing religion from superstition, since for this we must be able to distinguish worship of the true God from that of the false, or true from false religion. The distinction rests on the conviction that religious knowledge is possible; in other words, that men can know the true God and can distinguish what is true about him from what is not. For those who make the distinction, there must be something that counts as a criterion of truth in religion.

Such a criterion poses an especially difficult problem for those who base their religion on a supernatural source, that is, a religion believed to have been established by revelation from a source that is by definition beyond the reach of man's natural powers. Within Christianity, which is such a religion, one formulation of the criterion has received wide acceptance. Pascal, who, it must be remembered, was not only a devout Christian, but also a great mathematician and physicist, has a version of it in the eighteenth of his *Provincial Letters* which quotes both Augustine and Aquinas.

The rule is founded on what might be called the principle of the unity of truth: Truth forms one coherent whole and no matter how many kinds or parts of truth there may be, nor how diverse the methods of attaining these parts, they are all consistent with one another; no proposition validly established as true in one field can be inconsistent with any proposition validly established as true in another. Pascal shows how this principle can be used as a rule for determining the truth in religion.

There are "three principles of our knowledge," he writes, "the senses, reason, and faith," each with its own object and its own degree of certitude. "And as God has been pleased to employ the intervention of the senses to give entrance to faith (for 'faith cometh by hearing'), it follows, that so far from faith destroying the certainty of the senses, to call in question the faithful report of the senses would lead to the destruction of faith. ... We conclude, therefore, from this, that whatever the proposition may be that is submitted to our examination, we must first determine its nature, to ascertain to which of those three principles it ought to be referred. If it relate to a supernatural truth, we must judge of it neither by the senses nor by reason, but by Scripture and the decisions of the Church. Should it concern an unrevealed truth and something within the reach of natural reason, reason must be its proper judge. And if it embrace a point of fact, we must yield to the testimony of the senses, to which it naturally belongs to take cognizance of such matters" (*GBWW*, Vol. 33, p. 163a-b).

As applied to religion, this rule, it should be noted, is purely negative. It does not prove the truth of any religious doctrine; it only enables one to ascertain which interpretations of it are false. Thus Pascal goes on to say: “So general is this rule that, according to St. Augustine and St. Thomas, when we meet with a passage even in the Scripture, the literal meaning of which, at first sight, appears contrary to what the senses or reason are certainly persuaded of, we must not attempt to reject their testimony in this case, and yield them up to the authority of that apparent sense of the Scripture, but we must interpret the Scripture, and seek out therein another sense agreeable to that sensible truth; because, the Word of God being infallible in the facts which it records, and the information of the senses and of reason, acting in their sphere, being certain also, it follows that there must be an agreement between these two sources of knowledge. And as Scripture may be interpreted in different ways, whereas the testimony of the senses is uniform, we must in these matters adopt as the true interpretation of Scripture that view which corresponds with the faithful report of the senses” (*ibid.*, pp. 163b-164a). In support of this position, Pascal cites Aquinas: “Two rules are to be observed, as Augustine teaches. The first is, to hold the truth of Scripture without wavering. The second is that since Holy Scripture can be explained in a multiplicity of senses, one should adhere to a particular explanation only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it if it be proved with certainty to be false” (I, Q68, A1; *GBWW*, Vol. 19, p. 354b-c).

Augustine’s account in *The Confessions* of his search for the true religion tells of a dramatic appeal to this rule. In fact, by employing it, he was able to reject his belief in Manichaeism. The books of the Manichees, he tells us, contained much about astronomy and were “fraught with prolix fables, of the heaven, and stars, sun, and moon.” Augustine, remembering what he had studied of the astronomers, “compared some things of theirs with those long fables of the Manichees, and found the former the more probable.” His belief was considerably shaken, but he was persuaded to continue with the sect by the promise that their learned Bishop Faustus would be able to resolve all his doubts. On finally meeting him, Augustine found him eloquent, but “utterly ignorant of liberal sciences”; and he could not satisfy Augustine’s desire to see that “the account given in the books of Manichaeus were preferable, or at least as good” as that given by the astronomers. The failure to meet this test blunted his “zeal for the writings of Manichaeus,” and, since he “despaired yet more of their other teachers,” he writes that all the efforts whereby he “had purposed to advance in that sect . . . came utterly to an end” (*Confessions*, V, iii, 3-vii, 13; *GBWW*, Vol. 18, pp. 27c-30c).

RELIGION AND KNOWLEDGE

The test just described is a cognitive test. It supposes that we have attained genuine knowledge and also that religion achieves some kind of knowledge, although it may involve more than knowledge alone. The test supplies a criterion of religious truth only if religion makes statements which can then be compared with what we know from other sources.

For a skeptic, like Montaigne, it is no test at all, since he doubts the truth of both the senses and reason. His defense of religion, in the *Apology for Raimond de Sebonde*, operates on a different principle. It aims to destroy man's trust in both the senses and reason so that he may rest secure in his faith alone. The difficulty with this approach is that it leaves us with no rational basis for adjudicating between the claims of different and opposed beliefs; religion becomes a blind option. It is not surprising, then, that Montaigne, in all his many accounts of religious beliefs, makes little, if any, attempt to distinguish religion from superstition.

The cognitive test is also no criterion for those who hold that religion cannot claim any knowledge about the way things are but can only tell us what we ought to do. In this case, religion is understood as making no statements that are comparable with established scientific truth. Such a position with regard to religion differs from that taken by either Aquinas or Montaigne. Unlike Aquinas, it holds that religion makes no statement about the way things are that can be compared with scientific knowledge. Unlike Montaigne, it maintains that men can and do attain to genuine scientific knowledge.

We can distinguish two variants of this position. One takes the form that religion is not a cognitive activity at all and, hence, a fortiori, contains no knowledge comparable with scientific truth. Another form is not as radical as this. It does not deprive religion of all claim to knowledge; it holds that religion does contain knowledge, but knowledge that is practical, and not theoretical; it tells us what we ought to do, and not the way things are. Kant provides a paradigm example of this second position in his work *On Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

Kant defines religion as “the recognition of all duties as divine commands.” Religion, as involving divine commands, obviously contains some relation to God. But Kant insists that there are no “special duties having reference directly to God”—no “courtly ob-

ligations over and above the ethico-civil duties of humanity (of man to man).” He also maintains that religion contains no theoretic knowledge of God: “In religion, as regards the theoretical apprehension and avowal of belief, no assertorial knowledge is required.” Not even knowledge of God’s existence is demanded: “This faith needs merely the idea of God, to which all morally earnest (and therefore confident) endeavor for the good must inevitably lead; it need not presume that it can certify the objective reality of this idea through theoretical apprehension.” All that religion requires, according to Kant, is the minimum assertion that “it is possible that there may be a God,” understood as “the object towards which our morally legislative reason bids us strive.”⁸

In fact, the belief that anything more is required than the duties of man to man constitutes for Kant the mark of superstition: “Whatever over and above good life-conduct man fancies that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious illusion and pseudo-service of God.”⁹ Any departure whatsoever from this maxim is “pseudo-service of God (superstition).”¹⁰ He goes on to say that “it is a superstitious illusion to wish to become well-pleasing to God through actions which anyone can perform without even needing to be a good man (for example, through profession of statutory articles of faith, through conformity to churchly observance and discipline, etc.)”¹¹ True religion requires nothing more than doing one’s duty for duty’s sake. For this, conscience alone is all that is needed: “Conscience needs no guide; to have a conscience suffices.”¹²

Religion still involves knowledge, according to Kant. But it is a knowledge, through conscience, of moral duty, and not a knowledge of God. Indeed, Kant emphasizes morality so much that it has been claimed that the reference to God in his definition of religion is almost an afterthought. For some, however, religion consists in having a certain kind of experience that is unique, having nothing to do with any knowledge that can be communicated either of the way things are or of what we ought to do.

There is nothing in the idea of religious experience as such that requires it to be completely disjoined from any kind of knowledge. In his account of the varieties of religious experience, James is al-

⁸ *On Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

most exclusively concerned with what he calls “faith-states”; yet he is also convinced that religion involves creeds and “a positive intellectual content,”¹³ that is, it lays claim to knowledge.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Many reports exist of what purport to be religious experiences. What is of special interest in these accounts is that some claim to be reporting an experience of the transcendent God. The experience, of course, occurs in nature, that is, it is something that happens to men in a certain time and place. Yet it carries with it the conviction that there is more in it than any purely natural event can provide.

James himself had such an experience, after he had begun work on his book on religion and while he was on a walking tour in the Adirondacks. He tells of the experience in a letter to his wife, dated July 7, 1898:

... I have had an eventful twenty-four hours. ... My guide had to serve for the party, and quite unexpectedly to me the night turned out one of the most memorable of all my memorable experiences. I was in a wakeful mood before starting, having been awake since three, and I may have slept a little during this night; but I was not aware of sleeping at all. ... The guide had got a magnificent provision of firewood, the sky swept itself clear of every trace of cloud or vapor, the wind entirely ceased, so that the fire-smoke rose straight up to heaven. The temperature was perfect either inside or outside the cabin, the moon rose and hung above the scene before midnight, leaving only a few of the larger stars visible, and I got into a state of spiritual alertness of the most vital description. The influences of Nature, the wholesomeness of the people round me, especially the good Pauline, the thought of you and the children, dear Harry on the wave, the problem of the Edinburgh lectures, all fermented within me till it became a regular Walpurgis Nacht. I spent a good deal of it in the woods, where the streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life. The two kinds of Gods have nothing in common—the Edinburgh lectures made quite a hitch ahead. The intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it; its ever-

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 382.

lasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay; its utter Americanism, and every sort of patriotic suggestiveness, and you, and my relation to you part and parcel of it all, and beaten up with it, so that memory and sensation all whirled inexplicably together; it was indeed worth coining for, and worth repeating year by year, if repetition could only procure what in its nature I suppose must be all unplanned for and unexpected. It was one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence, and I understand now what a poet is. He is a person who can feel the immense complexity of influences that I felt, and make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement. In point of fact, I can't find a single word for all that significance, and don't know what it was significant of, so there it remains, a mere boulder of *impression*. Doubtless in more ways than one, though, things in the Edinburgh lectures will be traceable to it.

Dante's experience with Beatrice, as related in its beginnings in the *Vita Nuova* and carried to completion in the vision of God in *The Divine Comedy*, can also be interpreted as a transcendent experience. In terms of it, Charles Williams has elaborated what he calls "romantic theology," in his book *The Figure of Beatrice*.¹⁴

In Augustine's account of his conversion there are at least two incidents that deserve to be counted as the same kind of experience. One is the final moment of decision when, after years of doubt and torment, he finally decides to become a Christian. It occurred at a time of particular anguish, when he felt self most divided against self; he believed the doctrines taught by the church, yet he could not bring himself to enter it; "Give me chastity," he prays, "only not yet." He withdrew from his friends to a garden in order to consider and lament his condition. There, he tells us:

I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; take up and read." Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently, whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words; nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God, to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find. ... Eagerly then I returned to the place where ... I [had] laid the volume of the Apostle ... I seized, opened, and in silence read that section, on which my eyes first fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provi-


¹⁴ *The Figure of Beatrice* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1943).

sion for the flesh,” in concupiscence. No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.—*Confessions*, VIII, xii, 29; *GBWW*, Vol. 18, p. 61a.

The other occurs after his conversion, while he is discoursing with his mother, looking out upon the garden of their house at Ostia.

We were discoursing then together, alone, very sweetly; and “for-getting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,” we were enquiring between ourselves in the presence of the Truth, which Thou art, of what sort the eternal life of the saints was to be, which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man. But yet we gasped with the mouth of our heart after those heavenly streams of Thy fountain, “the fountain of life,” which is “with Thee”; that, being bedewed thence according to our capacity, we might in some sort meditate upon so high a mystery.

And when our discourse was brought to that point, that the very highest delight of the earthly senses, in the very purest material light, was, in respect of the sweetness of that life, not only not worthy of comparison, but not even of mention; we, raising up our-selves with a more glowing affection towards the “Self-same,” did by degrees pass through all things bodily, even the very heaven, whence sun and moon and stars shine upon the earth; yea, we were soaring higher yet, by inward musing, and discourse, and admiring of Thy works; and we came to our own minds, and went beyond them, that we might arrive at that region of never-failing plenty, where Thou feedest Israel for ever with the food of truth, and where life is the Wisdom by whom all these things are made, and what have been, and what shall be, and she is not made, but is, as she hath been, and so shall she be ever; yea rather, to “have been,” and “hereafter to be,” are not in her, but only “to be,” seeing she is eternal. For to “have been,” and to “be hereafter,” are not eternal. And while we were discoursing and panting after her, we slightly touched on her with the whole effort of our heart; and we sighed, and there we leave bound “the first fruits of the Spirit”; and returned to vocal expressions of our mouth, where the word spoken has be-ginning and end. And what is like unto Thy Word, our Lord, Who endureth in Himself without becoming old, and “maketh all things new”?—*Confessions*, IX, x, 23-24; *GBWW*, Vol. 18, p. 68a-c.

The value of such experiences, even leaving aside the question of whether or not they are necessary for religion, has been the subject of much discussion. Some argue that they constitute the very essence of religion and the only evidence for its truth. James notes that these mystical states are usually “absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.” But he also points out that “no authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.” The most that he allows is that they provide evidence that there is not “only one kind of consciousness” and so “break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness based upon the understanding and the senses alone.”¹⁵ Religious men may disagree about whether or not religion attains knowledge comparable to scientific knowledge, but all would certainly agree that it involves more than knowledge alone. 

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¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 323-24.