

Religion Is ... And Is Not

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Religion is man's response to experience he has of a self-manifestation of God that is at once revelation and salvation. The experience occurs in a phenomenon of mystery and ecstasy.

Religion is an instance of the self-transcendence of life in the dimension of spirit, the dimension that is uniquely man's.

Spirit -- with a small "s" when not starting a sentence -- is the dimension of existence in which the power of being and the meaning of being are united. The dimension of spirit arises from the self-transcendence of life in the dimensions that precede it: the dimensions of the inorganic, the organic and the psychic.

The functions of the dimension of spirit are culture, religion and morality. Only man exhibits these functions because he only actualizes his existence in the dimension of spirit.

The self-transcendence of life of which religion is an instance differs in origin and type from the ordinary self-transcendence of life that starts even in the dimension of the inorganic.

The ordinary self-transcendence of life is intrinsic to existence. It does not occur as a response to divine self-manifestation.

Existence transcends itself irresistibly from its own nature. Self-transcendence accounts for the phenomena of evolution and progress, for example, because it is intrinsic to all entities.

But this ordinary self-transcendence of life cannot produce religion because its relationships are horizontal only and do not include a vertical component, namely, relationship with a divine self-manifestation.

For example, humanism has tried and failed to produce religion (which it regards as the actualization of human potential through education) because of its solely horizontal orientation as well as certain contradictions in its assumptions. Humanism is inherently reductionistic.

The self-transcendence of life of which religion is an instance depends for its being on the self-manifestation of being itself, or as we say symbolically, a self-manifestation of God or the Spiritual Presence.

Man's response to the self-manifestation of God in personal, communal, aesthetic and cognitive functions is the content of culture. That response, in those functions of culture and also in the moral act, is religion.

Man cannot generate religion apart from divine self-manifestation and he cannot compel divine self-manifestation. Man makes religion by responding to divine self-manifestation. Religion cannot occur without the causative phenomenon of divine self-manifestation.

To understand the power and meaning of religion, as well as of culture and morality, we must think dialectically and be ever aware of the "dance" life is, the dance of man and his world, and more fundamentally, the dance of essence and existence, or, God and creation.

Religion is a dialectical phenomenon: man's response to God's act of self-manifestation which is both revelation and salvation. The two belong to one another, in an endless dance, the self-manifestation of God in revela-

tion and salvation and the response of man in acts of culture, religion and morality. ¹

Thus the self-transcendence of life which is religion arises in the dimension of spirit but differs in origin and type from the ordinary self-transcendence that inheres in existence.

A self-manifestation of God may not be ignored when it occurs, which is frequently and in both persons and communities. Response to God must occur and does always occur and that response is religion.

Religion is where man is, without exception. This is one factor that makes culture, religion and morality mutually immanent, interpenetrating one another, able to be distinguished but not separated.

The revelatory experience occurs in man at the divine pleasure and with the irresistibility that makes God God, the unconditioned and unconditional, infinite, beyond the subject-object split, beyond even the dance of life.

The divine act of revelation and salvation always achieves its mission and nothing can deflect, retard or prevent that achievement.

The number of possible responses to divine self-manifestation is limitless. Potentially, there are at least as many responses as there are minds. Therefore, in principle the number of possible religions is limitless.

For convenience, and because man experiences the polar tensions of individuality and participation, dynamics and form and freedom and destiny in all aspects of his existence, agreed expressions of religion come to predominate in areas and take on names, habits and agendas.

¹ There is also the question of how God came to have a dancing partner. However, examining that question and its answers belongs to another time and place.

These forms call themselves and are called this or that “religion,” such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. But the phenomenology of religion *per se* is effective and constant in all religions, which is to say in all acts of culture and morality driven by response to divine self-manifestations.

What passes for religion today in "mega-churches," "the black community," synagogues, mosques and all other instances of revivalism and literalism is the ordinary self-transcendence of life in the dimension of the organic. It is not man's response to a self-manifestation of God. It is neither revelation nor salvation. It is entertainment and politics, not spirit and not the Divine or Holy Spirit. It is heightened excitement, a species of intoxication, all types of which destroy the rational structure of man (Greek *logos*). It is not religion.

Similarly, what passes for religion today in the "main-line churches" and synagogues is of ordinary self-transcendence of life in the dimension of the psychic. It is not man's response to a self-manifestation of God. It is psycho-humanistic self-help and sentimentality, not spirit and not the Divine Spirit. It is not religion. The churches and synagogues are no longer that, they are moral clubs, NGOs, bereft of religion.

Since the dimension of the organic precedes and is a basis for the dimension of the psychic, the self-transcendence passing for religion in revivalism and literalism is less perfect (meaning less completely actualized) than the self-transcendence passing for religion in “the main line.”

This makes "the main line" a bearer of nostalgic sentimentalism, its message mere psychology, and revivalism and literalism a bearer of positivistic triumphalism, its message mere entertainment. Both are demonic distortions of existence and neither is religion.

However, because intoxication is less perfect and therefore more widely attractive than psycho-sentimentalism, the "main line" is losing members while revivalism and literalism are gaining them.

Neither is responding to divine self-manifestation. Each, along with humanism, manifests what inheres in their own existence merely.

Only as response to divine self-manifestation, to the ground and depth of being "moving" of its own "impulse" from essential rest to existential activity and experienced directly by man in a constellation of revelation and salvation, can an act of man be religion and be deemed religious.

God is love.

When its content is inspired by religion, an act of man is cultured and moral. For:

"Culture is the form of religion and religion is the substance of culture."

Paul Tillich

A.M.D.G.