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Part 1 What is religion?

Three Positions

What is religion, and does it have any legitimacy? There are many different answers to each of these questions, but ultimately any given answer to either question embodies one of three attitudes:

- 1 One of uncritical acceptance, such as we would presumably find among people living 3,500 years ago;
- 2 One of rejection, such as we would find in someone, such as Freud, whose career involved examining religion, and therefore making an object out of it, as opposed to *having* religion; or
- 3 One of critical and reflective acceptance, such as we find in William James, Rudolph Otto, and Mircea Eliade, these being scholars who took it upon themselves to supplement critical scientific rationalism, such as we find in Freud, with firsthand knowledge of the experiences involved in being religious.

In the present work, the views of James, Otto, and Eliade will be stated, compared, contrasted, and evaluated. It will be found that they have much the same view as to the emotional basis of religion and also as to its psychological function. In their view, the essence of religious sentiment is that this world is not all that there is and, moreover, that one cannot *fail* to have this view while retaining psychological health. Each of these authors acknowledges that there exist psychologically healthy, self-identified agnostics and atheists; but they also hold that such individuals, whether they know it or not, hold some variant of the view just described. They also hold that

when people genuinely do not have this view, they succumb to various different forms of psychological morbidity.

It must be stated at the outset that, when these authors refer to “religion”, they are typically referring to its subjective, emotional side, not to its objective, institutional side. At the same time, none of these authors is referring to the mindset of someone who, in the 21st century, describes himself as “spiritual.” For reasons to be discussed, the person who self-describes as “spiritual” is in much the same category as a self-described atheist. 21st Century ‘spiritualism’, so these authors would say, is just another manifestation of contemporary nihilism and is therefore not an expression of the *actual* spiritualism that these authors have in mind but of its absence.

Let us start by describing the previously mentioned attitudes of uncritical acceptance, rejection, and critical acceptance.

Uncritical acceptance

Someone is genuinely uncritically accepting of religion if they don’t even know of the possibility of not accepting it. It is not possible for a member of any contemporary society to have this attitude. So-called “fundamentalists” are not uncritically accepting of religion. A contemporary Christian or Moslem fundamentalist *chooses* to be a fundamentalist. He lives in a society of non-fundamentalists; he has access to books, newspapers, and websites that represent views antithetical to his own. The contemporary fundamentalist is *reacting* to non-religious views and to religious but non-fundamentalists views. By contrast, the spiritualism of the stone age tribesman is not a reaction, that is to say, it is not a defense against some other view.

Moreover, the tribesman’s views do not represent mere credulity or acquiescence to some set of social norms. In believing that some bolt of lightning represents the wrath of a higher being, he isn’t acquiescing to social norms or to a charismatic leader. He believes it because *it is how he naturally sees the world*, not

because he has been taught that this is how he *should* see the world. The contemporary fundamentalist is in a very different category: his beliefs are the result of a long process of acculturation, usually accompanied by considerable internal struggle.

Rejection

There are two very different forms of religious rejectionism: the authentic kind and the inauthentic kind. An example of the authentic kind is someone, e.g. Freud, who genuinely has a rationalistic world view and, on that basis, simply doesn't accept a religious world view.

An example of the inauthentic kind is anyone whose rejectionism is simply a way of fitting in or moving ahead. People often join atheist groups because they want to fit in with others or because they believe membership in such a group to be a source of prestige. This form of rejectionism is presumably a historical *consequence* of the work of authentic rejectionists—as in, the latter changed our worldview in such a way as to make a non-religious view be socially normal—but the mentality involved is much closer that involved in religious fundamentalism than it is to that involved in authentic, rationalism-based rejectionism.

In most cases, today's atheist or secular humanist is simply following the herd, just as the true-believer was one thousand years ago, and his views are likely to be equally dogmatic. So even if *what* the contemporary atheist believes is more reasonable than what a medieval peasant believes, his reasons for believing it may well be equally emotional and equally spurious. Indeed, the brain-centers that mediate 'militant' atheism are identical with those that mediate religious fundamentalism.

Critical acceptance

There are two ways to be reflective about religion: reductively and non-reductively. Freud was reductively reflective about religion. In his view, God represents the father, and religion exists to mediate various biological and social

functions (e.g. preventing incest, directing aggression towards appropriate targets, and inculcating superego). William James was non-reductively rational about religion. He didn't deny that religions served (or used to serve) various social functions. Nor did he deny that religion was amenable to eliminative explanations of the kind that Freud would later provide. His position is not so much that those positions are wrong as it is that they are incomplete. There are indeed reductionist truths about religion, James grants, but there are also non-reductionist truths; and, so he claims, it is truths of the non-reductionist kind that the very essence of religion lies.

It is important to note that there are, or at least could be, both reductive *and* non-reductive truths about religion. James himself makes this point. Religion is a psychological phenomenon and can be examined as such. It can be said why people are religious, just as it can be said why people do science. It could well be that Newton poured himself into his scientific researches as a way of fleeing from painful childhood memories, and it might well be that Martin Luther's religious fervor is to be explained in much the same way. But, as James himself says, the psychological backstory is not always the whole story. Scientific positions must be understood on their own terms, and it is at least possible that the same is true of religious positions. Consequently, even if everything Freud says about religion is correct—even if God is simply a personification of superego and even if 'holy injunctions' are mere defenses against incestuous urges---it doesn't follow that religion is *nothing other* than a giant neurosis. Supposing that Smith becomes a medical researcher because he suffers from terrible asthma, it doesn't follow that his researches are *nothing but* expressions of asthma-related distress. Similarly, supposing that Martin Luther turned to God because his own father abandoned him as a child, it doesn't follow that his subsequent religious activity is *nothing but* an expression of anguish over not having had a father.

Of course, it will be said that, whereas science has both subjective and objective sides, religion is *pure* subjectivity, there being nothing real corresponding to the various psychological phenomena involved in it. But, of course, this is precisely what James, Otto, and Eliade question, and it is to their work that we now turn.

In what follows, we will use the term ‘perceptible world’ to refer to the world *qua* entity that can be known through our senses and through scientific examination of the data thereby made available to us. It must be borne in mind that, in this context, ‘perceptible’ means ‘knowable either through our senses or through rational inference from what our senses disclose to us.’

Part 2 James’ position Religion vs. Science

According to James, the essence of religion is that the perceptible world is not the whole world, since an ‘invisible order’ suffuses and undergirds the perceptible world, giving it meaning and moral structure:

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.^[1]

This quotation explained: According to the scientific rationalist, the world is just a machine, consisting of so many parts governed by so many mechanisms, and is

to be understood in much the same way as a machine. According to religion, says James, this is *not* the case, since the world known to us through our science is not *all* there is, the reason being there *also* exists an ‘invisible order’ that suffuses the perceptible. Moreover, this invisible order gives the world meaning and it gives individual human beings a purpose. A given person’s life is meaningful to the extent that he is on the right side of this ‘invisible order’ and meaningless to the extent that he is on the wrong side of it.

Religion as Psychologically Necessary

Notice that, in this particular quotation, James is expressing a value-judgment; he is just saying what, in his view, the essence of religion is. But it is the very purpose of this work of James to express a value-judgment about this conceit: and that judgment is that *even if it is false, we benefit from believing it to be true*. James’ argument is that, even if God does not in fact exist, belief in God gives one a certain measure of God-like strength. In a word—believing it makes it real:

We can act AS IF there were a God; feel AS IF we were free; consider Nature AS IF she were full of special designs; lay plans AS IF we were to be immortal; and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life. Our faith THAT these unintelligible objects actually exist proves thus to be a full equivalent in *praktischer Hinsicht*, as Kant calls it, or from the point of view of our action, for a knowledge of WHAT they might be, in case we were permitted positively to conceive them. So we have the strange phenomenon, as Kant