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### The Nature of Religion

Questions about the nature of religion are as old as humankind itself and as varied as the cultures that develop them. As Clifford Geertz writes in *Religion as a Cultural System*,<sup>4</sup> this is a serious question, “of fundamental moral, political, and intellectual significance for the world in which we live.” (p.20) Geertz asserts that the modern study of religion may be termed “worldview analysis” and it informs our sense of the meaning of life. This in its turn, defines our thoughts and ideas about virtue, which influences the activities we engage in. The key to synthesis relates to the factor of *identity*, which duly informs our religious *perspective*, and thus influences our entire worldview.

The study of religion begins with the not-so-simple distinction between what constitutes a religion and what does not. Scottish writer Ninian Smart addresses this question in his book, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*,<sup>8</sup> by compiling what he terms the “seven dimensions of religion,” which include the experiential/emotional, narrative/mythic, doctrinal/philosophical, ethical/legal, social/institutional, material, practical/ritual. In a lecture, Dr. Veidlinger asserted that anything that conformed to six of the seven criteria, including Communism, would qualify as a religion. The overall conclusion arrived at was that there are no hard and fast rules as to what constitutes a religion, and therefore, many things can be studied as a religion; even football, Communism, and following the Grateful Dead.

Professor Veidlinger explores the reasons why there are commonalities between religions, listing them as having historical connections, similar roots, human psychology, practical geography, and coincidence. Some of the common features include sacred texts & myths that create a body of believers, as well as ritual and moral systems.

Writing in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*,<sup>7</sup> Willard Oxtoby maintains that we may best study and define religion if we “observe the words we use to talk about the subject.” He explains that it is arbitrary to expect all religions to have a systematic doctrine, and that religion is older and larger than institutional Christianity’s distinction between the sacred and the secular. Oxtoby also notes that he omits three kinds of religions from his studies: 1. Those of indigenous tribal populations; 2. those that have died out: Manichaeism, Greece/Rome, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Mexico/Peru; 3. newer traditions such as the Baha’i faith.

Oxtoby also suggests that we can attempt to define religion by exclusion, by defining what it is not. He quotes Paul Tillich’s characterization of religion as “ultimate concern,” and informs the student that Christian Europe did not refer to the world’s great traditions as “religions” until after the 15th century of the common era. Oxtoby begins to identify the characteristics that are shared between them, warning that we “must not expect any single feature of religion to be shared by all.” He states that “religion is: a sense of power beyond the human; apprehended rationally as well as emotionally; appreciated corporately as well as individually; celebrated ritually and symbolically as well as discursively; is transmitted as a tradition in conventionalized forms and formulations that offers people a) an interpretation of experience; b) a view of life and death; c) a guide to conduct; d) an orientation to meaning and purpose in the world.” (p.7) Furthermore, Oxtoby identified three paths or “ways” of pursuing religious ideals from the

Bhagavad Gita: *karma marga* which is linked with faith; *jnana marga* which is associated with knowledge, and *bhakti marga* which centers upon devotion.

Scholars have noted many features that can be associated with religion, such as the idea of a central axis mundi that connects the sky (heaven) with the earth. Oxtoby further identifies various other features, including the anthropomorphism of the forces of nature, even coining the term “euhemerism” from a long inscription found on an ancient column in the Indian Ocean that states “the gods were originally men and women that were deified and worshipped during their own lifetimes...” Another feature of religion can be identified in the Deism of Lord Herbert Edward and the U.S. founding fathers who believed in a God that created the world and its natural laws, but does not take an active role in its day to day governance. Immanuel Kant asserted that all religious affirmations are unprovable by their very nature, while Friedrich Schleiermacher placed his emphasis on the intuitive feelings associated with religious traditions. Max Muller<sup>6</sup> claimed that the “names [of natural forces] become deities” while Emile Durkheim<sup>2</sup> “locates the origin and the essence of religion in the identity of the social group.” Carl Gustav Jung<sup>5</sup> viewed features of religion as evidence of a “collective unconscious.” Geertz asserted that religion is a “set of symbols,” while the great chronicler of religious traditions, Mircea Eliade, explained that religion addresses “a reality that does not belong to our world.”<sup>3</sup>

According to *Religion in India*<sup>1</sup> by noted historian of religion Fred Clothey, “Religion is a symbol system that is created by human beings in such a way that it is modeled from the social reality and becomes a model for the social reality.” (p.11) This circular thinking brings the student back to the Vedic period of India’s history, which resulted in the creation of the four Samhitas: the Rg Veda (hymns to the Gods), Sama Veda (hymns in song form), Yajur Veda

(sacrificial mantras), and the Atharva Veda (magical formulae). During this time, these beliefs were not thought of as “religion” but as true descriptions of reality that were carried through the millennia by extremely complex oral techniques of recitation. After the Vedic period (1500-500 B.C.E.) new writings were created that include the Brahmanas (instructions for hymns and sacrifices), Aranyakas (speculations on the Samhitas), and the Upanishads (further speculation on various texts). While the Vedas are all considered to be “shruti” or revealed by the gods, the remaining sacred texts that were composed by humans are known as “smriti.”

While students of religion may continue struggling to reconcile the disparate reasoned opinions of these venerable scholars, we may easily acknowledge that their variability prompts us to adopt a working definition of religion that is very broad and inclusive.

Works Cited

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