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What is Religion?

The word 'religion' comes from the Latin *religio*, but it has changed its meaning over the centuries. To the ancient Romans *religio* chiefly meant fear of the preternatural; in the Middle Ages it meant the consecrated life of nuns, monks and friars. In More's *Utopia*, however, published in 1516, it is used in its modern sense. Utopus, the ruler who gave Utopia its name, was able to conquer the country because the inhabitants were 'fighting assiduously among themselves about religions' ('*de religionibus inter se assidue dimicasse*', *Utopia*, Book 2, chapter *De religionibus,* p. 264). It was perhaps when wars afflicted Europe at the time of the emergence of nation-states that *religio* was pressed into service to say what some of the fighting was about. Today in the West the word 'religion' is in constant use. People think that what they mean when they write it or utter it is clear and unproblematic: it signifies an easily recognised natural phenomenon, like mosquitoes or sleep. Anthropologists assume that every society in the past had a religion, and writers for the general public speculate on why that is and whether it will be the same in the future. Surveys show that many people in Western countries now say they have no religion. Could religion disappear from world altogether? Might it be just a passing phase in the history of mankind?

Is it really so clear, however, what today we mean by 'religion'? In the last century a number of attempts were made to define it. William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902, p. 31) said it is 'the

feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude'. Karen Armstrong perhaps shows the influence of James in *Fields of Blood* (p. 2): 'In the West we see "religion" as a coherent system of obligatory beliefs, institutions and rituals, centring on a supernatural God, *whose practice is essentially private* [my italics].'

James' suggestion is astonishing. It is as social beings, not as solitary living organisms, that people think, feel and act as Christians, Jews, Muslims, and adherents to other recognised religions. Rousseau's 'religion of man', that is, of man, in general, is as mythical as the pre-social human beings whose religion he supposed it to be. If we fail to see the essentially social character of religion, we shall never understand why it is so important to people and so divisive.

Bertrand Russell in *What I Believe* (1925, p. 5) said God and immortality are 'the central doctrines of the Christian religion', and continued, 'It cannot be said that either doctrine is essential to religion. . . . But we in the West have come to think of them as the irreducible minimum of theology.' Although he himself disavowed religion, Julian Huxley in 1927 wrote a book entitled *Religion without Revelation* and defined religion as 'the reaction of the personality as a whole to its experience of the Universe as a whole'(p. 137). Stephen Clark in a recent article, 'Atheism Considered as a Christian Sect' (2015, pp. 277-303), argued that atheistic humanism with its commitment to truth, reason and human perfectibility is so much the product of European Christian culture that it is not just a religion but a Christian sect.

Russell was on the right scent. By 'religion' 'we in the West' actually mean Christianity, and anything that sufficiently resembles it for us to slap the same label onto it. That, in effect, is what William P. Alston says about the word in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (1967). Until recently Christianity was very much a reality for the West. In some countries, including England, it was established by law; in all it was taught to children and children were regularly forced to say prayers and herded into churches. It is our paradigm for a religion. It has a number of salient features. It is highly social both in organisation and in practice. Christians belong to churches, denominations, parishes, congregations, and these associations have bishops, priests, pastors and similar officers. There are communal prayers, processions and other rites, and special buildings, cathedrals, parish churches and chapels, where these rites are celebrated. There is a sacred book, the Bible. There are prophets, reformers and other notable introducers of new ideas and practices. There are beliefs concerning a personal God and life after death which provide a rationale for Christian practices; and their beliefs

and practices are deeply important to Christians. Most of these features are easily discernible in Jewish life as known from the Bible and in Classical Greece and Rome. So, we say that the ancient Jews, Greeks and Romans all had religions.

This concept of religion which so perfectly fits Christianity is comparatively recent. The ancient Greeks had no word to express it. They had a word for worship, *thrêskeia*, but worship was not connected with belief. Devotion to the Olympian gods carried with it neither theoretical beliefs about the universe nor practical principles about how people should behave. The ancient Jews noticed that other societies worshipped different gods, but they did not think of their own adherence to the God of Abraham as a matter of religion but rather of race. They distinguished themselves from other nations, and classified differences in worship between themselves and the Greeks as ethnic. As a nation they had their distinctive laws and customs, but had no concept to enable them to separate their religious customs from their non-religious. The recent change in translating the Bible from using 'nations' or 'peoples' to using 'pagans' for the Greek *ethnê* is misleading. The word 'pagan', which originally signified a country-dweller or rustic, acquired its current religious meaning only after Christianity had spread through the Mediterranean world; a word was then wanted to distinguish Jews and Christians, who were mostly found in towns, from everyone else. There was still no word meaning exactly what we mean by 'religion' in the Middle Ages. Aquinas, writing in 1267-72, discusses various ways of understanding *religio* in *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*) (2a 2ae, Q. 81) and favours identifying it with a disposition to give due worship to God; but in Question 186 he narrows it to life in vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Everyone was conscious of the division between Christian and Muslims, but it was thought of as chiefly ethnic; Muslims spoke of Christians as Greeks, Romans and Franks, though Christians also spoke of differences in faith. William Caxton at the end of his 1470 translation of Voragine's *The Golden Legend* speaks of 'articles of faith' but the Thirty-nine Articles of the 1571 are 'articles of religion'.

We Westerners think beliefs an important part of religion. We show that today by using the word 'faith' instead of 'religion'; we talk of 'faith schools' or call Hinduism a 'faith'. The word 'faith', today at least, suggests a particular kind of belief, belief which is held tenaciously and without good reason. Beliefs are indeed important to Christians, who formulate them in creeds, but creeds do not exist outside Christianity, and what we call 'beliefs' play little part in the conscious thinking of non-European civilisations. Our distinction between beliefs and desires corresponds

to the grammatical differences in reported speech – I believe that you *are* seated, desire that you *should be* – which do not exist in many non-European languages.

Our concept of a belief, I have argued in 'Is the Concept of the Mind Parochial?', is a legacy from the philosophers of ancient Greece. We have inherited from them the idea that being rational is a matter of having reasons for your behaviour, and a reason is something that can be formulated in words as a belief. We are reluctant to say that only educated Westerners are rational, so we attribute to sane adults in all societies, including the most primitive, beliefs that would rationalise the customs they follow. Émile Durkheim bases his definition of religion on this assumption. He says in *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (p. 36):

> Religious phenomena are naturally arranged in two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites. The first are states of opinion, and consist in representations; the second are determined modes of action. . . . The rites can be defined . . . only by the special nature of their objects. . . . It is in the beliefs that the special nature of this object is expressed. It is possible to define the rite only after we have defined the belief.

It is unrealistic to suppose that these 'beliefs' are always consciously held. A scholar would be puzzled to say what religious beliefs were generally held by the Classical Greeks or Romans, and spokesmen for what we count as non-Christian religions, including Judaism, often deny that what we call 'beliefs' play an important role in them. The general beliefs that rationalise people's customs are held by them not as solitary individuals but as social beings, and whether they are held consciously and formulated depends on the history of their society.

Christian beliefs divide into two varieties. There are doctrinal or dogmatic beliefs like the belief that the universe depends on the Jewish God, and that Jesus returned to life from death. What makes these beliefs religious is not that they lack justification – many beliefs are unjustified without being religious. Nor are they religious because they concern non-physical entities: pure mathematics is about non-physical things, but the belief that every even number above two is the sum of two primes is not religious. They are religious because the rites and practices for which they provide a rationale are paradigmatically religious. In themselves, however, they are theoretical and aspire to objective truth.

Second, Christian principles of conduct are counted as beliefs. That is because they can be formulated in sentences the surface grammar of which is indicative, sentences like 'Abortion is wrong' and 'Generosity to the poor is good'. Some philosophers hold that these sentences are more like counsels and commands than statements which are true or false. Certainly, orders and prohibitions and advice for or against a course of action cannot be true or false; it does not follow, however, that they cannot be right or wrong and, in general, we think customs and practical principles actually are right or wrong, good or bad. To mark the difference, however, between doctrinal beliefs and practical principles or convictions, people today often call the latter not 'beliefs' but 'values'. The word is confusing, because they are not the sort of values provided by professional valuers, but the thought is that those who say that something is good think it valuable, and those who say something is bad value avoiding it or preventing it. Christians regard beliefs of both kinds, dogmatic and practical or moral, as essential to Christianity. Not necessarily, however, quite the same beliefs. Different Christian denominations have slightly different beliefs. That is why they are sometimes called different 'religions'.

Christian beliefs of both kinds are indeed essential to Christian culture, and Christian culture is our paradigm for a religious culture; but, if not every culture is religious, what is distinctive of Christian beliefs apart from their being held by followers of Jesus of Nazareth?

Crane in *The Meaning of Belief* starts by saying that 'religious belief' (p. 35) or the 'religious world-view' (p. x), besides being essentially social, essentially involves a 'sense of the transcendent'. The Judaeo-Christian God is transcendent in that he is not part of the spatio-temporal world of which he is the source. This idea of transcendence, however, is no more universal than the modern idea of the supernatural, which depends on a modern idea of what is natural. Crane's idea of transcendence seems limited to Jews, Christians and Muslims. To obtain a definition of religion which will justify his claim on p. 2 that 80 per cent of the world's inhabitants are religious believers, he has to invoke Durkheim's conception of the sacred and the profane (pp. 106-17). In *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, we read:

> The first criterium [sic] of religious beliefs . . . is that they always suppose a bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes, which embrace all that exists but which mutually exclude each other [p. 40].

> [The distinction] is very particular: *it is absolute*. In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another [p. 38].

Durkheim takes his idea of the profane from the prohibitions (sometimes called 'taboos') which are the means of regulating many primitive societies that have no positive rules or rule-enforcement. They do not, however, establish a permanent division of all that exists. Prohibitions of foods are often restricted to seasons, and others can be lifted if there is good reason, as Herman Melville found in Taipivai. Durkheim was a prisoner to the idea that to say what a word means you must specify something common to all the things to which it applies.

What we consider the religious beliefs and practices of Christians are those which were taken from the Jews. The first followers of Christ were Jews who came to form a sub-society within the larger Jewish society. At the time of Christ, the Jews did not have a sovereign state of their own; Palestine was part of the Roman Empire and, besides having a Roman governor, it was ruled by client kings. Nevertheless, the Jews had their own internal autonomy; they were ruled, as they had been since the Babylonian captivity, by a hereditary priesthood and they had their own laws, derived from Mosaic law, and their own courts in which those laws were applied. They were themselves a society within larger societies. Christ's disciples formed a sub-society within that. At first, they lived entirely by Jewish law; but to accommodate the increasing numbers of non-Jewish Christians, they relaxed some of its provisions, and, in particular, the rule that males must be circumcised. In Genesis 17:10-14 God states his covenant with Abraham and his successors as follows (I use the Authorised Version translation):

> This is my covenant which ye shall keep. Between me and you and thy seed after thee: every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money must needs be circumcised; and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.

This covenant, which supposedly antedates the Egyptian captivity and the covenant in Exodus, could hardly be more explicit, so it is not surprising that abrogating the rule produced the tensions with non-Christian Jews recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul. In the end the Christian society, comprising both Jews and non-Jews, was expelled from the larger Jewish society. It then came to be a new sub-society in the larger society of the Roman Empire.

What Russell identified as the paradigms for a dogmatic religious belief, the beliefs that the natural order depends on a person outside it and that there is a life after death, are beliefs about the world taken from the Jews. The Jews alone in the first century believed in a personal transcendent creator, and, although some Jews, we are told by Josephus, did not believe in a life after death, others, the Pharisees, did, and it was from them that Christ's followers were chiefly drawn. The Christians also retained Jewish practical beliefs and rules about life, death and sex. These conflicted with customs sanctioned by law in the Roman Empire as a whole, abortion, infanticide, uxoricide, suicide, divorce and so on; and these Jewish rules today are classed as religious. So, Christianity appeared as a sub-society for life, not essentially confined to one nation or race, existing within a larger society, and holding which had practices and beliefs at variance with those prevalent in the larger society.

Will that do as a definition of a religion? Anything that satisfies it will certainly threaten the smooth running of the larger society. The concept of a threatening sub-society must have existed before the advent of Christianity, and Jews were considered threatening, but as an awkward ethnic minority, a recalcitrant nation within the Empire. Christians were of different ethnicities, so they could not be conceived as a nation, but, when they were persecuted it was as a sub-society with a culture hostile to that of the empire, addicted to secretive unlicensed assemblies. Their hostility to the culture of the empire was shown by their refusal to join in practices by which ordinary citizens showed their attachment to it; the point that these practices were religious was not recognised by officials like Pliny (who wrote to Trajan about them, *Letters*, 10.96-97) because officials did not have the concept of religion. After the Empire became Christian, moreover, the modern notion of a religion disappeared from Europe until Europe was divided by the Reformation on non-ethnic lines. Even since then there has been difficulty in grasping religious differences as independent of ethnic, and people have tried to attribute them to cultural differences between northern and southern or eastern and western races.

Those in the West today who say that they have no religion, mean that they do not attend any Christian church or any mosque or synagogue or comparable building. These buildings belong to sub-societies, and the self-styled non-religious do not feel that they belong to any such sub-society. They do, however, belong to the whole society of which they are citizens, and as social beings they have a culture. They have concepts of day and night, light and dark, the seasons and other things of practical significance, the social roles and the skills that the society recognises, and the plants, animals and weather conditions on which it depends. These concepts appear in 'beliefs', as we should call them, about what is the case that are bound up with their customs and practical 'values'. They share a set of beliefs about the world and its contents, and a set of practices and practical ideas of what is good and bad, right and wrong. Not being the culture of a religious sub-society, theirs may be called, a 'secular' culture. The word, however, has become slippery through the emergence of people who describe themselves as 'secularists', so I shall linger briefly on its history.

It is taken from the Latin word *saeculum*, which perhaps started by signifying a race or breed, but came to mean a human life-span, an epoch or a period of time, in particular a century. In the mediaeval West it was used to distinguish the present temporal order and its affairs from the non-temporal existence of God and those who survive death, what we now call the 'transcendent'. A distinction was made between the 'secular' clergy, who were all male and lived 'in the world', engaged in running dioceses, parishes or schools or in work now appropriated to civil servants, and the 'religious', who included women, and who lived not 'in the world' but in communities governed by special rules and who devoted themselves, supposedly, to the transcendent. The division was between two kinds of church person, not between church people and the laity, and 'secularization' meant release from vows to live by 'religious' rules.

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* dates the word 'secularism' to 1848 and says it means: 'The doctrine that morals should be based only on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or a future state.' A wide range of further definitions is offered by Andrew Copson in *Secularism*. These show it is now conceived not as an ethical but a political theory about the best relationship between the state and religious bodies. Some people who accept that political theory are also churchgoers, and some who describe themselves as non-religious have no political theory but simply share the culture of the sovereign state in which they live.

Although it is not part of a secular culture to go to a synagogue, church, or mosque, all human beings need social activities, and in Chapter 12 I shall indicate some ways in which people with a secular culture satisfy that need. There is not much difference between religious and secular cultures, which is why the concept of religion, even today, is peculiar to the West. The concept which any society needs is that of a sub-society, the culture of which is at variance with its own.

In every human being there occur tensions between the egoistic, the social and the altruistic parts of human nature. Not everything that is good for us as individuals is permitted by society, nor is everything that is good for those for whom we feel concern. These tensions threaten our unity as rational agents, and it is part of being a mature rational agent to handle them, to bring them under control, and to judge what it is best for us to do, all things considered. Everyone, however, needs a culture in order to function as a rational agent. If you belong to a sub-society with a culture that conflicts with that of the whole, or even, to a lesser extent, that of another sub-society, your unity as a social being is under threat. The good practical judgement we need to prevent conflict between self-interest, social duty and altruistic concern from disrupting our unity as individuals is what Aristotle called *phronêsis* and medieval philosophers *prudentia*. Good political judgement is required in rulers to prevent conflicts between one sub-society and another, or between any sub-society and the state as a whole, from disrupting the unity of the whole state. However, the two kinds of judgement are not quite analogous. It is natural for us to have the three aims in our practical lives, and, though they sometimes conflict, they are not just reconcilable but mutually complementary; human beings need all three. There are rational considerations, then, to help us to bring them into harmony. It is not natural to belong to a multicultural society or to have your unity as a social being torn apart. That is as tragic a predicament as being caught between the demands of society and the needs of a person you love, but even harder to resolve. Ordinary practical judgement is ill equipped to deal with it, and there are no considerations of complementarity to help you. Political judgement (if you have it) has no concern with the fragmentation of an individual's social nature. Besides, our political leaders are of the same species as the rest of us, and in a modern democracy some may themselves belong to a sub-society with a culture different from that of the whole.

Here we see the weakness of the modern ideal of multiculturalism. Rulers are responsible for the unity of their societies and the happiness of the people in them. Both are threatened by a sub-society with a

culture that conflicts with the culture of the whole society – either its actual culture or the culture its rulers wish it to adopt. The threat appears when a sub-society becomes conspicuous, and disappears only if either its culture becomes the culture of the whole society or else the sub-society ceases to exist or to be conspicuous. Christians were persecuted when they became a conspicuous sub-society but their culture ended by becoming that of the whole Roman Empire.

The West is now filled with sub-societies. This is a result of easy travel, the internet and globalisation. In Western nation-states there are plenty of people who want to get rid of them. The rulers, instructed by history, shrink from violence. They hope that their own culture will become the culture of all citizens, and talk, on the one hand, of pluralism, on the other, of 'liberal values' or, in the United Kingdom, of 'British values'.

In *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (2007), Bernard Williams enquires how far a multicultural society is a genuine possibility, and how far those advocating it really wish their own culture to be that of everyone. He observes (p. 131): 'There must, on any showing, be limits to the extent to which the liberal state can be disengaged on matters of ethical disagreement. There are some questions, such as that of abortion, on which the state will fail to be neutral whatever it does.' Other matters like euthanasia, sex and the education of children are in the same state. Perhaps, however, people will cease to care: 'The convictions that people previously deeply held, on matters of religion or sexual behaviour or the significance of cultural experience [may] dwindle into private tastes.' Perhaps (p. 133) the best hope for toleration may lie in 'modernity itself, . . . and in its principal creation, international commercial society. Despite unnerving outbreaks of fanaticism in many different directions, it is still possible to think that the structure of this international order will encourage scepticism about religious and other claims to exclusivity.'

Does he mean that, since we all wear the same clothes, drive the same cars, fly in the same aeroplanes, and use the same electronic devices, we may settle for a unified culture of consumerism, whatever that may be? His actual conclusion (p.134) is inconclusive:

> It may be that liberal societies can preserve, in an atmosphere of toleration, a variety of strong convictions on important matters. Only the future can show whether that is so. . . . Perhaps toleration will prove to have been an interim value, serving a period between a past when no one had heard of it and a future in which no one will need it.

A past, one might say, like before anyone had heard of Christianity, and a future like when it had become the religion of the Roman Empire. Williams does not use this example, but it is hard to doubt that he himself would like to see a society, to borrow a phrase from him, 'asymmetrically skewed in the liberal direction'.

That completes what I have to say about society and religion, generally. I want to pass to Christianity and consider how our nature as social beings bears on its beliefs. However, since, as I said, we are told that religion is a matter of faith, and since Christians not only accept this but regard faith not as a weakness but as a virtue, I shall first consider what the Christian virtue of faith is.