

Chapter 1

What Is Religion?

The two main concerns of philosophy of religion are God and religion. In this chapter, we will focus on the nature of religion. Before we attempt to formulate a definition of religion, let's look at four of its major facets: creed, code, cult, and community. Notice the mnemonic device: 4 C's! (a mnemonic device is a strategy for helping you remember something). These four characteristics can be found in nearly everything that is identified as a religion. Ask yourself how well they fit with the religion with which you are most familiar. (I was alerted to these features by Peter Slater, who says in his *Dynamics of Religion* that a religion is "a personal way of life informed by traditional elements of creed, code, and cult and directed toward the realization of some transcendent end." He adds that "A personal way of life is both individual and communal" (Harper & Row, 1978, 6–7)).

1.1 Creed

A religious creed is a religion's way of summarizing, expressing, and transmitting in words its most important beliefs about reality and history. It is a religion's way of saying, "This is how we understand who we are, what our lives are about, and what reality is like."

Examples of creeds are the Shema in Judaism ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," Deuteronomy 6:4); the Nicene Creed in Christianity; The four Noble Truths in Buddhism; and in Islam the statement that "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His prophet."

Why does a religion have a creed? Because a religion *is* in part a way of understanding reality. The creed of a religion provides people with a point of view to gather around; it provides them with ideas by means of which to identify themselves to one another and to outsiders; it provides outsiders with something to consider and decide about. Creeds are a way whereby members of a religion can express their agreements with one another and can discover their disagreements.

I know of no religion which does not provide or encourage a particular understanding of reality. However, different religions differ greatly with regard to how long and detailed their creeds are, and with regard to how completely and literally members and people who would be members are expected to take their creed. Roman Catholicism and conservative protestant churches stand at one extreme; they have very detailed creeds and expect them to be understood in a certain way and accepted completely. Liberal forms of Judaism and Christianity stand at the other extreme, having briefer creeds and a much more open attitude as to how they are to be understood and how completely one is expected to believe them.

1.2 Code

A religious code is a statement of what we as humans ought to do and ought not to do. Sometimes the parts of a code are very specific, such as the Biblical command that one should not mix the flesh of a calf with the milk of its mother (Exodus 23:19). Sometimes the parts of a code are very general: Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18).

Examples of religious codes are the 10 Commandments of Judaism (You shall not kill, steal, bear false witness, commit adultery, or covet your neighbor's possessions; Exodus 20); the Great Commandment of Christianity (You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself; Mark 12: 29–31); and the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, plus the Buddhist command, "Don't cause suffering."

Why are there religious codes? Religion is concerned with action, as well as with belief. It is concerned with the living of life, as well as with the understanding of life. Just as no religion of which I am aware is unconcerned with helping the individual toward an understanding of the nature of reality, none is unconcerned with giving to the individual, or helping the individual develop, a set of principles according to which life can be lived in a moral and fulfilling way.

1.3 Cult

The cult aspect of religion does not necessarily have anything to do with bizarre, mysterious, or secret practices (though it may). Cult, as that word is used here, is simply the external aspect of religion whereby through symbols, rituals, ceremonies, music, architecture, clothing, hair styles, and more, a religion expresses its beliefs and values and the way it perceives and feels the world. By means of these symbols and practices, a religion tries to cultivate a vivid sense of the reality and presence of the sacred. These practices and symbols help focus and refocus the attention of members on the beliefs and values of the religion; they help bring young people and converts into the religion, and they identify the religion and its members to those who do not belong to it.

Examples are: Jewish circumcision of infant males; bar/bas mitzvah initiation of young people into Judaism; Christian baptism of infants or adults by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling; saying the Lord's Prayer together; confession of sins to a priest in Roman Catholicism; taking communion in Christianity; bowing to the ground in prayer (Islam); blowing the ram's horn to signal the beginning of Yom Kippur (Judaism); the whirling dance of the dervishes of Islam.

Why are there cultic practices? People have a need for structure, rhythm, texture, and focus in their lives, as opposed to disorganization, emptiness, and aimlessness. The daily, weekly, annual rites and celebrations of a religion help provide structure and rhythm to life. They give texture and qualitative richness to life. They help give one a sense of the reality and presence of the sacred. They give life a special feeling or texture (there is something it *feels* like to be a Southern Baptist or a Sikh or a Pure Land Buddhist). Cultic practices give people something to remember fondly and to look forward to (e.g., Christmas and Easter; Hanukkah and Passover). They help people focus on what the religion considers to be important, and they help people refocus on it after they have been diverted from it by the distractions, temptations, trials, failures, and tragedies of life.

With regard to these objectives, consider the impact of the daily prayers of a devout Muslim male who five times every day bows on his knees toward Mecca and prays to Allah; or consider the weekly worship and the annual holy days of Jews and Christians. Such practices and celebrations give to the individual and the community

a sense of structure, cohesion, rhythm, and flow which keeps things in perspective from the point of view of the particular religion involved.

People also need rituals that help them achieve and maintain social solidarity with one another, and which give them identity as members of a special group. Consider again the dramatic influence of the Muslim practice of daily prayer. Five times every day every practicing Muslim male knows that he is joining with millions of other Muslims who are bowing and praying to Allah; indeed, there is a continual bowing of millions of Muslims as the earth rotates on its axis; the individual Muslim male can sense himself as part of a continuous wave of worshippers – a wave that never stops. (The wave at a football game is nothing compared to the wave of Islam. The Muslim “wave” goes on 24 hours a day, every day of the year!)

Finally, I mention that the *symbols* of a religion can enhance the significance of life, giving to life a sense of depth or transcendence or mystery or richness that is foreign to the secular point of view. Further, these symbols, as external artifacts, can visually remind people in moving ways of the beliefs and values of their religion.

Examples of religious symbols are the Star of David and the yarmulke (Judaism), the cross (Christianity), the yin/yang symbol (Taoism), and the lotus flower (Buddhism).

Religious *rites of passage* are symbolic acts that honor important events in life, such as birth, maturity, marriage, ordination, and death, from the point of view of the religion. Examples are Christian baptism of infants and Jewish bar mitzvah of mature boys.

1.4 Community

Nearly all religions are highly communal, recognizing and emphasizing the social needs of individuals and bringing them into relation with one another. However, the ways in which the individuals in religions are organized vary greatly, ranging from very hierarchical forms to nonhierarchical forms.

Why is there communal organization in religions? *First*, there needs to be some way of exercising authority within a community so as to define its essence and make decisions. If an organization doesn't stand for something, then it stands for nothing, in which case, it isn't really an organization. *Second*, people need companionship, friendship, and

a nourishing web of social relationships. We find these kinds of relationships most readily with people with whom we are like-minded. With such people we can relax, feel accepted, and share our thoughts and feelings because we are bound together by common beliefs and values. The members of a religious community will not agree on everything, but they agree on what they consider most important, and that helps keep disagreements among them from becoming disagreeable or destructive. (Episcopalians have a saying: "Agree on essentials; disagree on nonessentials; be charitable in all things.")

Third, religious communities provide religious *education* to children and outsiders, helping to form their values and their understanding of themselves, other people, and the world. *Fourth*, being an organized community provides a religion with a more effective means of outreach – whether to share the good news that they believe their religion contains or to help those in need of charitable aid. *Fifth*, many people find that communal worship and prayer (worship and prayer with others) contain special values in addition to the values of solitary prayer, meditation, or worship.

Some people try to reduce religion to one or the other of the preceding four aspects of religion. For example, some think of religion solely in terms of beliefs. "A religion," they say, "is just a bunch of beliefs." Other people think of religion as "morality tinged by emotion." They emphasize the code aspect of religion – sometimes parodying religion as "just a bunch of rules to live by." Still others think of religion in terms of bizarre or boring practices. Finally, some think of religion as just a kind of social organization.

I believe that each of those ways of portraying religion is misleading and inadequate. Anyone who thinks of religion in only one of those ways will have a one-dimensional understanding of a four-dimensional object. To be sure, the four dimensions are combined in different proportions in different religions. For example, the cultic aspect is especially prominent in Eastern Orthodox Churches. The creedal aspect is especially prominent in Roman Catholicism. The code aspect is especially prominent in Orthodox Judaism. The communal aspect is especially prominent in liberal Protestantism. But every religion is concerned with reality, morality, the texture, flow, and rhythm of life, and the solidarity of people with one another. To fail to notice and appreciate any of those four facets of a religion would be to fail to appreciate the richness of religion in its most enduring and influential forms.

1.5 Toward a Definition of Religion

Before attempting to formulate a definition of religion, let's think about the religious search that leads to the emergence of religion. The religious search is motivated by discontentment with our lives. It is a search for something to liberate, integrate, elevate, and transform our lives. Paul Tillich, a twentieth-century philosophical theologian, said that the religious search is a search for that which is ultimately real and ultimately valuable because only that which is ultimately real and ultimately valuable is worthy of our whole-hearted, unqualified devotion and can unify and transform our lives in the ways we most deeply desire. *Religion* is a response to the religious search. It is an answer to the haunting spiritual questions and unhappiness that motivate the religious search. Religion *interprets* the nature of spiritual unhappiness, *identifies* the cause or causes of it, *affirms* that the problem can be overcome, and *sets forth* a way of life whereby spiritual unhappiness can be overcome and spiritual peace can be found. The nature and cause of spiritual unhappiness is, of course, understood in different ways in different religious traditions. In Biblical traditions, spiritual unhappiness is often understood as alienation from our Creator, resulting from sin or rebellion against God. In Hinduism, it is often understood as alienation from one's true self, caused by ignorance of who one truly is. In Buddhism, it is often understood as the unhappiness caused by craving things that cannot satisfy us. In naturalistic traditions, it is often understood as resulting from a lack of a sense of worthy things to live for.

Keeping the preceding analysis in mind, I would like to articulate a definition of religion for your consideration. Keep in mind, however, that there is no universally accepted definition of religion that I can just hand to you. Any definition of religion will be controversial, including mine. But to understand ourselves and humankind better, we need to try to understand religion better, so what I propose is to provide you with a working explanation and definition of religion which you can accept, reject, or modify as you see fit. Before I begin, recall Peter Slater's definition, given at the beginning of this chapter: a religion is "a personal way of life informed by traditional elements of creed, code, and cult and directed toward the realization of some transcendent end." Then consider this definition by Erich Fromm,

who says that a religion is “any system of thought and action shared by a group that gives to the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion” (*Psychoanalysis and Religion* [Bantam Books: 1950], p. 22).

Now I want to summarize some of the preceding points with a definition that I hope you find illuminating and helpful: A religion is a way of understanding, feeling, and living life that consists of (i) *beliefs about* the nature of one’s self, others, nature, history, and ultimate reality; (ii) *belief in* something or someone thought to be the highest good; (iii) *a way of life* expressive of how one should live one’s life given one’s beliefs about reality and the highest good; and (iv) *stories, symbols, and practices* that are intended to help the individual, the community of believers, and outside seekers to achieve, remain, and progress in appropriate relationships to that which is believed to be the highest good. The preceding is “quite a mouthful,” but if you read it slowly and thoughtfully several times, I think you will begin to get a rich sense of the various aspects of religion and how they function in human life. Meanwhile, for a briefer definition try this: *religion is a way of thinking and living that involves devotion to a supreme being or value.*

By the way, in my longer definition I have spoken about “the highest good” rather than “God” because there are, as we will soon see, two basic kinds of religion: naturalistic and supernaturalistic. Naturalism is the belief that nothing exists beyond nature. *Naturalistic religions* agree that nothing exists beyond nature, but they also hold that nature itself or certain parts or possibilities of nature are sacred and should be treated with reverence and devotion. *Supernaturalistic religions* hold that there is some being, force, realm, or dimension that transcends nature and gives it its meaning. The opposite of religion in either of the preceding forms is usually called “secularism,” which holds that nothing exists beyond nature, and nothing in nature is sacred or worthy of worship or single-minded devotion. Rather, the secularist holds, there are various limited goods in life that compete with one another for our attention – food, shelter, health, family, friends, work, freedom, creativity, etc.

Now we turn our primary focus from religion to God, but the two will continue to be closely related. As we go along ask yourself how different conceptions of God lead to different forms of religion, and how different forms of religion lead to different conceptions of God.

1.6 Ze, Zer, Mer

As we begin to focus on God in the rest of this book, you will find me using three new words for a good reason. Other than the male pronouns “he,” “his,” and “him,” there are no singular pronouns in the English language that are commonly used without regard to gender to refer to humans, androgenous creatures (such as we find in science fiction and perhaps will find in fact on other planets), and persons without a gender (such as God and angels, according to some important religious traditions). For excellent reasons, this practice of using male pronouns generically is becoming less and less common. Indeed, some individuals and professional societies have begun to use “she” and “her” generically, rather than “he,” “his,” and “him.” That change has been fitting and illuminating, but ultimately it suffers from the same problem from which the generic use of male pronouns suffers, viz., it is grammatically incorrect and can be confusing or misleading. Efforts have been made to avoid the unfair and ungrammatical nature of the preceding alternatives, but they have proven awkward and do not accommodate nongendered persons. To be sure, awkward or ungrammatical language is better than language that unjustly offends people, and especially women, who have borne the brunt of linguistic and other injustices for millennia. Fortunately, there is, I think, a better way.

To get beyond the preceding difficulties, we need to come up with a set of nongendered personal pronouns that are widely adopted, and the sooner the better. More specifically, we need to go beyond: (i) the confusion and incorrectness of using male pronouns generically for all persons, for example, “Everyone who pays his taxes by check should write his social security number on his check” (ditto for the generic use of female pronouns); (ii) the awkwardness of written and spoken locutions such as “he/she” and “he or she,” for example, “Everyone who pays his or her taxes by check should put his or her social security number on his or her check” or “Everyone who pays her/his taxes by check should put her/his social security number on her/his check” (also, this locution does not accommodate nongendered persons such as God; of course God doesn’t pay taxes, but he/she should); (iii) the incorrectness of using a plural pronoun to refer to an individual, for example, “When an individual is in distress, we should help them”; and (iv) the incorrectness of referring to nongendered persons, such as

the God of monotheism, as “he” or “she” or “it,” for example, “If we are faithful to God, he will bless us.”

To capture in language the richness of actuality and possibility, we need non-gendered personal pronouns that refer indifferently to persons whether they are female, male, or – as in the case of God, some angels, robots, science-fiction creatures, and perhaps extra-terrestrials – none of the aforementioned. I propose “ze,” “zer,” and “mer” as non-gendered personal pronouns for general use. I propose “ze” for the nominative case, “zer” for the possessive case, and “mer” for the accusative case. “Mer” is a blend of the last letter of “him” and the last two letters of “her,” “ze” is a blend of “she” and “he” (“se” with a modification to be explained); “zer” is a blend of “his” and “her” (“ser” with a modification to be explained).

“Z” has been substituted for the “s” in “se” and “ser” to avoid such homophones as “see” and “sea,” in the case of “se,” and “sir” in the case of “ser.” Using these new pronouns and making the appropriate substitutions, the illustrative sentences earlier would read: “If we are faithful to God, ze will bless us”; “Everyone who pays zer taxes by check should write zer social security number on zer check”; “When an individual is in distress, we should help mer.”

“Ze,” “zer,” and “mer” may seem awkward now, but if we use them regularly and the usage becomes widespread, they will soon seem quite natural. Meanwhile, we will have enriched the categories of our language and improved our ability to communicate clearly, precisely, and grammatically. “She,” “her,” “he,” “his,” and “him” should, of course, continue to be used when appropriate. “Ze,” “zer,” and “mer” will supplement them, not supplant them.

To close on a personal note: in my philosophy of religion courses I explain these terms to my students, and then I use them when I speak of God, which of course I do a lot. My students are not required to use these terms, yet many of them are intrigued, attracted, and choose to do so, at first with self-conscious good-humor. My female students seem especially appreciative of an opportunity to speak of God without being forced to use a gendered pronoun or an awkward strategy designed to evade the use of pronouns altogether. Similar benefits accrue for general discussions of the nature of a person, whether in philosophy of religion, philosophy of mind, or other areas of philosophy (must a person be gendered?). Hence, even if “ze,” “zer,” and “mer” do not enter into common usage

(obviously the odds are against that), nonetheless they can be very useful in religious and philosophical discussions.

For Review, Reflection, and Discussion

1. Having read this chapter, are you satisfied with my definition of religion? If not, how would you change or replace it, and why? (Note: giving examples is not to give a definition. To say, "Religion is Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc." would be to give examples of religion, not to give a definition of religion. To define something is to state the essence of it – an essence by means of which genuine examples can be identified and pretenders can be excluded. In terms of terminology to be discussed more later, what are the *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions of something being a religion? Or is the designation of something as a religion completely conventional or arbitrary?)
2. What would you add to or subtract from the four aspects of religion?
3. Is there a hierarchy of importance among the four aspects of religion? If so, what do you think is their order of importance and why?
4. Could a group without a creed, or a philosophy of life, be a religion? If yes, how so? Can you identify one? If no, then is a creed or a philosophy of life a necessary condition of something being a religion?
5. Some people think that religion is an effort to respond to spiritual unhappiness. How is spiritual unhappiness different from other kinds of unhappiness?
6. What is now your understanding of the differences between philosophy and religion? How are they alike?

For Further Reading

Holley, David, *Meaning and Mystery* (Wiley-Blackwell: 2010). Holley explains religions as "life-orienting stories" that should be judged not on the basis of objective, public evidence but on the basis of how well they help us understand, integrate, and live our lives.

Fromm, Erich, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (Yale University Press: 1950, or Bantam Books: 1967). Sensitive, helpful insights from a philosophical psychoanalyst.

Noss, David S., *A History of World Religions*, 12th ed. (Prentice-Hall: 2007). This is one of the most inclusive and detailed surveys of world religions in one volume.

Sharma, Arvind, ed., *Our Religions* (HarperCollins: 1993). Each chapter is on a different religion by an expert from that tradition. Sharma writes about Hinduism.

Slater, Peter, *The Dynamics of Religion* (Harper & Row: 1978). Readable. Insightful. Brief.

Smith, Huston, *The World's Religions, Revised and Updated*, (HarperOne: 2009). Smith is a marvelous writer and also has an illustrated version of his *World's Religions*.