The Category 'Religion' Reconsidered

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The category 'religion' as problematic

RELIGION' AS A CATEGORY OR CONCEPT is the invention of the western Enlightenment. While the etymological roots of the English word 'religion' are in the Latin ('to bind'), the modern popular use of the word has come to mean a set of personal or communal beliefs which usually, though not always, entail belief in, and often experience of, a transcendent being or beings, prayer, or worship, ceremonies, rituals, ethical codes, etc. The category 'religion' came to be used from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards by western intellectuals to refer to belief in a transcendent creator whose genius made the ordered world, which is ruled by the physical laws laid down by that creator and so successfully uncovered by Newton and others. As knowledge of other continents grew, the term 'religion' came to refer also to the beliefs and practices of the 'new' cultures encountered by western explorers; thus we came to have the major 'world religions' such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism, as well as numerous smaller 'religions'.

Faced with this profusion in what was once a relatively un-crowded field of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Enlightenment rationality did to religion what it was busily doing in all the emerging sciences: it began to order and structure these diverse cultural phenomena into categories (monotheistic/polytheistic, eastern/western, etc.) and to seek behind them the 'true' meaning of such diversity, the religious equivalent of the laws of nature. Modern western rationality, disillusioned with the theological claims of Christianity to special revelation of the divine, projected on to the cultures it encountered in its colonial expansion around the globe the simplified deism which was its own historic compromise with Christianity. Just as all beliefs could be considered as ultimately pointing to a single creator being, which was itself a projection of the theism of western onto-theology, so too could all diversity in gods, belief, worship and so on be neatly packaged into the category 'religion'.

'Religion' As A Category Can Be Understood As The Rationalization Of The Fundamental Distinction Between God And The World

However, this positing of religion as a discrete and identifiable 'category' could happen within the intellectual history of the West only because the way had been prepared by the West's own dominant traditions. Platonism, Judaism and Christianity each emphasized the utter transcendence of the divine reality which stood apart from the world (it was this parallel which allowed Schopenhauer to jibe that Christianity was Platonism for the masses). One of the most fundamental divisions in the western mind as it emerged from both Greek and Hebraic thought was the division between the world of the divine and the world of the senses which we inhabit. Whether any other fundamental divisions (such as that between self and world, or appearance and reality) are the origin or consequences of the God-world division is not of major import here; what is important is to recognize that western religious thought was permeated with the view that the world was created, and should therefore never be equated with God.

Thus, in protecting the transcendence of God, western thought built into the God-world relationship a clear distinction between the sacred and the non-sacred, between the divine holiness and the world which could never be holy as God is holy. Yet, God must somehow engage with his world, and this engagement occurs not through the world as such, for that would be to entertain the possibility that the world is the divine (the vilification of Spinoza and the reaction of Karl Barth to nineteenth-century theology are lessons from history in this regard). Rather, the creator engages with the creation through God's special presence or activity in particular dimensions of the world. The cultural consequence of this is that in the West our culture has interiorized a clear distinction between things that are sacred (books, people, places, actions, words, etc.) and things that are not sacred, i.e. are profane. The concept or 'category' of 'religion' is simply the extension of this fundamental distinction into the world of modern scholarship and popular thought in the West: 'religion' is to the rest of life as God is to the whole world.

The category of 'religion' is therefore an artificial construct which sets up this discrete realm of human activity, a realm which is perceived as distinct from the rest of life.

Hence in the contemporary West we can hear people say, 'I am not very interested in religion', a statement which in many other cultures (including major cultures such as the one we call 'Hinduism') would be an unintelligible assertion akin to saying 'I am not very interested in life'. To return to our opening sentence, we can now see that 'religion' in the western sense means *both* to be 'bound in' to a particular community and set of beliefs *and* to be set apart from the remainder of the non-religious dimensions of life. We can phrase this sentiment colloquially: religion is perceived as what happens in church between people of like mind, and has little to do with the rest of life.

The major 'theories' of 'religion' are inadequate because they are reductionist and mutually incompatible

In the nineteenth century, as the nascent human sciences of sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc. came to separate into discrete spheres of investigation in the university, it became possible to formulate 'theories' of 'religion', that is, overarching explanations which would account for *all* religious belief in terms of some structure or originating experience inherent in human history or culture. Thereby, in the century between roughly 1840 and 1940, we have the projection theory of Feuerbach, the economic alienation theory of Marx, the 'magic' theory of Frazer, the sociological theory of Durkheim, the psychological theory of Freud (itself simply a reworking of Feuerbach), and a range of others less well known. What all of these theories have in common is the methodological assumption that 'religion' is a discrete area or object of study which can, indeed must, be capable of explanation in 'scientific' categories which do not depend on any element inherent in the religious belief systems themselves. In other words, 'religion' is always really about something else, such as coping with our alienation from the means of production (Marx), the cultural expression of the claims of society on the individual (Durkheim), the 'universal obsessional neurosis of humanity' (Freud).

I do not here have the space to examine these 'reductionist' theories in their individual detail, but three observations are in order. Firstly, these 'modernist' theories of religion can function at all only by assuming that all the cultures and belief-systems which they interpret are really about the same thing, 'religion'. Further, this assumption ultimately engages these theorists in a form of circular reasoning. The diversity of the phenomena which they attempt to explain can only be brought under the rubric 'religion' by a theory which explains such diverse phenomena successfully; yet such a theory can only be presented at all by positing a unified category 'religion' which lends itself to interpretation by a single overarching explanation. The category is posited in order to meet the need for a theory which then conveniently explains its origin and meaning.

Secondly, these theories cannot *all* be correct and many of them are incompatible with each other (for example, the theories of Freud and Durkheim cannot both be correct, for the Oedipus complex and the sacredness of society are not univocal theories). While this fact does not logically preclude the possibility that any one of them might be correct and the others mistaken, it points at the very least to the problematic nature of any attempt to reduce the phenomena to one 'category': *which* theory is closer to the truth than any other is a matter mostly of conjecture.

Thirdly, most of the major modernist theories have a greater or lesser element of truth in them. Durkheim alerted us to the way in which religion can function in the creation and maintenance of a society's rules of conduct; the feminist critique of male images of God would have been impossible without the theories of Feuerbach and Freud; liberation theology would have been unthinkable without Marx. The modernist, reductionist theories of religion fail not because they are completely wrong, but because they over-stretched themselves both in terms of the nature of their subject matter and in terms of their own capacity to offer a successful explanation by reducing their subject matter to some external explanatory element.

'Religion' can be best understood as a 'family resemblance' category, which allows identity without reductionism

Later theorists of religion such as Clifford Geertz and particularly Mircea Eliade have developed theories of religion which are much more sensitive to the claims made by the believers or practitioners themselves, and which do not₂attempt to 'explain' away religion in terms of

something else or through methodologies more appropriate to the physical sciences. Among contemporary commentators the move away from such explanations has gone hand in hand with a recognition that the category 'religion' may itself be wholly inadequate to encompass the diversity of human cultures and beliefs. Thus, Daniel L. Pals looks back at the modernist theories of religion — the theories which inherited the Enlightenment view that all 'religions' had an underlying common core meaning, and therefore could be encompassed by one explanatory model — and comments that 'this hope of forming a single theory of all religions astonishes us by its naive overconfidence'.[1] Like many leading contemporary commentators, Pals is aware not only of the inadequacy of all attempts to formulate a single theory of religion, but also of the complexity of denying religion at all.

This is an important shift of viewpoint, for it acknowledges that while the category of 'religion' emerged in the context of Enlightenment deism, we should not assume that the selfsame concept continues to dominate in scholarship today, even if some dimensions of popular understanding (and a few eminent scholars) still think of religion in this fashion. If anything, our contemporary situation is characterized not by the modernist tendency to merge all belief systems into some amorphous category 'religion', but by a thorough recognition of the astonishing diversity and plurality of beliefs which we conveniently and necessarily bring under one heading, 'religion'. In sum, we use the same word 'religion' now as deists did a quarter of a millennium ago, and the modernist theorists did this in the last century, but we do not necessarily intend thereby to reduce all diversity to some univocal concept.

Here, perhaps, the contemporary view of religion must be a nominalist one — we see many different cultural and social phenomena which we recognize as having a great deal in common, and we term these phenomena 'religions'. As John Hick puts it, following Wittgenstein, 'religion' is a family resemblance concept,[2] that is, it brings together things which have much in common, yet cannot be reduced to being the 'same'. This recognition of the irreducibility of 'religions' is essentially what distinguishes 'religion-friendly' theorists such as Mircea Eliade from earlier reductionists like Freud, Durkheim and others. It should also distinguish informed discussions from popular misconceptions.

'Religion' as a category is necessary yet inadequate, and definitions of religion are both unavoidable and notoriously imprecise

Nevertheless, we are still faced with the problem of description or definition: what terms or categories can one use to describe such diversity successfully? As John Hick puts it, any 'discussion of religion in its plurality of forms is inevitably beset by problems of terminology . . . We have very little in the way of a tradition-neutral religious vocabulary.'[3] The first step is to recognize that every definition of religion will be inadequate, for it can never hope to encompass all the reality which 'religion' contains. The most obvious difficulty is in trying to bring together under one concept or category religions which have as their focus strong belief in a divine being (God, Allah, Jehovah) and those which do not have an equivalent belief (e.g. Zen and Theravada Buddhism). Contemporary commentators are sensitive to this danger and attempt to formulate catch-all definitions which will avoid the pitfalls of over-emphasis on one or other side. So, for example, the sociologist Steve Bruce offers a very broad definition of religion as 'beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose'.[4] In applying this definition, Bruce succeeds in encompassing theistic and non-theistic religions, and acknowledging certain historical movements (such as Marxism) which demonstrate many of the characteristics of religion (founding figures, sacred texts, 'impersonal powers or processes', etc.) but which do not have other elements (such as belief in transcendent beings).

We are, in my estimation, left with a situation where we require some concept or category to bring together complex realities ('religions') which most people, scholars included, think that they know when they see; nevertheless, the primary category which we have is problematic in the ways

I have described. It is, therefore, unavoidable that we continue to use the term 'religion' as a category for certain discrete areas of human activity, yet we can do so successfully only if we remain alert to the severe limitations inherent in the use of any such term. The recognition of 'family resemblances' which enables us to posit a category called 'religion' — or some such equivalent but as yet unnamed concept — is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for attempting any adequate interpretation of these identifiable spheres of human action and culture.

'Religions' as complex realities which cannot be considered as simply belief systems

Both the theorists we have referred to, and contemporary sociologists such as Bruce, require an operating definition of 'religion' in order to attempt either an explanation or a description. Despite improved attempts to understand religion on its own grounds, so to speak, such definitions remain external and, in terms of 'religions' themselves, inadequate. For, reflection on 'religion', as theologians and practitioners well know, is a secondary activity; the act of worship, the experience of the divine, and other fundamental charac- teristics of religion are primary. It is, therefore, almost a truism to say that the very word 'religion' is itself inadequate to describe the enormous diversity of belief systems which it attempts to encompass; the category 'religion' is an artificial construct, an invention of our need to codify and contain diversity within the boundaries of identity laid down by the modern mind. So, even if we acknowledge that some term such as 'religion' is unavoidable (within which great diversity and difference can be contained for the purpose of ease of identity), we must not lose sight of the danger that through the use of such a category we can imply that the enormous complexity of the 'religious' is reducible to a single element.[5]

If we accept this much as non-contentious, there is, however, another perspective which is closely related to this view (perhaps inseparable from it). This is well expressed by Leslek Kolakowski as follows: 'Religion is not a set of propositions, it is the realm of worship wherein understanding, knowledge, the feeling of participation in the ultimate reality (whether or not a personal god is meant) and moral commitment appear as a single act . . .'[6] Kolakowski emphasizes how the term 'religion' functions as an integrating term, and how the 'religious' is to be understood as encompassing a virtually indefinable range of acts, experiences, hopes, expectations, myths, propositions, ethical guidelines etc. By reminding us of the secondary and ultimately inadequate nature of all our attempts to control 'religion' through use of language, Kolakowski also reminds us that the language of religion itself, particularly the language of doctrine, dogma or proposition, is secondary to, and derived from, the 'realm of worship' wherein experience, understanding and morality are unified. To formulate a simple example: the truth of the statement 'God became incarnate in Jesus Christ' resides not merely (or even primarily) in the cognitive claim of the proposition, but in the whole life of the believing community for whom this statement is fleshed out in worship, in the ethical response to human beings which flows from a particular understanding of the human person, in the prayers made to a God who could join fully with human history and destiny etc. The truth of this doctrine is lived, not simply known cognitively.

I am not suggesting here that language is ontologically secondary or derivative, but rather that we should attempt any understanding of 'religion' - and of our own specific religious tradition - with the twofold hermeneutical premise that, firstly, the term 'religion' is both necessary *and* inadequate, and, secondly, that the language of religion itself, particularly the language of proposition or statement, is incapable of capturing the totality of the religious 'realm' in its widest sense. Thus, to emphasize 'religion' as encompassing the totality of a life lived in the context of tradition, myth, doctrine, worship, ethics etc. is, I think, ultimately a far more positive position than tilting at the windmill of the category 'religion' as it was first formulated in the context of Enlightenment deism.

Indeed, for Christianity at least, there is an important lesson to be learned here for its future survival. In its attempts to come to terms with the weakening of its power and influence in the society which it was instrumental in creating, Christianity's historic emphasis on correctness of doctrine and belief has contributed significantly to a situation where 'religion' (including the world's religions which are not Christian) is viewed by that society as predominantly a rival epistemology to science. If believers and secularists alike share a view of 'religion' as primarily a theory about the nature of reality, then that theory will look paltry in comparison with the clear success of the scientific method. That is, if 'religion' is understood as essentially a theory

about the way that the world is (a view which, we must recall, originated out of western Christianity), and science makes claims which appear to contradict that theory, then 'religion' will continue to be the poor relation simply because of the tangible achievements of science.

One reaction to this situation is, of course, for religious believers to remain stuck within their own flawed understanding of 'religion' and to continue to defend religion (most often not as a 'category' but as the particularity of their own 'religion') as primarily a set of theoretical beliefs which becomes a rival epistemology to science. In the West this involves predominantly Christianity, and this flawed understanding of what constitutes 'religion' is one important factor (not the only one) in the persistence today of fundamentalist forms of Christianity within western societies.

Postmodern dissipation of meaning may open possibilities for a renewed understanding of religion in the West

In his influential book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* - a book which is now over twenty years old yet still resonant with its perceptive analysis - the American sociologist and critic Daniel Bell puts forward the proposal that about one hundred years ago aesthetic modernism replaced religion as the dominant cultural mode of the whole of western society. According to Bell's thesis, modernism sought to substitute for religion or morality an aesthetic justification of life, in which the creation of a work of art, even the reconfiguration of one's own self as a work of art, was a form of salvific activity. For Bell modernism is characterized by a self-willed effort to remain in the forefront of 'advancing consciousness'. This necessarily entails the existence of what has been known since the early part of this century as an avant-garde, which self-consciously adopts the position of leading us into the promised land of self-realization. However, the concept of an avant-garde, which shocks society by being always ahead of convention, loses its impact when society itself (or at least significant sections of it) appropriates the shocking as part of the general culture, and this is precisely what Bell sees as having happened in the twentieth century. That which was once practised by the few is now practised by the many, and the majority now hold what once were fringe beliefs, such as the view that the primary form of self-identity is the expression of the will, that the future is now, that all cultural continuity should be denied. This shift in the locus of the aesthetics of living ushers in the postmodern, a distinguishing mark of which is that what was once maintained as esoteric by the few now becomes the ideology of the many. As Bell puts it, there can no longer be an avant-garde, because in a postmodern culture there are few people left on the side of order or tradition; if aesthetic modernism replaced religion, there is nothing left to replace aesthetic modernism except its own parody of itself.

I have space only to assert, rather than to defend this view that we live in an age when meaning is dissipated, privatized and corn-modified. But it is my view that 'religion', in the West at least, has become merely another product which the Christian churches attempt to sell as a remedy for the spiritual illness of the age. But the churches are attempting to market their product in a context where the cultural expressions of postmodern capitalism have lost even the residual (aesthetic) concern which modernism had with the salvific. If the premodern was concerned primarily with religious salvation and the modern with spiritual salvation in an aesthetic sense, then the postmodern appears to have lost concern with salvation itself. We live in a milieu in which the cultural production line of manufactured 'meanings' is post-modern, post-Christian, and even post-religious.

So, what does Bell suggest as a solution to the postmodern eclipse of meaning? - Nothing less than a return to a religious sensibility. Bell asserts that 'despite the shambles of modern culture, some religious answer will surely be forthcoming . . .' But on what grounds does he make such a curious prediction, the contemporary evidence for which seems less than convincing? His rationale lies in the conviction that 'religion' is inherent in the human character:

> [Religion] is a constitutive part of man's consciousness: the cognitive search for the pattern of the 'general order' of existence; the affective need to establish rituals and to make such conceptions sacred; the primordial need for relatedness to some others, or to a set of meanings which will establish a transcendent response to the self; and the existential need to confront the finalities of suffering and death.[7]

If this is true then 'religion' is inescapable, a part of what we are. But it is still too soon to

tell whether Bell's diagnosis is a convincing one or whether it is of the genre of Heidegger's gnomic self-serving 'only a god can save us'. One thing seems clear, to me at least; if an answer to our lostness is to be forthcoming, it will not be found in any theoretical analysis or clever packaging of something called 'religion'; nor will it be essentially of our own making (if we take 'making' to be what it has become for us contemporary western consumers, namely the manufacture of a product which will help ease or deflect our attention from our pain). Perhaps this restoration of ourselves to ourselves will occur through something clumsily labelled 'religion'; but if it occurs at all, it will occur when we least expect it, when we no longer harbour the illusion that we are in control of ourselves. If Georges Bataille is correct and 'we do not know ourselves distinctly and clearly until the day we see ourselves from the outside as another',[8] then we are left to wait for the Other who can show us to ourselves. In the meantime, we are left with our hope, and with 'religion'.

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NOTES

1 Daniel L. Pals, *Seven theories of religion,* New York and Oxford, OUR, 1996, p. 9.

2 John Hick, *An interpretation of religion,* London, Macmillan, 1989, pp. 3-5.

3 Ibid., p. 9.

4 Steve Bruce, *Religion in the modem world: from cathedrals to cults* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), p. 7.

5 This irreducibility of complexity is true, not only of 'religion' considered as a discrete area of human activity, but of all human culture/s. No culture or religion can be adequately under stood through any single aspect or dimension, and the core of any social identity is to be found within what Paul Ricoeur calls the *'foundational mytho-poetic* nucleus' of any society or culture. It should go without saying that this 'mytho-poetic nucleus' is itself irreducible to something else. See Paul Ricoeur, 'Myth as the bearer of possible worlds' in *A Ricoeur reader,* ed Mario J. Valdes (London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf: 1991), pp 481-490.

6 Leslek Kolakowski, *Religion: if there is no God* (London: Fontana, 1993), p 165.

7 Daniel Bell, *The cultural contradictions of capitalism* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p 169.

8 Georges Bataille, *Theory of religion,* trans Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p31.