A Theory of Religion

What is a religion? As Socrates might have asked: What feature do all and only religions share in virtue of which they are religions? This question may seem misguided. Confronted with the diversity of behaviour called "religious," we may easily doubt the existence of a single feature that explains the religiousity of every religion. To use Wittgenstein's term, there may only be a "family resemblance" between religions, a network of features generally shared, most of which belong to each religion, no one of which belongs to every religion. Efforts to produce the single defining feature tend to strengthen the doubt that one exists. Is a religion an attempt to approach God or appropriate the sacred? Then Theravada Buddhism is not a religion, for God and the sacred are irrelevancies in this tradition. Is a religion a practice that expresses and advances the ultimate concern of a large number of people? Then the stockmarket is a religion and so is the drug trade. Such accounts are typically too narrow or too general, unless they are circular. Perhaps religion has no essence.

In what follows, I will define the single feature that makes all religions religions; that is, I will formulate a <u>theory of religion</u>. My thesis is that religion, for all its apparent diversity, constitutes

a unique kind of human behaviour with its own underlying nature- which this theory reveals. My motto: Where legislation was, let research be. The Wittgensteinian, faced with a borderline case (e.g.,secular humanism or Confucianism), can simply stipulate whether or not it is a religion. Where there can be no standard, there is no possibility of getting things wrong. On my account there is always a fact of the matter, and the theory provides a criterion which guides our investigation toward that fact. Science often begins when we first know what we are talking about: discovering the nature of the thing we study is a boon to systematic research. In short, this theory is meant to be part of science and to help establish the study of religion as a special science.

I

The feature of religions that provides the basis for the theory I will present is this: a religion can be practiced. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism each involve a set of activities that, when done in the right way for the right reasons, constitute the practice of that religion. This suggests that for every religion, there is a system of practices that comprises the religion. A religion is a kind of system of practices. But plainly this is insufficient.

Medicine is a system of activities performed regularly by doctors, but medicine is not a religion.

What differentiates practices that constitute a religion from practices that do not? What makes a system of practices religious? Part of the answer is the way the system of practices is rationalized. A religion must be rationalized by beliefs that articulate an account of the universe (or an account of the reality that underlies the universe) according to which there is the possibility of fit. That is, the beliefs that rationalize the system of practices entail that there is a relation in which a person can but needn't stand to the rest of what is, which is fundamentally appropriate to the way things are (or to the way the reality that underlies the universe is), such that standing in this relation is, in and of itself, the greatest human good. That relation is fit: with some misgiving I offer harmony as a guiding metaphor. So, "fit" denotes any relation satisfying three conditions: 1) a human creature is one term and the universe (or the reality that underlies the universe) is the other, 2) the relation can obtain but it needn't, and 3) standing in this relation to the universe is, in and of itself, the greatest human good. For convenience, we may call a collection of beliefs that states an account of fit a religious

world view.

I maintain that a system of practices is a religion only when it is rationalized by a collection of beliefs that entails the possibility of fit. But this account is still incomplete, for it fails to specify the way in which the set of beliefs rationalizes the practices. What is the relation between practices and fit which makes performance rational according to the religious world view? I submit that the relation between practice and fit cannot be merely productive if the system of practices is to be a religion: the whole purpose of performing the practices cannot be to produce fit in the way that labor added to leather makes shoes, or dieting results in weight loss. If the practices are chiefly a method or technique for producing fit, they are not a religion. Rather, a system of practices is a religion only when it is rationalized by beliefs according to which the performance of these practices (because one accepts the beliefs) is part of what constitutes fit: to perform the practices because one accepts the world view is to assume significantly the appropriate relationship to what is real.

An analogy may clarify the relationship between religious practice and fit I have in mind. Suppose that friendship is a symmetrical relation, so that I

am someone's friend only if she is friends with me. Visiting my sick friend in the hospital to cheer her up isn't merely a technique for producing deeper friendship (though it certainly may produce a deeper friendship), but part of what it <u>is</u> to be her friend. To behave in this way for this reason toward someone who likes me is to assume significantly the relationship of friendship to this person: it is part of what constitutes being a friend. (Contrast a "friendship pill" which I slip into her tea.) Note that I might stand in the relation of friendship and never visit my friend when she is sick, because she is never sick or because of my phobia for hospitals. This behaviour isn't <u>essential</u> to friendship. Further, friendship is something more than this particular behaviour; the behaviour is only part of what constitutes friendship. Nor is friendship reducible to the set of behaviours I do from affection for my friend. I could do them all and fail to stand in the relation of friendship if she doesn't reciprocate; and even the same reciprocal behaviour is compatible with different degrees of friendship, which depend in part on depth of affection- often a matter of luck, natural proclivity, or grace.

Similarly, the taking of the Mass may produce a deeper relationship with God, but it would be a

mistake to call the Mass a method or technique for getting closer to God. For to participate in the Mass (for the right reasons) is already to stand significantly in the appropriate relation to God. At the same time, the taking of the Mass may not be essential for fit: we might allow that a man on a desert island who finds a copy of the Gospels might be saved simply by his love of Christ. Fit is something more than the taking of the Mass. Nor is fit reducible to the whole set of behaviours we do because we accept a Christian religious world view, for there may be degrees of fit that are attainable only by God's grace. The force of the claim that a practice is part of what constitutes fit is that to perform the practice is to enter significantly into the appropriate relation. One can enter into a relation significantly but not completely; like friendship, fit can be a matter of degree. Hence the performance of a practice that constitutes fit need not ensure that one has completely attained the relation which is the highest good. What matters is that in performing the practice one ipso facto participates in the relation that is the summum bonum: the practice is not merely instrumental to the attainment of fit.

The theory of religion, then, is this: A religion is a system of practices that is rationalized by

beliefs according to which the performance of the practices constitutes fit. The practices may be celebratory or commemorative, they may be productive of good harvests, eternal life, even deeper degrees of fit; but if they are a religion, they must also constitute fit according to the religious world view. The word "religion" is derived from the Latin "religare" which means "to bind together": a religion binds together the believer and that which is most real, through practices the very performance of which is to assume the relation that is taken to be the chief human good. This is the feature that all and only religions share which makes them religions.

This theory explains why religion is nearly as ubiquitous as human culture and why religion is attractive even to those who are not afraid of death or particularly hungry for security. People generally want to know the point of their existence and where they stand in the scheme of things. The capacity for metaphysical yearning is perhaps the most human attribute of our species. A religion explicates a metaphysical connection that (it maintains) is the main point of human existence, and it enables the believer to enter into that relation through the performance of constitutive practice. Certainly a religion is a response to all sorts of human and

social needs, but if a religion doesn't do this much, it isn't a religion. Our theory, therefore, explains why so many people care to be religious.

II

The theory helps generate a useful taxonomy of practices and theories closely related to but substantially different from religions. Some examples: 1. A system of practices is a religion only when the performance of the practices constitutes fit. This feature of the theory enables us to make clearly an important and intuitive distinction. A system of exercises rationalized by beliefs according to which the exercises are merely productive of fit (in much the way that dieting and exercise produce but do not constitute weight loss) is a spiritual path, not a religion.[1] A program of austerity, breath control, mental exercises, and physical postures that are merely instrumental to the attainment of "moksha" (or liberation) is an example of a spiritual path. Here the practices are primarily a spiritual methodology: Vivekenanda entitled a book Yoga: The Science of God Realization. Breathing exercises in no way constitute God realization; they are merely a technique for producing fit. By contrast, the reading of the Torah on the Sabbath isn't a method or a technique for

producing the appropriate relation to God. Performing this practice is to participate in the right relationship; the practice is part of what constitutes holiness in Judaism.[2] Judaism and Yoga are both rationalized by religious world views, but Judaism is a religion and Yoga is a spiritual path.

2. A theory of the good is an account of what constitutes the greatest good for human beings. As I mean it, "the greatest human good" needn't be the only intrinsic good. Rather, the summum bonum is the intrinsic good such that any life which attains it is well worth living and any life without it is seriously defective. In addition, the greatest good is often viewed as the ground in which other intrinsic goods are meaningful and truly satisfying. Every religious world view includes a theory of the good: the summum bonum is identified with fit. But the converse doesn't hold. Indeed, there are theories of the good that are logically incompatible with every religion. For instance, Hedonism, which identifies the sole intrinsic human good with pleasure, excludes every religious world view. Pleasure is a state of an organism, not a relation that obtains between an organism and that which is most real (contrast holiness). Consequently, if pleasure is the summum

bonum, no relation between a human creature and the universe is, in and of itself, the supreme good; hence all religious world views are false and all religions misguided.

Of course, pleasure can be a by-product of fit, as it is of virtue. Holiness, for instance, can be pleasant. But all religious traditions that identify holiness with fit agree that holiness is incommensurably more valuable than any quantity of pleasure which accompanies it. Indeed, an extreme degree of holiness can be quite unpleasant, a torment verging on madness- recall what Jesus and Ramakrishna went through- but a Christian or a Hindu who allows that there have been more pleasant lives would still judge the unpleasant holy life as having incommensurably greater intrinsic worth. Fit is valuable because it is the fundamentally appropriate relation between a human being and the rest of the universe (or the reality that underlies the universe), not because it is pleasant; and though religious traditions often tout the pleasure of fit, the nature of fit is that it would not be rational to shift to bowling if that turned out to be more enjoyable. An analogy to altruism may be helpful: Holiness, like altruism, requires that we act for the sake of something other than our own enjoyment; and the

devotion to something other than our own enjoyment is part of what is pleasant in both cases.

3. A philosophy of life, roughly, tells us what matters in human life and how to get it. A philosophy of life is essentially practical: it tells us what to do to get what matters. By contrast, a theory of the good can leave us largely in the dark about how to live. The theory that the pleasant life is the best life does not yet tell us what to do to have a pleasant life. We can say, tentatively, that a philosophy of life is a theory of the good conjoined with practical recommendations for attaining that good.[3] Hedonism conjoined with Epicurus'counsel that the most pleasant life is devoted to study and contemplation is a philosophy of life. But note too that it is counter-intuitive to cast religions and spiritual paths as philosophies of life. The view that what matters most is to participate in the life of the risen Christ by taking the mass, saying the rosary, and so on, or the view that the supreme good is God realization, which is accomplished by a program of mantra chanting, breath control, and fasting, both seem inappropriate candidates for philosophies of life. Here we think of philosophy as an alternative to religion. We can best capture these intuitions as

follows: A philosophy of life is a non-religious theory of the good[4] conjoined with practical instructions for attaining that good. Secular humanism is a philosophy of life.

4. The word "cult" is sometimes defined so widely that all religions are cults- especially the religions of other people.[5] Our theory enables us to formulate a narrower definition which marks an important distinction. Cults are ritual practices intended to please a supernatural or quasi-supernatural being (or collection of such beings) too limited in its attributes to ground an account of fit. We ought to resist the assumption that any ritual practice intended to please supernatural or quasi-supernatural elements is sufficient to constitute a religion. Rituals meant to propitiate elves and fairies are not a religion. A practice directed at supernatural beings too minor to ground an account of fit is not by itself a religious practice.

Suppose we believe there is a spirit in a local tree who will protect us from smallpox if we perform rituals that please him, and this is the entirety of our belief. Our practices are wholly instrumental: we would apply electric shocks if that worked better. We do not mention him at weddings or funerals nor does he

influence our moral code. Then these practices do not by themselves constitute a religion. A religion cannot be wholly a matter of commerce with the gods. This is reminiscent of the Melanesian cargo cults, in which harbors and runways were built and rites performed to entice passing ships and planes to give up their cargo. Consider too ritual practices directed at animal kinds to ensure good hunting.

Cults can develop into religions, however. This happens in one of two ways: First, the cult object becomes sufficiently inflated with attributes to provide the basis for a religious world view, according to which our practices constitute fit. Second, various cults practiced by the same community intermesh and become a religion.[6] The "breakpoint" between cult practice and religion may come when the collection of cult practices, taken collectively, is taken to constitute fit with the gods, taken collectively. The summum bonum is to stand in the relation to The Divine Realm, as manifested by the gods, which is constituted by ritual devotion to the particular gods.[7] The old cult object becomes a representative of The Divine. Or the breakpoint may come when various cult objects come to be viewed as aspects of one God; for example, in the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna proclaims that all sincere worship, even of

rivers and trees, is directed to Him.

Of course, there may be no particular moment in the development of a culture when cults become religions or parts of religions. Nonetheless, if there is to be a religion, the old cult practices must be reinterpreted so that our definition is satisfied, at least by an authoritative subset of the population- rabbis, rishis, or priests. This division of labor in a community- so that ordinary practitioners allow that the experts define what the practices are really about- enables us to count people as practitioners of a religion who would merely be practicing a cult if they were practicing alone.[8]

The conjunction of the theory of religion with this taxonomy of related practices yields a powerful and plausible instrument for sorting out previously intractable problems of classification: see the Appendix for a demonstration.

III

What about counter-examples? John Calvin taught that God has predestined some of us to salvation; the rest of us are damned no matter what we do. Now fit, by definition, is a relation that can but needn't obtain between a human creature and that which is most

real. But if salvation is predestined, then nothing I do can make any difference. The saved cannot be damned nor the damned saved. It follows that salvation in Calvinism is not fit. Still more serious, if nothing I do can make any difference to whether or not I am saved, then, even if salvation is fit, nothing I do can constitute fit. A consequence of our theory, therefore, is that Calvinism is not a religion. But surely this is false.

This is a fallacious argument, however. The doctrine of predestination does not entail that salvation is a relation that must obtain between God and those who are saved. For God could have chosen differently: He could have predestined the saved to be damned, and vice versa. So, if am saved, I needn't have been. Further, Calvin maintained that the faithful communicant receives with the elements the virtue or power of the Body and Blood of Christ (though Calvin denied that the bread and wine are changed by consecration).[9] Calvin accepts the Catholic account of the effects of communion; he only rejects the metaphysics. The sacraments constitute fit in Calvinism- but only for the elect (for whom they are redundant); and a symptom of election is that we will take the sacraments. One often finds constitutive practices in Protestantism despite the tension with

Protestant theology- perhaps because they satisfy a central religious need.[10] Calvinism is a religion on our account, and the counter-example evaporates.

Evangelical Christians believe that we are saved only through faith in the shed blood of Christ. Righteous works and religious rituals are useless. Each believer is reconciled to God forever as a one-time event at the moment of coming to faith.[11] Further, many Christians maintain that even faith is itself a gift of God, not a work of man. Paul writes "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not by yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast."[12] Then how can anything we do constitute fit? Nonetheless, most Evangelicals agree that for some the gift is insufficient. Free-will plays a role: the gift has to be accepted- we must allow ourselves to trust in the sufficiency of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Hence an action is required. This is not a "work" in the sense that is objectionable to Protestants; we hardly earn salvation by accepting it. To perform this action is to enter into salvation, so it constitutes fit. Evangelical Christianity is a limiting case of a religion: the system of practices the performance of which constitutes fit contains a single action performed just once by each Christian.

So far the objections claim the theory is too narrow. What of the objection that the theory is too broad? Suppose we insist that the truth relation is fit: the scientist who accepts the true theory stands in the relation to the universe that is the summum bonum. Wouldn't the theory compel the implausible conclusion that science is a religion- just as much as Islam and Christianity? It would not. A system of practices is a religion only when it is rationalized by beliefs according to which performance of the practices constitutes fit. Implicit here is that the beliefs rationalize the practices under descriptions that do not mention fit. The practices are not described merely as "fit-constituting practices," e.g., "holy practices." Otherwise the beliefs are empty, asserting only that fit-constituting practices constitute fit. Such beliefs rationalize nothing. Consequently, a fit-constituting practice is part of a religion only if the practice can constitute fit under a description that doesn't mention fit.

This has an interesting consequence. Obviously scientific inquiry does not itself constitute true belief. If truth is fit, the sole candidate for a constitutive practice is finding or discovering the truth- which only constitutes fit under a description that mentions truth. If (following Peirce) we try to

redescribe finding the truth as "arriving at the belief that all scientific inquirers would sooner or later accept if they continued inquiring indefinitely," plainly this needn't be discovering the truth--unless we abandon the correspondence theory of truth upon which the identification of truth with fit depends. Therefore, if truth is fit, the sole candidate for a constitutive practice is not part of a religion. So science is not a religion, if truth is fit.[13]

I hasten to add that the identification of truth with fit is implausible prima facie. Why should accepting the true scientific theory of the universe be, in and of itself, the greatest human good? The truth relation seems too intellectual to be the summum bonum: not enough of the human animal is engaged. Also, the truth relation obtains primarily between a representation and the world. Consequently, the successful scientist's relation to the universe is mediated by a representation, and it can be analyzed into her relation to the representation and the representation's relation to the universe. But fit, I submit, is immediate and non-composite. By way of contrast, the direct apprehension of the Good in Plato and the intellectual love of God in Spinoza are full-blooded and simple: both are species of fit. Note,

however, that the practice of Dialectic does not constitute the direct apprehension of the Good, anymore than scientific inquiry constitutes discovering the truth. For Plato and Spinoza, the study of philosophy is merely productive of fit. Here philosophy is a spiritual path.

IV

I have sketched what I believe is a plausible and useful theory of religion. But the theory is still incomplete. In this last section I want to complete it. The best way to see that the theory is unfinished is to address some technical questions it raises. Supposing that S practices a religion, which of S's practices are part of it? As it is unlikely that everything S does is a religious practice, how do we determine the proper subset of S's practices that is his religion?

We might say that S's religion is that set of practices each of which is such that S would allow its omission to count against the claim that he practices his religion. This strategy has the interesting consequence that the religiousity of a practice is a matter of degree, for S may allow some omissions to count more than others against the claim that he practices his religion. The trouble is that so-called

"primitive" people, who generally practice a religion, often do not have the concept of religion- so the strategy cannot have universal application. Nor can we identify S's religion with the set of practices each of which constitutes fit according to S's religious world view. For plainly not every practice which belongs to a religion has this function: a religion is likely to include some practices that are merely productive or celebratory and nothing else.

This raises a difficulty for our theory. For if religions typically include practices that don't constitute fit, how can the entire system, including the practices that don't constitute fit, be rationalized on the ground that the performance of the practices constitutes fit? We may begin to address the difficulty in this way: if the performance of practice a constitutes fit according to the beliefs of those who perform it, and additional practices x,y,z, aren't in some way incompatible with fit (e.g., sacrilegious), then, trivially, the performance of a,x,y,z will constitute fit too. So, if just one of S's practices constitutes fit according to S's beliefs, then the set of S's practices that are compatible with fit (which, of course, includes that one) will be rationalized by S's beliefs- for the performance of that set will be sufficient to

constitute fit. In fact, the theory has no problem including practices that do not constitute fit as part of a religion; indeed, we can't leave enough out! S's religion is smaller than the set of practices rationalized by S's religious world view. How can we define that smaller set?

We need to count the fact that a religion isn't wholly determined by the religious world view that rationalizes it. Often practices are part of a religion on account of relative accidents, for instance, the tradition that preceded the acceptance of the religious world view (as Mayan religion is reflected in Roman Catholic holidays in Mexico, and shamanism in Tibetan Buddhism). The aesthetic imagination of a people, their social organization, and their way of making a living often play a substantial role in determining religious practice. Nonetheless, practices that are part of a religion will usually relate in some important way to the religious world view and especially to the conception of fit it entails. We have seen that practices can be constitutive of fit and productive of fit. Further, practices can be celebratory of fit (Simchat Torah), commemorative of fit (celebrating the Buddha's birthday), symbolic of fit (the Chanukah menorah, which symbolizes the covenant- God's promise not to

allow the Jewish people to be destroyed). Let us say that a practice related to fit in any of the above ways is "significantly tied to fit." We might say that a religion is a system of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the performance of the system constitutes fit, wherein each practice is significantly tied to fit. A consequence is that practices which are merely productive of fit can nonetheless be part of a religion, though they cannot constitute a religion by themselves: a religion can contain a spiritual path.

However there may be practices that are part of a religion which do not stand immediately in any of these relations to fit. We can at least conceive of practices none of which taken alone is significantly tied to fit but which, performed together, conjointly constitute fit according to a religious world view.[14] Further, particular ethical practices, for example, turning the other cheek or refraining from killing animals, may be part of a religion without being significantly tied to fit. Nonetheless, these particular practices, when performed against the background of other practices, are part of what constitutes fit according to the religious world view.

Let us say that a practice p is <u>immediately</u> related to fit when the practice is significantly tied

to fit in one of the ways mentioned above. So the taking of the Mass is immediately related to fit because the performance of this practice is constitutive of fit according to Roman Catholicism; and celebrating the Buddha's birthday is immediately related to fit because this performance is celebratory of fit (see the Appendix for a Buddhist account of fit and constitutive practice).

A practice p is mediately related to fit when it is not immediately related to fit and

(a) p is part of a collection of practices (no one of which constitutes fit) that conjointly constitute fit and the collection would not constitute fit without p (or would constitute fit to a lesser degree without p), according to the religious world view,

or

(b) the addition of p to the set of practices that are immediately related to fit produces a set of practices which collectively constitute fit to a greater degree than the original set, according to the religious world view. So if I take the Mass and turn the other cheek I am holier than if I just take the Mass.

Now we can say that a religion is a system of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the performance of the system constitutes fit, where each practice in the system is either immediately or

mediately related to fit. The set of practices immediately related to fit is typically surrounded by a halo of mediate practices. This again suggests that some religious practices are more religious than others. In a religion containing immediate practices that constitute fit, practitioners usually take the omission of these immediate practices to count more against the claim that someone practices the religion than the omission of non-constitutive immediate practices. The failure to meditate counts more against the claim that someone is a practicing Buddhist than the failure to celebrate the Buddha's birthday. Further, the omission of practices that constitute fit usually counts more against the claim that someone practices the religion than the omission of mediate practices. The omission of the Mass counts more against the claim that a woman is a practicing Catholic than her failure to be a good Samaritan-though the good Samaritan who takes the Mass is more of a practicing Catholic than the Catholic who just takes the Mass. But the Catholic who practices astrology is no more of a practicing Catholic than the Catholic who doesn't, for the practice of astrology is neither mediately nor immediately related to fit in Roman Catholicism.

We can now address a final question: As it is

unlikely that everything S believes is part of his religious world view, how do we determine which of S's beliefs belong to it? A religious world view involves a particular account of fit, so we might say that S's religious world view is the smallest set of his beliefs that states this account. Now surely if a belief belongs to this set it belongs to S's religious world view, but does the converse hold? The belief that there was once a holyman who became enlightened and was known as "The Buddha" would not be part of S's religious world view (where S is a Buddhist) because the smallest set of S's beliefs that states the Buddhist account of fit doesn't mention the Buddha: it simply contains what the Buddha taught. Yet this belief certainly appears to be a part of S's religious world view, if only because it explains practices that are part of S's religion (by the criterion given above), for example, his celebrating the Buddha's birthday, his meditating before an image of the Buddha, and so on. These beliefs explain particular practices, simply in that, if we ask S why he performs the practice (e.g., why do you sit before that statue?), S can adequately answer our question by expressing these beliefs.

Let us say that S's religious world view contains the smallest set of S's beliefs that states the

particular account of fit to which S subscribes plus
a) beliefs which entail that particular practices are constitutive of fit (immediately related to fit because constitutive of it)
b) beliefs which entail that particular practices are mediately related to fit in one of the two ways mentioned above
and
c) beliefs which explain practices that are immediately related to but not constitutive of fit, e.g., commemorative practices, celebratory practices, and so on.

This has the consequence that a shared belief may be part of S's religious world view and not part of R's. I have the belief that Jesus said "Turn the other cheek" but, as I am not a Christian, this belief isn't part of my religious world view: it plays no part in rationalizing any of my religious practices. Pope John Paul also believes that Jesus said "Turn the other cheek" and, in the context of the Pope's other beliefs, this entails that the addition of forbearance to the practices that are immediately related to fit produces a set which collectively constitutes fit to a greater degree. So the belief is part of his religious world view but not mine. Plainly, I can have a belief that is part of John Paul's religious world view and

have no religious world view at all. S has a religious world view only if S has a set of beliefs that states an account of fit. Failing this none of his beliefs will constitute a religious world view, even if they are part of someone else's.

Let us say that a religious belief is a belief that is part of a religious world view. Consequently the same belief may be religious for the Pope and not religious for the Dalai Lama. Some beliefs are religious for any believer, namely, beliefs like "The summum bonum is to love Krishna," which state an account of fit. Others, which do not by themselves entail an account of fit, nonetheless belong to the smallest set of beliefs that states an account of fit in a well-known religion, e.g.,"Jesus is the son of God." The assertion of one of these beliefs warrants a strong presumption that the believer subscribes to the other beliefs in that set. Beliefs of both kinds are paradigmatically religious-the sort we would naturally give as examples of religious belief. Our discussion suggests that the religiousity of a belief can be a matter of degree. S's beliefs that are religious for any believer or which belong to the smallest set of her beliefs that states an account of fit are likely to count more for the claim that S is a believer in her religion than religious beliefs which would not be

religious for S if she rejected that account of fit.

To sum up: What is a religion? A religion is a system of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the performance of the system constitutes fit, wherein each practice is either immediately or mediately related to fit. The religious world view that rationalizes a religion is made up of an account of fit plus beliefs that rationalize or explain the practices that are mediately or immediately related to fit. A religious belief is part of a religious world view. This theory provides a framework in which difficult questions about religions and related phenomena can be intelligibly addressed. My hope is that it makes up in science and clarity what it lacks in poetry. Would it have satisfied Socrates? Little did. Perhaps he might have allowed that the theory, if not the end of the path, is a step in the right direction.

Appendix

The theory provides a criterion to which we can appeal in difficult cases to decide whether or not we are confronted with a religion. Let me demonstrate the utility of the theory and the accompanying taxonomy by using them. "Theravada Buddhism" is often used to denote early Buddhism, as preserved in the Pali canon.

The Buddha taught that the gods are useless to believers. Enlightenment is the result of an ethical, self-reliant life (the 8-fold path), including meditative practices which reveal that all phenomena are transient, unsatisfying, and egoless. This insight leads to the cessation of desire (or grasping) and, consequently, to the end of suffering. There is neither worship nor ritual in early Buddhism; yet the Buddha founded a monastic order that exists today, and Buddhism is counted among the world's great religions. Is Buddhism a religion or something else- perhaps a philosophy of life? Scholars differ without knowing what is really at stake. Matters are complicated further by the development of several schools of Buddhism in its 2,500 year history- in some of which the Buddha is worshipped as a God-plus vigorous controversy over the meaning and proper emphasis of what the Buddha taught. While we cannot completely settle the matter here, our theory ought to provide a simple and illuminating way to sort Buddhism out. Does it?

The Buddha taught the cause of suffering and the way out of suffering. The cause of suffering is desire; the way out is the eradication of desire by following the 8-fold path. Nibbana, the goal of the 8-fold path, is negatively described as the permanent

cessation of desire (likened to a spent candle going out). On this account, Buddhism is a philosophy of life: the chief human good is the absence of suffering, and the practical way to that good is the 8-fold path. The absence of suffering is not a relation between the believer and the universe; so the good, on this account, is not identified with fit.

Hindus, however, often insist that the Buddha was a great Hindu holyman and reformer. Nibbana, they say, is simply God realization negatively described. The Buddha feared that a more positive description would lead only to intellectualizing; nonetheless the ending of desire and the resulting loss of the illusion of a personal self are the sufficient condition for God realization in the Vedic tradition, in which the Buddha was immersed. Indeed, the Pali canon sometimes refers to Nibbana as "the deathless" and "the unconditioned"- terms suggestive of God. Those who think the Buddha rejected Hinduism have mistaken his practicality and reticence for atheism. On this account, Buddhism is a spiritual path: God realization is a species of fit and the 8-fold path a method for producing God realization.

But there is also a non-theistic account of fit arguably implicit in Theravada Buddhism, an account later developed more explicitly in China and Japan.

Anyone attached to mind, body, and other transient things is out of harmony with a natural world of wholly momentary objects. Suffering is the struggle to maintain this delusory separation; the sense of self is the effort of desire and thought to lift body and mind from the transient stream. To cease grasping after the transient is to resume one's natural condition. This reunion is the fundamentally appropriate relation between a human creature and the universe (including his own mind and body) and it is, in and of itself, the chief human good.

Along with this conception of fit, the Soto Zen school of Buddhism identifies enlightenment with the meditative mind. To attend each moment to the psycho-physical stream <u>is</u> to flow side by side with the other empty processes in nature and to resume one's natural selfless condition. Meditation produces deeper degrees of fit; nonetheless, to assume the meditative stance is already to stand in the right relation to the universe. Soto teachers claim that this account is the essence of the Buddha's original teaching. Indeed, the early Buddhist canon describes the meditating monk as faring along "not grasping anything in the world."[15] If Nibbana is negatively described as the permanent cessation of grasping, the meditating monk enters significantly (but not permanently) into the <u>summum</u>

bonum, which described positively may be reunion with nature. Consequently, to follow the 8-fold path is to stand in the relation to the universe which is the chief human good.

On this account, Buddhism is a non-theistic religion: the 8-fold path is rationalized by beliefs according to which its performance constitutes fit. Our theory, therefore, has the consequence that Buddhism (including Theravada Buddhism) is a religion according to the views of at least one of the schools of Buddhism. But the theory also explains why Buddhism can be viewed as a philosophy of life and, further, as a spiritual path. Most important, the theory reveals clear and substantial differences between these positions. This is not just a difference in words. It is a matter of some interest and moment whether and to what extent the scriptures and traditions support one of these positions over the others. A scholarly discussion can now proceed that was virtually impossible before.

Footnotes

1. This distinction largely underlies inchoate popular attempts to contrast religion and "spirituality" or to distinguish religion in a "narrow and a wide sense."

2. In Judaism, fit is participation in the manifestation of the Godhead in human history: it is constituted by keeping the covenant and the law of God "who has sanctified us by His commandments."

3. Of course, philosophies of life are often unsophisticated: also, the theory of the good and the practical instructions are sometimes contained in one statement. The view that what matters most in life is affectionate relations with one's family involves a rough-grained theory of the good- affectionate relations with one's family are what matter most- and the practical locus of the good is obvious: to have the good one ought to spend plenty of time with one's family, not sacrifice family relations to work, and so on. So this single proposition constitutes a philosophy of life.

4. A non-religious theory of the good is simply any theory of the good which does not identify the good with fit.

5. I owe this witticism to Lyle Downing.

6. The emergence in the community of a shared idea of holiness or piety can be an indication that this has

happened. Recall the insistence of Euthryphro, Plato's fundamentalist polytheist, that holiness is what the gods all love and unholiness is what the gods all hate.

7. Consider Euthyphro's suggestive contention that holiness isn't holy because the god's love it; rather the gods love holiness because it is holy. Holiness does not owe its value to the gods. But surely holiness does owe its value to some extent to the divinity to which the believer is related. This suggests that holiness transcends the gods- the terms of the relation are the believer and The Divine.

8. Cults can also arise within religions. A figure (supernatural or human) may arise against the background of a pre-existing religious world view, who is taken to have the power to provide a quick route to fit for those who worship her. This person is too limited and local in her features to provide an account of fit by herself- so she is a cult object. She is not a mere representative of The Divine (The Divine in one of its forms); we worship the cult object, not The Divine, believing that in return she will use her power to place us in the right relation to The Divine. Early Christian theology (including the

selection of "heresies") is motivated by the need to construe Jesus so that he is neither a cult object within Judaism on the one hand nor a mere representative of the Jewish God on the other. Otherwise Christianity could not emerge as a separate religion with its own constitutive practice. More recently, the Virgin Mary has arisen as a cult object within Roman Catholicism.

Further, cult practices (for example, the practice of propitiating animal kinds to ensure good hunting) may be part of a <u>whole way of life</u> that emphasizes a relation of man to nature which constitutes fit. What I know of the religion of American plains Indians suggests that a whole way of life (of which a cult practice is a significant expression) can constitute fit: an entire culture can be a religion. The cult practice significantly expresses a religious way of life in that the cult, though it is chiefly productive, provides an opportunity to apologize to the animal kind for the necessity of hunting. This courtesy is a mark of the fundamentally appropriate relationship to nature that the whole way of life constitutes. Here the cult practice neither develops into a religion nor arises within one; it may always have been part of a religion.

9. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. F.L.Cross, (Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 1425.

10. John Kent writes "It is worth remembering that, while the Eucharist has not been celebrated as often as the sixteenth-century reformers would have in some Protestant traditions, the actual service has never lost the social character of the people of God sharing in the means of grace." Ibid., p.119.

11. I owe this sentence and much of my description of Evangelism to Scott Calef, who brought this objection to my attention.

12. Ephesians ch.2, vs 8-9.

13. Could identical systems of practices be rationalized by wildly divergent religious beliefs? Only if the practices are underdescribed. The words "We believe in the one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God..." could mean in another culture "I hereby adore the Great Pumpkin." But the Catholic practice is to say these words meaning that we believe in the one Lord, Jesus Christ. When the priest says of the wafer "This is the body of Christ," he is declaring that it is the body of Christ by saying those words. The recipient, in saying "Amen," is

affirming her belief that the wafer is the body of Christ. In reciting the Psalms, Jews are praying to the God of Moses. Just as the same physical movement can be described as waving hello or merely stretching, depending on the agent's intentions, religious practices are described in terms of the beliefs which motivate them. We aren't just making sounds and collapsing in a heap, but praising Allah and bowing to Mecca. Substantially different beliefs generate different act- descriptions, hence different practices.

14. Recall our discussion in footnote seven of the possibility that an entire culture might constitute fit.

15. Majjhima-nikaya I, 55-63 in Buddhist Texts Through the Ages, ed. Edward Conze (Harper and Row, 1964), p.59.