

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION

Definition of “religion.” Religion is that struggle and that groping within every human being for otherness. This struggle manifests itself externally in a myriad of ways (e.g., myths, rituals, symbols, humanistic concerns, etc.), yet that fundamental quest for otherness distinguishes the *human being* from *other beings* and might be called the essence or the essential component of the creature labeled *homo sapiens*. Thus, to possess humanity is to possess religion, to be human is to be religious. Not to be religious, consequently, is not to be authentically human. This innate groping or struggling, so pervasive within the human species, permeates the thinking, the doing, the choosing, the feeling of each *homo sapiens*. Being who we are prohibits escape from “the struggle.”

“The struggle” manifests itself in a myriad of ways. It might be a struggle within the depths of the human “soul,” a fighting with the “self” and all of its annoyances. It might be a fighting against spirits of “supernatural” beings, for example, demons, devils, witches, ghosts, Satan, God, angels, etc. It might be a struggle with the “secular” forces of politics, economics, racial or class discrimination. It might be a struggle with the impersonal forces of the natural environment. It might be a struggle with material things, with the “power” (imagined or real) infused into the stuff of the universe. Whatever the impetus of “the struggle,” be it psychological, physical, man-centered, self-centered, God-centered, sociological, philosophical, or nature-centered, “the struggle” is very real and in need of resolve. That resolve comes in the form of a goal to achieve or attain, and, of course, the goal will vary according to the particular form of the religious endeavor.

Lest it be objected that such a view is “pan-religionism,” that is, it makes every human endeavor a religious enterprise, it should be understood that “the struggle” is *core* and central to the human psyche. Except for true cases of split personality, mental and psychological derangement, and so forth, “the struggle” will affect and temper the whole of life. It will integrate, mold, and shape the bits and pieces of both the “mundane” and “magnificent” activities and thoughts of any individual into a “sensible” or “meaningful” pattern. This pattern may be perceived by the individual, or it may not be perceived by the individual. In either case, it does exist. The pattern may seem to the individual to be disrupting or disorienting, and therefore nonsensical. Yet even this “negative” appearance and perception does not deny the integrating factor of that deep longing within.

“The struggle” is pervasive and cannot be denied. It affects all of life. But it is not to be equated with all of life. “The struggle” arranges different aspects of life in a variety of ways. It functions as an unpredictable dynamic as it ekes its way amidst the confusing and kaleidoscopic forces of human existence. And it brings order to life by structuring, categorizing, or establishing hierarchies of value or non-value, compartmentalizing, etc. It may even bring “order” to life in seemingly negative ways, that is, by tearing down structures, by de-compartmentalizing, or by a return to “natural” processes (i.e., a return to the wild). The effect upon “the struggle” of any given mix of kaleidoscopic forces is a peculiar phenomenon. For some sets of impetuses, this process of ordering produces the differentiation of “the sacred” and “the secular.” But according to other sets of impetuses, the ordering process is less dichotomous and everything is “sacred” or everything is “profane.”

Of course, quite a number of variations of the sacred/secular dichotomy do exist. Even within the same religious tradition variations exist, but such variations do not seem to be as divergent from each other as those of differing religions. So for some, certain “things” seem to be wrapped around “the struggle” more tightly than other “things.” For others, all “things” equally are wrapped around “the struggle.” Many complex factors determine what “things” are tightly wrapped around “the struggle” and what “things” are not. These complex factors also determine the tightness of the wrap. Factors such as childhood education and training, social environment, physiological and psychological development, historical context (e.g., birth factors and life experiences)—all these impetuses affect “things” and “wrap.” So to posit the pervasiveness of “the struggle” in the totality of life is not to posit “pan-religionism.” Every endeavor of each person might very well be related to his or her particular “religion,” but all will not see it this way. Each person will view the necessary connection between religion and life according to their individual “wrap.” Some will disclaim altogether the existence of any such “wrapping.” They have no religion, so they say! But they have “the struggle,” and the “wrap” of “things” is there whether they wish to admit it or not.

Personal presuppositions for the study of “religion.” As suggested, to be human is to be religious. So, the qualities of “humanness” must be explored. What does it mean to be human? What distinguishes the human species from other creatures or beings?

The first step in answering these questions involves establishing presuppositions. The writer presumes the following: (1) the existence of such a thing as humanness; (2) the qualitative distinction between humans and other beings (e.g., animals, plants, etc.); (3) the qualitative distinction between humans and the material world or cosmos; (4) inherent deficiencies or

weaknesses within humans when compared with the “ideal” in most religious systems; (5) the possibility of the “superhuman,” an entity distinct from and active within human affairs; (6) the psychological and physiological complexity of the human species; (7) the linear progression of human history; (8) the impossibility of nonbeing or non-choice; and (9) the interrelatedness of individualism and communalism.

The second step offers a tentative definition for “humanness.” It involves metaphysical reality, that is, a state of being or existing. It involves self-consciousness, that is, the awareness of personhood. It involves a consciousness of otherness, that is, an awareness of the existence of things, persons, and beings distinct from itself. It involves an innate sense of “otherness” that is “beyond,” that is, a being or beings in contradistinction to its own kind. It strives for oneness, wholeness, or unity of being. It strives for lack of tension or antagonism between itself and otherness. It seeks after “satisfaction.”

An important epistemological foundation. A fundamental principle for inquiry into this matter of religion is *intelligibility*. This principle affirms that reasoning processes presupposed for any possible acquisition of knowledge are necessary and cannot be brought into question. This may sound like an affirmation of the “begging the question” fallacy. It is not. Rather, it is a recognition that rationality, or reasoning processes, are always present or assumed. These processes or laws of thought would include the principle of identity (e.g., consistent definitions or meanings throughout an argument), the principle of contradiction (e.g., two diametrically opposed propositions cannot both be true), and the principle of sufficient reason (e.g., a cause for every happening). If the reasoning process is brought into question, reason is always used to do so. Reason cannot be denied without the asserting of reason. A non-reason

stance is self-contradictory. Contrariwise, a reason stance is axiomatic. Every inquiry has its own assumptions, and every inquiry depends on the orderly progression of human communication and the thought processes (despite the inherent limitations and drawbacks). Too, this epistemological foundation is not meant to totally deny any role for emotions, feelings, or experience in the *religionswissenschaft* enterprise. The experiential nature of “the struggle” is extremely important. However, *intelligibility* insists on the possibility and even the necessity of reasonable and meaningful discourse about such things.

The context of “the struggle”—a personal viewpoint. A Christian theistic world view.

The attempt to identify the immense variety of man’s religious enterprises under the rubric of “the struggle” borrows from Paul, the Christian apostle, and his use of the Greek word *pselaphao* [to feel, to touch] in his speech to intellectuals in Athens, as recorded by Luke in the New Testament (Acts 17.16-34). The situation in Athens was that of many “objects of worship” (*to sebasmata*, verse 23), and Paul called the Athenians “extremely religious” (*deisidaimonesterous*, verse 22; older English translations mistakenly render “superstitious”). Paul told these philosophers about his God in the following way:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out [*pselapheseian*] for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.” [Acts 17.24-28, New International Version].

As Paul suggests, men or people of all nations “grope” for God, and he is not far from any. This is the world view of Christian theism [hereafter abbreviated CT]. It would be wrong

to portray CT as monolithic. The author only wishes in this brief excursus to speak from a *personal* Christian theistic perspective which other, but not all, Christians would share. CT, however, postulates the universality of “the struggle.” This *must* be so due to CT’s perception of “God” and “man.” About God, CT affirms: (1) the existence of a personal, ethical, and self-revealing God; and (2) the creation of the world by God, his transcendence over it, his presence in it, and his governing of it for moral ends. About mankind, CT affirms: (1) the spiritual nature, dignity, and worth of all people; and (2) the fact that sin and disorder in the world is not a divine idea, but it is a result of humanity’s initial departure from God and the historic development in such. Also, all people possess the *imago dei* or the image of God, but all people struggle to find reconciliation with their headspring (in spite of varying degrees of corruption of the *imago dei*).

CT sees the first human beings as monotheist. They worshipped a creator–father–god and offered animal sacrifice. But degeneration resulted producing henotheism, polytheism, dualism, monism, etc. Obviously, this brief generalization is inadequate and oversimplified, and it is given simply to suggest the overall tendency toward deterioration of mankind’s religious endeavors from a monotheistic norm as postulated by CT. To use an earlier image, the proper “wrap” of “things” around “the struggle” becomes unraveled due to the confusing kaleidoscopic forces of history.

The antithesis of “scientism” and Christian theism. The question needs to be raised as to whether or not CT has a role to play in the *religionswissenschaft* discipline. If by *wissenschaft* the scholar means a closed, naturalistic system which makes *a priori* judgments about the nature of reality, judgments that rule out any kind of supra-natural possibility, then CT and *religionswissenschaft* might very well conflict with one another. CT objects to science when it

becomes “scientism,” that is, when it goes beyond its limitations and uses empirically gleaned data to formulate answers to broader, metaphysically-oriented questions. Science might very well, and often does, limit the scope of answerable questions to the limits of its endeavors (e.g., reductionism). Science, however, should not rule out the possibility of broader questions with broader answers.

Neither should science attempt to extend empiricism into the metaphysical realm. Science must limit its scope to the quantitative, the stable, the predictable, the observable, and so forth. The unobservable, the unmeasurable, the unpredictable, the trans-temporal, the trans-spatial—these matters must be left to the philosophers and the theologians. So CT insists that nature, generally speaking, operates regularly, and science *must* investigate those natural processes. But CT also insists on the inadequate philosophical quality of the scientific enterprise to explicate and draw broad conclusions concerning all the conceivable phenomena of the universe. In other words, science must do its work in the context of a higher epistemology and a higher metaphysic than itself. True, *religionswissenschaft* can observe, collect, and document data about people’s religious endeavors. But *religionswissenschaft* proper cannot speak a word about reason, truth value, beauty, unconsciousness, the psyche, morality, memory, or psychological freedom. These things “transcend” the motor-like mechanism of neurology, stimulus, etc. To speak to these issues, *religionswissenschaft* must take up the role of *religionsphilosophie*.

Problems of Christian theism. Attacks on CT assert that: (1) theism can be explained on the basis of purely human ideals, wishes, longings, or needs that have been objectified; (2) theism is inconsistent with scientific method and the scientific view of reality; (3) words like

“God” do not have a clear meaning and renders them ambiguous and meaningless; (4) theism is irreconcilable with the extent and the intensity of human suffering; (5) theism is inconsistent with the worth, freedom, and full responsibility of human beings; (6) theism causes people to ignore social injustice and to oppose positive social change; and (7) many people committed to the highest human values have no personal awareness of “God.” While such objections to CT are not wholly unfounded (due often to misdirected claims or actions by proponents of CT), they are not to be accepted *in toto*. CT does not attempt to solve all the puzzles and riddles of the universe. It does, though, affirm trust in God. Obviously, this affirmation of faith raises problems, and such must be so necessarily. But rejection of theism also raises problems. Neither position receives immunity from problems.

Rejection of anti-theistic systems. Freudian psychoanalysis views religion as a cultural phenomenon, psychologically determined, with a strong father–son complex. Religion is both illusory and dangerous. It aligns itself with evil human institutions; it discourages critical thought; it deprives humans of self-reliance and personal development; it hinders morality. As a system of viewing the cosmos, CT rejects Freudian psychoanalysis and its view of religion.

Marxist thought views religion as the false exteriorization of people’s dreams and hopes. The ruling classes have used religion to control the working class or the poor. And due to this false reliance on “God,” belief denies to humans the proper development of an existence that is both responsible and free. Rather than adherence to religious systems, people should be concerned about their own satisfaction and betterment. CT also rejects Marxist thought and its ideas about religion.

Scientific humanism views mankind as the measure of all things. Scientific humanism can be considered a “belief” or “religion” in itself that is concerned with material things and life on earth, rather than spiritual things, supernatural beings, or another (i.e., heavenly) world. Its goal is to unfold all the capacities of men and women for their welfare, happiness, and material fulfillment. There is no need, consequently, for the supernatural or the transcendent. The universe is “closed.” As a world view, CT rejects scientific humanism.

These brief surveys (and other examples could be given) might be labeled crude and superficial. But they serve to show the critical antithesis between CT and the systematic world views of other approaches to religion.

The value of *religionswissenschaft* for Christian theism. When psychology, anthropology, sociology, or phenomenology speak metaphysically and in all-encompassing fashion, CT must object. This is not to preclude, however, the possibility of CT deriving benefit from these disciplines. Much that is good and valuable has been and will be achieved by these sciences. Such can aid the theistic enterprise, but only as tempered by a world view that does not deny its (CT’s) basic, inherent character.