RELIGION - THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

By Michel Clasquin

What is religion? In a book about religion, Christianity and the New Testament, it might well be a good idea to start out with a clear idea of what we are looking at. It is only too obvious today that there are different religions, churches, denominations and sects. So let us ask ourselves, what is "religion", what does it mean when we say that a person is "religious" and don't all the religions worship the same God in their own way, in any case?

One could argue that it is obvious what religion is. After all, I am religious, I believe this and that and I do such and such, therefore that is what makes something a religion and therefore RELIGION itself. It may be so. But let us try an analogy: a capitalist might define "economics" as "the interchange of goods and services in a free market." That would be an answer of sorts, but an answer that simply ignores Marx's analysis of human exploitation, Keynes's advocacy of state involvement in the economy, the experience of millions of people in rigidly-controlled command economies ... the list is endless. Clearly, one cannot simply extrapolate such a general statement about either economics or religion from one's own beliefs and experiences.

Even so, might it not be possible to take one's own experience, strip it down to its most basic essentials, see whether those same essentials also apply to other religions and create a workable definition of religion from that? Many have tried this approach, and have come up with answers such as "religion is the worship of a divine being or beings" or, more broadly, "religion is the human response to that which is considered sacred".

However, if we dig a little deeper in the various religions of the world, we come up with a number of problems. Let us first tackle some basic beliefs. Christians, Jews, Muslims and many others all claim to believe in the existence of a single god who created the world and everything in it, but disagree strongly with each other and among themselves about the details of this being, not to mention what He or She might require of humans. Hindus respond that, in their view, a monotheistic setup is fair enough, but there is also something to be said for incorporating some aspects of polytheism, at least on a subordinate level.

In the final analysis some of them might also agree with the Buddhists that the ultimate nature of reality is devoid of personality and that its beginning and end, if such things were to exist, are lost in the mists of time. And the Chinese sage Confucius once replied to this whole debate by saying, "You do not yet know how to serve people, why then worry about serving the gods?"

But if basic beliefs about the world and its origin do not help us along in our search for the meaning of "religion", perhaps we can find something else that all religions have in common. I am not referring to acts like praying, lighting candles or prostrating - there the differences are all too clear - but perhaps there is something uniquely religious about ethics. After all, don't all religions teach people not to go around killing, raping and robbing each other?

Well, in a sense they all do, but only in highly selective ways. Christians are told to "turn the other cheek", but Islam values a somewhat tougher attitude. Buddhists will extend, in theory at least, their nonharming attitude to all living beings, then indulge in endless debates among themselves whether this implies compulsory vegetarianism. The sacrifice of large numbers of human beings was an integral part of Aztec religion. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians disagree among themselves on the sinfulness of suicide and abortion. And hardly ever has any religion succeeded in preventing the miseries of war; to the contrary, almost all of them have had a hand, at one time or another, in starting wars against people who happened to be heretics, pagans, heathens, infidels or apostates, in other words, "not like us". However devoted we are to our respective traditions, we must face up to the truth:

"Religionism", like racism and sexism, has caused untold suffering for millions of people.

So, if there is indeed a common factor that not only unites all the religions but also helps us to understand what, essentially, it is, it is not plain to see. What about the structure of the word itself? The word "religion" is derived from a Latin source that means "to tie back" or more figuratively "to re-connect". But this does not help us much, either; the question immediately arises "reconnect to what?" and we are back in the interminable debate about the existence, or otherwise, of God, the nature of reality and what human beings really are. In Afrikaans, as in its close relative Dutch, the most common term is "godsdiens", literally "service to God". Clearly the same problem arises, for the existence of God is presupposed in the very term itself. For this reason, Afrikaans-speaking scholars active in Religious Studies have turned instead to the neutral, if somewhat artificial, term "religie".

There are three possible reactions to this dilemma. First, I can say that while all other traditions are man-made and false, my own is divinely inspired and true. In other words, my beliefs are the TRUTH, while all others are mere "religions". While this approach has the virtues of frankness and simplicity, it is also true that it leads to a fanaticism and a disregard for the rights of others that would no doubt have horrified the founder of the religion in question. This strategy seems most common among monotheists.

A more subtle variation of this strategy is to declare that all religions have a certain amount of truth in them, but mine happens to be the completely fulfilled truth, which has emerged after a long evolution. Alternatively, if this is not yet the case, my religion is at least the closest approach to this complete truth that will be revealed in the fullness of time. This strategy has long been a favourite among Hindus and Buddhists, but it seems also to have taken root in certain sectors of twentieth-century Christianity: one thinks here of Raimundo Pannikar's phrase "The unknown Christ of Hinduism". But while this strategy may be more refined than the "only my religion is the truth" approach, it is imperialistic in nature. It refuses to take other people seriously, preferring instead to remake them in its own image.

The second major way of reacting to the problem of the differences between religions is to declare that the only true religion is mysticism. Mysticism may be defines as a process whereby the mystic plumbs the depths of the self and reality in a radical process of meditative self-discovery to discover the true nature of reality experientially. And the sayings of mystics of all kinds of different traditions show that they have known very similar experiences. Therefore, the true unity of religion can be found in mystical experience. In mysticism, we can find the "perennial philosophy", the common ground of all religious experience.

There is a lot of evidence to support this train of thought. But mysticism, at least in the narrow definition of the term used here, is, was and probably always will be a minority interest among religious people. Where does this leave the rest of us? Moreover, the mysticism approach and the "only my religion is the truth" attitude share another shortcoming: there is no way that they can be proven to a disinterested outsider. Instead, they require a leap of faith or a mystical experience that is itself religious. Thus, basing a definition of religion on them leads to arguing in circles.

The third reaction to the problem is to ignore it. This approach, which grows naturally out of the exclusivism of the first strategy, was perhaps possible in certain periods in the past, when religions dominated large areas almost entirely. But today, it would imply shutting oneself up in a self-imposed ghetto, avoiding all contact with everyone who might possibly not share one's beliefs and never venturing outside. Surely an unacceptable "solution" to most of us. After all, most religions do believe that their message is valid for all people; how is this truth to be transmitted to other people if we ignore them?

So perhaps there is a fourth way, a way of approaching the differences between religions that will not deny the religious feelings and beliefs, and therefore the very humanity, of people of other faiths and that will not restrict us in the practice of our own religion.

One could examine some concrete cases. When the early European explorers set out on their voyages in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they already had some idea of what religion was. This notion was derived mostly from Christianity, but they were also aware of Judaism and Islam, even if they regarded these as false religions. When they reached India, they encountered certain systematised beliefs and practices that bore a sufficient resemblance to what they were used to at home for them to refer to this as the "religion" of the Indian people. The same was true when, later, they reached China and the Americas. In each of these cases, there were separate social structures that were not necessarily identical to European religion, but which bore a certain "family resemblance" to it. With each discovery of a new "religion", the very term itself was widened and it became easier and easier to describe a newly-discovered social phenomenon as "religious".

Sometimes this process would break down, of course - some of the early missionaries to Southern Africa would write in their letters home that the indigenous people of Africa had no religion! Actually, what happened was that those activities that would be considered "religious" in western society were, in African communities, so tightly integrated with the rest of social life as to present a seamless whole to the observer. To some extent, this is also true of Judaism and Hinduism. Even in modern western society, it is not always easy to say where religion stops and, say, politics begins.

The second concrete example concerns a more recent event. In November 1992, the South African branch of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP), an interrelations organisation, convened a conference in Pretoria to finalise and accept the *Declaration of Religious Rights and Responsibilities*, the culmination of two years of negotiation between members of many different religions. There were delegates from the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. In fact, most of these were represented by delegates from different subdivisions of their religions (eg Roman Catholic Church, Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, Zion Christian Church etc for the Christians) along with representatives from the academic study of religion and from the interreligious movement. In all, there were about a hundred participants.

Although the Declaration was primarily a sociopolitical rather than a theological or religioscientific document, it was felt to be necessary to commence with a definition. It was not easy to arrive at a definition that was acceptable to all. The end result of two years of inviting comments and suggestions and of six hours of hard negotiation was as follows:

> (We) understand, for the purpose of this declaration, a religious community to mean a group of people who follow a particular system of belief, morality and worship, either in recognition of a divine being, in the pursuit of spiritual development, or in the expression of a sense of belonging through social custom and ritual ...

Technically, you will see that this is a definition of a religious *community* rather than of religion itself, but there is nevertheless a definition of religion hidden within it. This definition consists of two parts; first it describes what religious people *do* and second, *why* they do these things.

Firstly, then, it is stated that religion consists of "a particular system of belief, morality and worship". This is still open to criticism, as certain forms of Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist meditation can only be seen as "worship" by analogy. Perhaps an "or" instead of "and" would have been more suitable here.

This is precisely what we see in the second half of the definition where it is stated that religious people believe and do these things *either* for this reason *or* for another *or* for yet another. One of the Muslim representatives suggested that the form "and/or" be used, as he felt that even "or" was too exclusive - after all, Muslims recognise both the "recognition of a divine being" and "the pursuit of spiritual development" as inseparable parts of their religion. This suggestion was rejected by the drafting committee on the grounds that it would be stylistically clumsy and that each religious tradition, however

diverse, still showed a preference for one of these three objectives, its main focus, as it were. In Christianity, for instance, both "the pursuit of spiritual development" and "the expression of a sense of belonging through social custom and ritual" are common enough and recognised as important aspects of the faith, but the main focus of Christianity is surely on "recognition of a divine being".

The three objectives of religion were not chosen at random: "recognition of a divine being" was intended to represent the theistic faiths of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, certain aspects of Hinduism and many others. "The pursuit of spiritual development" was inserted at the insistence of one of the Buddhist representatives, in order to acknowledge the nontheistic religions (most forms of Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and certain forms of Hinduism), while "the expression of a sense of belonging through social custom and ritual" was specifically intended to recognise African Traditional Religion. Admittedly, there are flaws in this part of the definition, too. For instance, no provisions were made for true polytheists, simply since none were present at the conference to speak up. But the one great merit of this definition was that it was acceptable to so many representatives of so many different religious traditions.

A similar approach is taken by the scholar of religion Frederick Streng in his book "Understanding religious life". He identifies four traditional and five less traditional "ways of being religious", acknowledging all the while that each one of these "ways" may be present in each specific religious tradition to a greater or lesser degree. No one characteristic is set up as the "essence" of religion.

From these two examples we can see that it is not easy to identify the one thing that all religions are and must be. Still, if we cannot identify one common characteristic of all religions, perhaps we can devise a system of classifying them, much as was done in the WCRP definition above. Then, perhaps the way we classified the religions will itself show us what they have in common.

There are many ways to classify religions. One way is to distinguish between local, national and universal religions. The local religion is limited in terms of both geography and missionary intent. Usually, one is born into a local religion; it is the faith of one's family, tribe or clan and one has little interest in extending it to others. To the contrary, since the religion is the source of the group's power, and therefore its means of survival, one should be careful not to divulge too much of it to outsiders. While this type of religion is most common among "primal" communities (hunter-gatherers, herders and premodern agriculturalists), remnants of it remain even in modern societies - witness the secrecy that surrounds quasi-religious groups such as the Freemasons.

National religions usually have to do with the common bonds of a shared language, culture, ethnic background or a shared history. Orthodox Judaism is a good example of this. While it is not impossible for an outsider to join a national religion, to do so requires that one adopts, not only the religious precepts, but an entire lifestyle. As a result, national religions tend, after an initial flowering that is associated with the growth and political dominance of the associated community, to stop growing and only perpetuate themselves, or even to decline.

The universal religions, on the other hand, have divorced themselves from a specific society to such an extent that they have become "portable". They can adapt themselves to almost any society in which they find themselves. Universal religions are clearly oriented towards converting people of other faiths. Christianity, Buddhism and Islam are the most often quoted examples of universal religions. Keep in mind, though, that there are always "mixed" types. For instance, Hinduism contains aspects of all three these types, depending on whether one investigates it on the village, caste or philosophical level.

But there is a problem with this classification system, useful as it is, if we are looking for the essence of religion. It simply classifies traditions according to their missionary zeal, or lack of it. In terms of this system, classical Marxism-Leninism, with its drive to "world communism" would have to be classified as a "universal religion". While there are some scholars who maintain that it was precisely that, it is

problematic to call this philosophy, which denied the truth-claims of *all* religious systems, a religion. In other words, we cannot use this classification to define religion as something that tries to convert other people.

Yet another approach is to have a look at the basic beliefs of the various religions and base our system of classification on them. One common outcome of this approach is to divide religion into theism, atheism and non-theism. However, atheism is not a completely integral approach, but rather a rejection of an already existing theism. That leaves us with theism, which can be divided into monotheism and polytheism, and non-theism, which one could define as the opinion that belief in a divine being is not necessary for the functioning of a religion. Examples of theism include Christianity and Islam, of non-theism Buddhism and Taoism. You will notice the similarity to two aspects of the WCRP definition.

But note that this classification hinges on the idea that the acceptance or non-acceptance of a personal god is a very important aspect of religion. This is itself a theistic idea. If a Buddhist scholar of religion were to classify the world's religions according to their basic beliefs, it would make more sense for him or her to classify them according to whether or not these traditions accepted the impermanence of phenomena, the nonexistence of an enduring soul or self in human beings and the unsatisfactoriness of all experience.

What the above examples teach us is that we can never look at religious phenomena with a blank mind, ready to receive "what is there". Our previous experience always colours our perceptions, just as those early European explorers left on their voyages with a pre-existing idea of what religion was all about. Not that this is fatal to good thinking, as long as the reality of the influence of this previous experience is recognised and used positively. Thus, classification systems, although useful, cannot give us the essence of religion, either. All they do is reflect our existing ideas about religion.

What can we learn from all this? Simply that *religion is not a single thing*. To understand religion, we must accept that it is a composite, something made up out of many things, any one (or even more!) of which may be present or absent without affecting the "religious" nature of the object under scrutiny. We cannot isolate a single aspect such as belief or worship or prayer and set that apart as "the essence of religion".

Compare in this respect the work of the philosopher Wittgenstein in his later years. What, he asked, is a game? Many games are played with balls and sticks, but chess is a game, yet it involves neither. Games are played for fun, unless you happen to be a professional sportsman who does it for the money even when you are injured. Games can involve competition, but some others stress cooperation. And so on. In the end, he decided that "game" could not be reduced to one single defining attribute. Instead, it was the sum total of all its attributes. In a specific instance, if one looked at a human activity and saw that the *majority* of its attributes complied with the list that together made up the definition of "game", then one would be justified in saying that that particular activity was a game. Can you see how the same is true of religion?

But if there is no single, substantial definition of religion, does this not also imply that there can be no one way of studying religion? Indeed, no longer can we simply pick out one methodology and state authoritatively that it is the "right" way. In the twentieth century, scholars have become aware that one's choice of methodology is not inherent in the material under scrutiny, but that it reflects nothing so much as the investigator's own attitude towards the material, just as we have seen above concerning classifications of religion.

There are a number of such methodologies available to the researcher, and you will study some of them in detail further on in this book. I name but a few: *historical criticism*, which attempts to re-set a text in its original historical context; *structuralism*, which tries to trace nonhistorical connections between the

myths and rituals of very different peoples; *phenomenology*, an effort to see the religious reality of other people as they themselves see it; and *deconstruction*, a radical attempt to see a text in a playful relationship with its reader. And, of course, each major religious tradition has evolved its own set of *traditional exegetical rules* for explaining its own scriptures. In time, the more modern methods may well become so commonplace that we will no longer know how we ever managed without them. They will then be part and parcel of the traditional exegetical system. This seems to be happening already in the case of historical criticism.

Certain requirements do remain; logical coherence, willingness to be proven wrong, not adjusting the facts of the case in an ad hoc way to make it fit into one's preferred methodological scheme. But beyond this, it is no longer possible to say that, for instance, the historical critical method of studying religion is "wrong". *Any* method that is internally consistent, logically sound and that maintains an attitude of respect towards the subject will deliver results that are *completely correct within the framework of that method.*

It is always possible to contend that a particular method was not applied correctly, and one can also criticise a method itself from a higher philosophical point of view. However, it is no longer permissible to see the results of, for instance, a structuralist analysis as invalid because its results invalidate the results of traditional scriptural exegesis, or vice versa. Like the definitions of "game" and "religion", the study of religion is the sum total of all efforts made within it, and is forever incomplete, a human search for the certainty that forever eludes us, yet nevertheless a noble attempt to improve our understanding of this elusive thing called "religion".

And the same must then be true in our personal religious practice: my bona fide religious experience is *completely valid* within the framework of my religious tradition, and so is your religious experience within the framework of yours. The fact that my religious experience is not the same as yours, or that our religious systems completely contradict each other, does not alter the fact that on the experiential level each of us has experienced a life-altering event of the deepest possible meaning. All of us, the Catholic and the Copt, the Buddhist and the Baptist, stand before the Great Mystery, begging bowl in hand, dumbfounded by the greatness of what we can see only dimly.

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