Thinking Passage: What Is Religion?

There are few concepts more complex and emotionally charged than the concept of religion. The following passage, "What Is Religion?" is taken from the book Ways of Being Religious, and it presents a provocative introduction to the concepts of religion and religious experience. After reading the selection, answer the questions that follow.


WHAT IS RELIGION?

By Frederick J. Streng

An African proverb, from the Ganda tribe in central Uganda, states, "He who never visits thinks his mother is the only cook." As with most proverbs, its meaning is larger than the explicit subjects referred to—in this case food and visiting. It suggests that a person is much the poorer for not having had exposure to and acquaintance with the ways of other people.

All of us have had some acquaintance with religious people, just as we have tasted our mother's food. But do we really understand very well what it means to be religious? The "Father of the Scientific Study of Religion," Max Mueller, once said: "He who knows one religion understands none." That is perhaps too extreme a statement as it stands, and yet it says about the
study of religion what the African proverb says about the knowledge of life in general—that we sacrifice much if we confine ourselves to the familiar.

If a visit is to be fruitful, the "traveler" must do more than just move from place to place. He must respond to what he sees. But what is it that shapes the way we respond to new experiences? Our perception of things is often colored by our previous attitudes toward them. In this case, what do you, the reader, expect from an exposure to various expressions of religion? What sorts of things do you expect to see? How do you think you will respond to them? If you were asked to define, illustrate, or to characterize religious behavior, how would you do so? The answers to these questions, of course, reflect your preconceptions. To become conscious of your preconceptions, ask yourself the following four questions:

VISUAL THINKING

What Is Religion?

• How would you define religion? What are some of the religious elements—objects and rituals—in this photo that are common to your religion? What are some different elements? Do you think that there are some things common to all religions? Why or why not?

Does your definition reduce religion to what you happen to be acquainted with by accident of birth and socialization? Perhaps that goes without saying. It may be true of anyone's "off-the cuff" definition of religion. However, we ask this question to encourage you to consider whether your definition has sufficient scope. Is it broad enough to include the religious activities
of human beings throughout the world? In surveying university students we have commonly
gotten responses to the question, "What is religion?" as follows: "Being Christian, I would define
it [religion] as personal relationship with Christ." "Religion [is]: God, Christ, and Holy Ghost
and their meaning to each individual." Other students think of worship rather than belief. In this
vein, one edition of Webster's dictionary, in the first of its definitions, describes religion as "the
service and adoration of God or a god as expressed in forms of worship." If we were to accept
any of the above definitions, many people in the world would be excluded—people who regard
some of their most important activities as religious, but who do not focus upon a deity. That is to
say, not all religions are theistic. It remains to be seen, of course, whether and to what extent this
is true. But let us all be warned of taking our habits or our dictionary as the sole resource for
defining religion. In some areas, the main lines of significant understanding are already well
established. Therefore we have no serious quarrel with Webster's definition of food as "nutritive
material taken into an organism for growth, work, or repair and for maintaining the vital
processes." But in religion, interpretive concepts are more problematical. Therefore we are
suspicious of the adequacy of the dictionary's definition of religion.

Another common way to define religion is to regard it as "morality plus stories," or
"morality plus emotion." These are ways of asserting that religion has to do mainly with ethics,
or that its myths merely support the particular views of a people. There are, of course, persons
for whom religion has been reduced to ethics, as when Thomas Paine stated (in The Rights of
Man): "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good." But we should be cautious in
assuming that this testimony would do for all religious people.
A final example of a definition that begins with personal experience is one that claims: "Religion is a feeling of security"; or, as one student put it: "Religion is an aid in coping with that part of life which man does not understand, or in some cases a philosophy of life enabling man to live more deeply." In locating the basis of religion in man's need for a sense of security, this approach suggests that the deepest study of religion is through psychology. It has been dramatically expressed by the psychiatrist and writer C. G. Jung when he wrote: "Religion is a relationship to the highest or strongest value . . . the value by which you are possessed unconsciously. That psychological fact which is the greatest power in your system is the god, since it is always the overwhelming psychic factor which is called 'god.'" Although this understanding of religion expresses a very important point, many theologians and religious philosophers point out that an interpretation that reduces all of religious experience to psychological, biological, or social factors omits the central reality exposed in that experience—the Sacred or Ultimate Reality. Thus, a student of religion should keep open the question of whether a familiar interpretation of religious life that fits into a conventional, social science perspective of man is adequate for interpreting the data.

Does your definition reflect a bias on your part—positive or negative—toward religion as a whole, or toward a particular religion? There are many examples of biased definitions that could be cited. Some equate religion with superstition, thus reflecting a negative evaluation. One man defined religion as "the sum of the scruples which impede the free exercise of the human faculties." Another hostile view of religion is to see religion as a device of priests to keep the masses in subjection and themselves in comfort. Similarly, Karl Marx, while not actually
attempting to define religion, called it "the opiate of the people," again reflecting a bias against (all) religion.

Still others, in defining religion, are stating their concept of true religion as opposed to what they regard as false or pagan faiths. Henry Fielding, in his novel Tom Jones, has the provincial parson Mr. Thwackum saying, "When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion; but the Church of England." Some Christians assume that their personal conviction comprises a definition of religion, so that religion is regarded as "the worship of God through His Son Jesus Christ,"or "a personal relationship with Christ." A Muslim can point out that the essence of religion is to make peace with God through complete submission to God's will, a submission that he will insist is brought to fulfillment in Islam. (In Arabic the word "Islam" means "submission," "peace," "safety," and "salvation.")

Therefore the student interested in reflecting on religious experience that includes more than a single institutional or cultural expression should remember the distinction between descriptive (neutral) and evaluative definitions. A descriptive definition attempts to be as inclusive as possible about a class of items, such as religious forms. An evaluative definition, on the other hand, reflects one's own criteria for truth or falsity, for reality or illusion. In "visiting" religious people, we suggest that you delay making an evaluation until you have understood why their expressions and processes have profound meaning for them—however strange those expressions may seem to you. In the final analysis, each person must evaluate different religious alternatives; but one of our goals in bringing together the material in this volume is to provide
you with a variety of options—a variety that is reduced if you limit religion to any single historical expression.

Obviously the believer who advocates one religion to the exclusion of all others differs sharply from one who rejects all. Nevertheless, if either accepts his own convictions about what is best or worst in religion as a description of what religion in fact is everywhere and for everyone, he exhibits a common indifference to unfamiliar, and therefore potentially surprising, religious patterns. As a believer (or skeptic), you have a right to declare your own understanding of what is most important, most real, in religion. This declaration is, in fact, essential, for it guides you in your quest for whatever is most real in life. As a student, on the other hand, you have an obligation to carry your studies as far as necessary to include relevant data. In this role, your obligation is not only to your own perception of value but also to a common world of understanding in which men of many religious persuasions can converse with each other.

Does your definition limit religion to what it has been in the past, and nothing else, or does your definition make it possible to speak of emerging forms of religion? In asking this question, we should observe two striking facts of the history of religion: there was a time when some present religions did not exist, and some of the religions which once emerged no longer exist (for example, the Egyptian and Babylonian religions). Human history, then, has witnessed the emergence and abandonment of several religions.

Even religious traditions that have maintained a sense of continuity over vast stretches of time (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, for example) have undergone important changes. Is it really as obvious as we tend to think that they are essentially the same now as they were at their origins? Do the terms naming these traditions even today point to a single entity,
however complex? You are familiar with at least some instances of religious warfare within the Christian tradition. Roman Catholics have persecuted and killed Lutherans; Lutherans have persecuted and killed Calvinists; Calvinists, Anglicans; Anglicans, Quakers; and most have returned the act with interest. Are all of these groups expressions of "the one true church"? Are some more Christian than others? Is there only one form of Christianity? Are new movements violations of the tradition? Or is the one who speaks to his own time the one who is most faithful to the genius of his tradition? These questions can be asked of all religious traditions. All have experienced change and diversity. Furthermore, it seems likely that this will continue, and that new religious traditions will emerge. Therefore, the conventions of the past cannot be regarded as the limits of future religious forms.

In part because history has witnessed the emergence and internal changes of many religions, anthropologists and cultural historians commonly suggest that religion (and human culture in general) has attained only its adolescence. Likewise, philosophers and religious thinkers in both East and West point to the anxiety and tensions today that are expressed in political, social, economic, and intellectual upheaval. They raise a question of whether or not man's moral, psychic, and evaluative resources can catch up with his self-destructive potential seen in technologically advanced weapons and psychological-chemical techniques for social control. The most hopeful of these philosophers perceive the present turmoil as a lack of "maturity" in human consciousness, and express the hope that it is not too late (quite) to change the direction of man from self-destruction to self-fulfillment.

From this perspective most of mankind's experience is still in the future. The history of religious life to the present is only a beginning. But the basis of these projections is the
recognition that man's survival requires him to recognize religious dynamics and processes for evaluations as major forces in human life. Should not a definition of religion aid us in looking at contemporary phenomena to see if any new ways of being religious are emerging? At least it should not inhibit persons with an interest in this matter, and we think an introduction to religion should encourage such reflection.

**Does your definition have sufficient precision?** Are there any limits to the scope of religion, or are the limits so vague that they fail to mark out an object of study? In an attempt to be as broadminded as possible, many definitions are like a student's statement that religion is "the means man has of coping with his world." Or they are similar to the claim that religion is "believing in a way of life which involves understanding and caring for others," or "religion is love." Such definitions tell us a good deal, but without some qualification they might refer to many other expressions of human life than specifically religious ones. In order to find a focus and a set of limitations at the outer circumference of that focus, we need to designate what are those essential elements of religion that will expose the *religious* meaning of the evidence we look at.

When one has "visited" (seen) a wide range of religious life, from all parts of the world and throughout human history, it becomes apparent that religion is a way of life that involves many processes—all of which, in different ways, are directed toward a common end. The goal is to reach a state of being that is conceived to be the highest possible state or condition. Religion is the general term for the various ways by which people seek to become changed into that highest state. We understand *religion as a means toward ultimate transformation*. By this we are not claiming that every activity you think of as religious will in fact transform you ultimately. It
might, but that is not our point. We mean that any reasonably specific means that any person
adopts with the serious hope and intention of moving toward ultimate transformation should be
termed "religious." We think it possible to speak of all religious activity (Eastern and Western,
past, present, and emerging) without reducing religion to what is merely familiar to us and
without putting a value judgment on one or more religions.

<h2>Questions for Analysis</h2>

1. Describe your concept of religion as specifically as possible. Where did the concept
originate for you? How did it evolve as you have matured? Explain the reasons or experiences
that support your concept.

2. Evaluate your concept of religion by answering the four questions posed in the Thinking
Passage:

• "Does your definition reduce religion to what you happen to be acquainted with by
  accident of birth and socialization?"

• "Does your definition reflect a bias on your part—positive or negative—toward religion
  as a whole, or toward a particular religion?"

• "Does your definition limit religion to what it has been in the past, and nothing else, or
does your definition make it possible to speak of emerging forms of religion?"

• "Does your definition have sufficient precision?"
3. Compare your definition of religion to the definitions of other students in your class.

What are the similarities? What are the differences? How do you explain these similarities and differences?

4. In the Thinking Passage, religion is defined as a "means toward ultimate transformation."

What do you think this definition means? Explain how this definition relates to your definition.