

What Is Religion?*

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Abstract:

Based on Adib Saab's personal research in the history of religions, this paper is an analysis of the common elements which make it possible to classify a certain discipline under Religion. These elements are: (1) separation and reunion, or appearance and reality; (2) rites; (3) good deeds; (4) emulating founders as models; (5) emulating saints. The author advocates his view that all religions are, in a profound sense, monotheistic insofar as they refer to one absolute reality of which this world or order of being is an appearance. Far from contending that the common elements singled out reduce all religions to one, the writer makes it clear that these elements refer to a functional similarity which allows us to talk about an essence of religion or of what he calls a 'unity in diversity'. Faithful to the phenomenological approach in the history of religions, the paper is based on 'descriptive', rather than 'evaluative', comparison.

Keywords: *religion, common elements, descriptive comparison, functional similarities*

1. Separation and reunion

Religions agree that a certain error entered into human life and spoiled its original purity, and that the correction of this situation is possible and indispensable (This chapter is based on personal research in the history and phenomenology of religion. Since the books which have been consulted concur on material of descriptive character as well as on many other points, we have found it sufficient to refer the reader to general books on the subject, among which are the following: Bowker 2002; Eliade 1987; Hinnels 2005; Noss and Grangaard 2008; Smart 1998). The error involved here is not the same as logical fallacies or rational mistakes. Rather it is of the nature of sin, evil, and corruption. This concerns the self not only in its

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mental aspect, but in all its aspects. The feeling of sin stirs man from the depth; and so does the feeling of salvation.

There is, therefore, a primal situation from which man deviated. Religions of China call it the Tao or the right order. This is a natural and moral order, whether with the Taoists who put the individual at the centre or with the Confucians who put society there. Lao Tzu and his disciples maintained that the individual soul is part of the universal order, and that its deviation from that order means falling into sin, whereas salvation is the realization, or rather the regaining, of unity with the right order or ultimate reality. This is manifested in obeying the rules of virtue, like kindness, sincerity, humility, and love. The outcome is a change in the person's life, with which the illusory, earthly self disappears and the true, heavenly self emerges. Confucius maintained that the upset of the social order means deficiency in the coordination of things and confusion in their relations. This comes from the corruption of the head, or the ruler, whose main role is to teach virtue. The highest form of government is that where the ruler behaves as a model of virtue, which means that he does not embark upon the moral formation of his subjects until he has achieved this aim in himself. Reform for Confucius is putting everything in its right place. Its main condition is the rebuilding of personality by means of the moral order which requires obedience of what is highest in man, that is his reason, and moving away from what is lowest, that is his instincts and physical power. By using his reason to the extreme, man purges his soul and does the will of heaven.

In the religions of India too, fall is defined as man's separation from his nature or reality, and salvation as regaining the pure, original state. In Hinduism and Buddhism, this separation grants man a feeling of self-sufficiency which makes him look at himself as a real and independent entity with an unlimited thirst for pleasure, acquisition, and the incessant coming back to this life. What in China is called the Tao takes in India the name of Brahman. This is the absolute reality which moves everything. The human soul (atman) commences its salvation when it realizes that it is part of this reality. Virtuous life is a search for the unity of atman with Brahman. One way to achieve this unity is yoga. This is a kind of spiritual exercise which aims at purifying the soul by suppressing its desires as a preparation for this union. Having become pure through meditation and prayer, the soul

is able to perform good deeds necessary for gaining salvation. In Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, fall consists in clinging to matter and salvation in liberation from it. The material world is an illusion and knowing it amounts to sheer ignorance, whereas absolute reality is completely detached from matter.

The concept of the soul's alienation from its reality and reunion with it continues with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, gaining new dimensions. Fall or sin here is the disobedience of God. The first sinner was the first man, Adam, who was also the first believer. Adam was in a state of perfect grace before he fell into sin. In Christianity, Adam came to signify the old man or sin, and Jesus Christ the new man or salvation. While Judaism understands Adam's sin as a sin of mankind to be borne by each of its members, Christianity and Islam maintain that all men are liable to sin and that they do sin; yet it is the individual alone who bears responsibility for his actual sin. This point was advocated by Jeremiah, but it is not characteristic of the Old Testament as a whole. If matter, according to Indian religions, is the source of impurity, evil, or sin and salvation is the liberation from matter, this is not the case with the Abrahamic tradition. The body, as in the saying of Saint Paul, can become an abode of the Holy Spirit. Here salvation signifies not being saved from matter, but rather saving matter. However, the condition of salvation in these religions is the same as in the other religions, namely faith and good deeds.

Most religions talk about creatures which facilitate for man the committing of sin. These are spirits of evil or devils. In Christianity as well as in Islam, it is believed that the devil was originally an angel who fell as a result of his rebel against the will of God, and who has since been acting on the stage of the world in order to keep man away from God. The Chinese put on their doors wooden cocks as charms to dispel the devils, since the crowing of roosters is associated with sunrise while evil spirits appear in the dark. All religions symbolize good by light and evil by darkness. The ancient Slavs believed that a bitter struggle took place between the bountiful God who grants man all the riches and the wicked devil that rips him off. Teutonians also talked about the powers of evil that killed Balder, the God of light. The story does not stop here, but adds an eschatological element by saying that victory will be written to the forces of light at the end of the world, when Balder will be liberated from death and a new, pure

creation will rise. Zoroastrianism gave an exhaustive account of the devil as the source of evil in the world. From the beginning the devil (Angra Mainyu) lies in wait for the Holy Spirit (Spenta Mainyu) which emanated from God (Ahura Mazda). The eschatological tendency reaches its climax with Zoroastrianism then with Christianity, where the devil is vanquished at the end of the world, after which a new heaven and a new earth will emerge.

If devils or evil spirits are the models of deviation and sin, angels or good spirits are the models of obedience and purity. In the Bible and in the Quran, frequent allusion is made to angels. What Christianity calls Holy Spirit is the name that Islam gives to Gabriel, the first among angels and the one who conveyed prophecy to Muhammad. In Mahayana, the largest school of Buddhism, angels have an important role to play: they hear the prayers of the faithful and come down to earth for helping them to achieve salvation.

Most religions depicted the world and the human soul as a battlefield on which good and evil compete, and looked at man as a free agent in choosing one or the other. This explains the origin of ideas like repentance, forgiveness, reward, punishment, heaven, and hell. We find all these ideas in ancient Egyptian religion, where we come across the picture of the scales by which Osiris balances a man's actions upon judging his departed spirit, and as a result sends virtuous spirits to a paradise over which everlasting happiness reigns and wicked spirits to a hell whose fire does not cease. The material conception of heaven and hell that we find with ancient Egyptians is encountered in a number of religions. Even in religions where such a conception does not exist, men of imagination tried to do so. One of those was the Italian poet Dante (1265-1321) who, in his famous epic *The Divine Comedy*, invented interesting images of heaven and hell, and also of the purgatory suggested by some Catholic theologians to occupy a rank between the two. In Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Islam, heaven and hell are both composed of layers.

Perhaps Indian religions differ from the rest in placing hell on this earth. Suffering consists in continuous rebirths, which means coming under the spell of the wheel of time and being contaminated by matter. The punishment of a sinner takes place when his soul transmigrates to another terrestrial body which is not necessarily human. Whereas Hinduism

envisaged a lesser salvation manifested in the return of the individual who had achieved incomplete self-purification to a better condition on earth, it agreed with Buddhism that real and accomplished salvation consists in utter liberation from matter and total dissolution in the absolute. This involves full separation from the body, the non-return to this world, and the end of painful becoming. Gotama, the founder of Buddhism, sought not to give too clear a concept of heaven in order not to fall into abstractions and errors, like designing as being or non-being the state of nirvana which is inexpressible. Yet like Hinduism, later Buddhism talked about a paradise which was described by some Buddhists as a land of purity and righteousness. Whatever the description of heaven is, all religions agree that it is a state of everlasting blessing. That is why it is called bliss. Wherever is this state of bliss after death, the condition to attain it is faith and good deeds during life on this earth. In Christianity the kingdom of heaven starts here with an act of faith as little as a seed or a leaven. This means that it starts inside man, in a pure and humble heart. Buddhists believe that perfect enlightenment which was achieved by Gotama during his earthly life secured for him complete liberation from return and made him experience nirvana even before death.

While all religions believe in the immortality of the soul, some of them go further to advocate the resurrection of bodies in the last day. This doctrine appeared clearly in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and earlier in Zoroastrianism which conceived God's mercy so plentiful as to annihilate hell in order to prepare enough room for resurrected bodies. The concept of abolishing hell was reiterated by some early Christian theologians. If the soul in Islam is an entity beyond description [One reads in 'The Night Journey' sura in the Quran: 'They will question thee concerning the Spirit. Say: "The Spirit is of the bidding of my Lord. You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little"' (17: 85). We have used the following translation of the Quran: Picthall 1953], the body of resurrection is indescribable too. Christianity envisaged it as an entity of light, upon which death cannot come as it came on the earthly body. But individual resurrection is meaningless if the person does not retain some of his earlier functions, like thought and memory. In Hinduism there is a doctrine which says that a day will come when all individual souls are to dissolve in Brahman, then to be reincarnated in a plant, an animal, a human being, a

devil, or a god. This happens in every cycle (kalpa) of being, when the social classes are reformulated and history repeats itself. Among the eschatological Hindu doctrines is one which says that the god Vishnu, who has come down nine times to earth on the back of a bird, still has a tenth descent. He will be riding a white horse and carrying a sword of fire. That will take place at the end of the fourth cycle of the earth's life, when Vishnu will come to save the righteous and destroy the wicked.

2. Rites

All religions, therefore, find the requisite of salvation in faith and deeds. Yet an important dimension of man's search for salvation appears besides holding certain doctrines and obeying a number of rules. This dimension concerns a body of religious practices called rites. A main set of rites turns around purification. Ritual cleansing by water is observed by and large. Bodily cleanliness here symbolizes spiritual purity. This is what the Hindus do when they bathe in the Ganges, what some Christians do at baptism, and what Muslims do when they perform ablution upon praying. For the Zoroastrians, fire is the purifying material; and its ashes become more cleansing as it becomes older. That is why the fire of the Zoroastrian temples should be kept burning. Fasting is another widespread rite. In Islam it takes place in Ramadan, the month during which the revelation of the Quran was completed, and its aim is purging the soul of what has contaminated its pure nature. Another purifying rite is communion, which goes back in time before Christianity, and which follows the act of offering or oblation. In the Canaanite religion, worshippers of the Baal used to offer animals and fruits. The Christian oblation represents Christ, where the bread stands for his body and the wine for his blood. The culmination of the mass, which is the principal service in traditional Christianity, is the communion, in which the faithful eat from that bread and drink from that wine for the forgiveness of their sins and for the establishment of a new covenant in their lives, one by which they 'wear' the new man, Jesus Christ, who regained for mankind its lost paradise. Walking around the Kaaba, which takes place during the Muslims' pilgrimage to Mecca, is done seven times before kissing the Black Stone as used to happen before Islam. But the meaning that Islam gave to this rite, which takes place during the season of Al Adha, or the memory of the sacrifice that Abraham was about to do

when God ordered him to slay his son, is that the believer should put everything in his life under the hand of God, and proceed towards Him with humility and reverence. Man's sacrifice before God becomes, as David says in the fifty-first Psalm, 'a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart'; it becomes a means to purify the heart and renew the soul.

A great danger attending to religious rites is practising them as shallow forms devoid of content. In every religion there are individuals who observe rites out of external admiration or to please the group to which they nominally belong, without in any case understanding the profound significance of these rites or their function in the light of the religious doctrines. Not few are those who practise rites as habitual behaviour emptied of meaning. In such cases, rites cease to perform the original functions for which they were instituted, and are transformed into a form of idolatry which threatens the spiritual life of its subjects as well as the true religious life of the community if its scope is enlarged. Many times outward sticking to rites has been a cause of fanaticism and taking a stand of enmity or isolationism towards other religions. Indeed, all the founders and great teachers of religions rebelled against formalism. We have in Christ's attitude towards the Pharisees a lucid example of this.

Can the remedy of this formalism lie in adopting a doctrine devoid of rites? This is liable to turn religion into a form of philosophy. If a religion without rites is possible at all, it is to be known that creeds may in turn fall into formalism. This means that any man of any religion can recite the confession of faith peculiar to his religion and utter as many prayers as he knows without living the life of religion in its depth. Jesus Christ reiterated what the prophet Isaiah had said about such persons: 'This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me' (Matthew 15: 8. For the Bible, the Revised Standard Version has been used). Christ said along the same line: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Matthew 7: 21). The Old Testament condemns this lip-service: 'they bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse' (Psalms 62: 4), a condemnation affirmed in the Quran: 'of such as say with their mouths "We believe", but their hearts believe not' (The Quran, 'The Table Spread' sura, 5: 41). Neither creeds in themselves nor rites in themselves, therefore, secure purity. It is rather by practising these creeds and rites sincerely that

man makes them positively active in his life. While creeds address the rational aspect of man, rites, comprising elements like chanting, prostration, lighting candles, and burning incense, make man participate in the process of purification with all his spiritual power and with his full being. Some Christian thinkers pointed out that the mass, which presents doctrinal elements in a dramatic way, excites and purges the feelings of the participants as used to do the Greek tragedy according to Aristotle (See Gogol 1985).

What is important is that doctrines and rites alike be built on an internal, firm foundation, on the heart. The heart is not an entity which differs qualitatively from reason or from man in whom rational and emotional functions meet; but it stands for sincerity, profoundness, warmth, and zeal in faith and action. We have already referred to David's prayer in the fifty-first Psalm, where he had said: 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me'. The distinction between the inward and the outward, essence and form, is not restricted to one religion, but is to be found in every religion. Confucius maintained that acting virtuously is different from talking about virtue, and that a virtuous life is the fruit of a free spirit, not of law or coercion. Love renders the law unnecessary as it guides man to the noble essence inside himself, which is the foundation of every virtuous action. He who hears and obeys the voice of his conscience is the superior man who does the will of heaven.

Jewish prophets rebelled against formalism, or the deterioration of creeds into mere verbal confession and of rites into meaningless exaggeration. Jeremiah claimed that temple worship does not guarantee spiritual depth or sincerity in faith, and he understood the covenant of salvation as a promise between God and the individual, inscribed in the hearts of believers. Christ continued that emphasis on what is internal. He found that all religious appearances are of no avail if the heart is not clean: 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man' (Matthew 15: 19-20). He compared the Pharisees, who were extreme legalists, to graves: 'So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity' (Matthew 23: 28). If words do not proceed from the heart, they are falsehood and dissimulation: 'You brood of vipers! How can you speak

good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks' (Matthew 12: 35). As evil actions come from inside, so also do good actions: 'The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil' (Matthew 12: 34). Islam too found in the purity of heart the root of right faith and action, and claimed that piety is primarily in the hearts of the believers rather than in turning their faces to this or that direction when they pray (See the Quran, 'The Cow' sura: 'It is not piety that you turn your faces to the East and to the West. True piety is this: to believe in God, and in the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets, to give of one's substance, however cherished, to kinsmen and orphans, the needy, the traveller, beggars...' (2: 177)).

3. Good deeds

This leads us to the question of morality. The link between religion and morality is tight. While we find moral systems based on philosophy regardless of religion, we never find a religion without a system of ethics. If we put aside religious doctrines concerning the creation and destiny of the world, what remains – and this is the greatest part of religion – is ethics. But if non-religious morality aims at social prosperity, religious morality aims at spiritual purity that all religions claim to be the condition of social progress. This means that religious ethics should be seen in the light of fall and salvation which was our starting point. Moral duties seem not to differ essentially from one religion to another. Perhaps the ten commandments of the Old Testament are a suitable representation of all such duties. The number of commandments is unimportant: they could be merged to become less as in some religions, or detailed to become more as in other religions. Their inclusion in sacred books aims at giving samples of them and of what is innate in man's nature or conscience. Saint Paul expressed this matter cogently when he said: 'When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written in their hearts' (Romans 2: 14-15).

It is evident that religions make works the laboratory of faith. In Christianity, the believer who contents himself with the confession that there is one God is no better than the devils that also 'believe- and shudder.

Do you want to be shown, you shallow man, that faith apart from work is barren?' (James 2: 19-20). Islam commends this when it says that God 'created death and life, that He might try you which of you is fairest in works' (The Quran, 'The Kingdom' sura, 67: 2). Christ summed up the whole message of the law in two commandments: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind', and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22: 37 and 39). The neighbour is the other, whoever he is, and to whatever ethnic group and religious confession he belongs. If ethics rests on a number of commands and interdictions, Confucius expressed the latter when he said: 'Do not do unto others what you do not want them to do unto you', and Jesus expressed the former when he said: 'Do unto others what you want others to do unto you'. Morality is action; and action takes place among individuals. That is why Muhammad claimed that religion is treatment, reciprocity, or conduct (One hadith (saying) of Muhammad goes like this: 'None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself'. See hadith 13 in Zarabozo 1999). As religions make the heart the basis of faith, so they make it the basis of action lest action fall into formalism in its turn. It was for this reason that Jesus considered love and Muhammad mercy as the foundation of all good deeds. If action is reciprocity, action motivated by love or mercy requires the recognition of man's dignity on the theoretical and the practical levels. We come across this principle in all religions. Confucius expressed it by making true virtue consist in the practice of the humanitarian sense, or the recognition of every man's value whatever his rank or position is, and in kind behaviour towards our brethren in humanity since this value is the possession of all without exception.

But can man behave all the time out of the motive of love or mercy? Can he always stay in this state of internal purity? Is the morality required by religions one of heroes and saints according to the expression of some ethical schools, a morality which goes beyond the capacity of the ordinary man? Life is lived after an example; and a person's life is meant to look like the example that he puts for himself. If the matter has to do with religion, why do we not try to be like heroes at least if we cannot rise to the stature of saints? It is true that religions base their claims on the divine aspect of man; but it is also true that they take man's fallibility into

consideration. He is always liable to fall into sin, and God is there to forgive his sins if he is sincere in his repentance. Yet man is not entitled to take advantage of his weakness in view of examining God's pardon if he is able in a certain situation to follow his better self. If purifying the self from sin and achieving salvation is the highest moral duty in all religions, remaining in this state is the most important feature of the whole story. This explains Saint Paul's saying: 'Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?' (Romans 6: 1-2).

While reciprocity is imposed on man by virtue of his social existence, which means that the moral aspect is a continuous measure of religious life, some have found in meditation, even in seclusion, the best that a believer can do if he wants to live the religious life on its highest. They saw in this mystic dimension the best guarantee to maintain a state of purity and salvation. Thus Hinduism found in the life of sanctity the best way for liberation. Jainism, which is a monastic religion, found that way in harsh asceticism based on overcoming bodily desires. Even religions which did not make seclusion from the world an ideal of salvation knew persons who did isolate themselves from the world as a way of achieving spiritual purity and remaining in that condition. This is the aim of monks in Christianity and mystics in Islam. Although asceticism is not a dogmatic condition that any religion poses for achieving salvation, it is undoubtedly a mental state on which many Buddhists, Jainists, Christians, Muslims, and others with an ascetic tendency meet, despite their dogmatic differences. This means that mysticism does not necessarily add to the doctrinal dimension of religion, despite the spiritual depth which one may come across in many mystical writings. Since religion can stand with or without isolation from the world, one is not entitled to prescribe asceticism as a general way of life. Perhaps the psychological resemblance between, say, a Buddhist monk and a Christian monk is much stronger than the dogmatic difference between the two, whatever the content of their meditation might be. Whether meditation takes place 'within the world', where we find the majority of believers, or 'outside the world', where monks and mystics choose to be, its aim is attaining individual salvation and staying as long as possible in a state of grace. Salvation in religion is an individual matter in the first place, since 'each of us shall give account for himself to God' (Romans 14: 12) as Saint Paul says, and since before God 'no father shall

give satisfaction for his child, and no child shall give satisfaction for his father whatever' (The Quran, 'Lokman' sura, 31: 33) according to the Quran.

He who achieves salvation in himself has the right to teach others about salvation. The New Testament stresses the point that teachers of morals be a model for others in their behaviour. Jesus says:

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when there is the log in your own eye? and, You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye (Matthew 7: 3-5).

The story of Jesus with the Scribes and the Pharisees who wanted to stone the woman taken in adultery is known. Despite considering adultery as a sin, Jesus said to the Jews: 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her' (John 8: 7). Saint Paul says: 'You then who teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?' (Romans 2: 21-22).

4. Founders as models

But who did achieve in himself more purity and kindness than the founders of religions? That is why the founder of a religion, whether he is called prophet, messenger, lord, or master, is a teacher of morality par excellence, since he teaches people by word and deed at the same time. He is the model that religion ordains for its adherents to realize themselves by imitating his person and conduct. A man is free to choose or not to choose religious values. But once a man accepts a certain religion, he has to accept with it its moral system; otherwise his adherence would be nominal or partial. Religious ethics is either an ethics of heroes and saints or it is not religious at all. What harms a man if the high example that he wants to emulate is high indeed? The life of religion or in religion is, according to the founders and interpreters of religions, the most rich, perfect, and beautiful life open to man. Is there a more plentiful existence for man than to lead his own life after the model of the founder of his religion? In this light one understands Saint Peter's saying: 'as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct' (1 Peter 1: 15).

If we survey the life of the founders of religions, we find there the ideal moral example that adherents are invited to imitate. In Hinduism teachers and saints take the place of founders. In the *Veda* and the *Upanishads*, we read much about gods and about the absolute reality (Brahman), while we do not read about a prophet or a messenger. But the *Upanishads* constitute a body of exegetic literature on the *Brahmanas*, or the didactic writings of the clergy (Brahmins). The Hindus looked at their clergy with reverence, and believed that the greatest reward a man can get for his good works is to return to this life, if such a return is indispensable, as a Brahmin, since Brahmins constitute the highest caste. At a later stage, there arose among the Hindus the rank of saints which lasted from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Those were mystics who are thought to have achieved a high degree of salvation through some rites which they practise, aiming at the mortification of the flesh, like sleeping on beds made of pointed nails. They used to walk in the streets half-naked, chanting prayers which reflected the fervour of their faith, while people ran behind them and collected the dust of their feet. What in Hinduism seems nearest to the prophet in other religions is perhaps the warrior Arjuna, the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita* whose message was dictated on him by the god Krishna. The *Gita* is the loveliest of the sacred texts to the hearts of the Hindus. There, Arjuna poses on Krishna all kinds of questions and gets answers to them. But what distinguishes Arjuna's attitude is his total submission to divine commands, which means that he was liberated from the illusion of self-sufficiency and materialism, and linked himself to the absolute reality, namely Brahman, of which he, as every other person, is part. In other words, Arjuna surrendered himself to the absolute which appeared to him in the form of Krishna, and was attached to him with all his faith, love, and reverence, looking at him as the sole refuge that can liberate his soul from its fetters. As such, Arjuna became a model worthy to be emulated by others in order to realize their own salvation.

As Arjuna experienced divine light and was himself enlightened, so also did Mahavera, the founder of Jainism, and Gotama, the founder of Buddhism. While revelation commanded Arjuna to achieve his enlightenment without leaving his social class, that of princes and warriors, the other two were asked to leave their royal palaces, each being a king's son, and seek the life of poverty and humility as a requisite of achieving

enlightenment and becoming a teacher. Does this show that one revelation contradicts another? It is not necessary to arrive at this conclusion if we realize that the salvation demanded by religions is a condition open to all, kings and commons alike. Keeping Arjuna in his caste was an emphasis of this fact, while asking Mahavera and Gotama to abandon theirs was a consecration of the immediate didactic role entrusted to them. If Arjuna was a teacher by his good example, the other two were teachers by example and profession alike. Mahavera isolated himself from the world at the age of thirty, leaving behind all his possessions and seeking a humble life. His followers so revered him that they composed stories about his divine origin, saying that he descended from heaven and entered the womb of a woman. A similar thing happened to Gotama who is said to have abandoned his wife and infant, and to have been tempted by the devil that could not win over him and lead him astray. Some signs of his enlightenment are love and kindness towards all creatures. One cannot become an accomplished Buddhist until one achieves enlightenment like the Buddha. This means becoming oneself a Buddha and securing the state of non-return to this world. Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, also abandoned his family life and sought seclusion. He had a religious experience before starting his mission. That was when, as the Sikh tradition maintains, he was transported into divine presence whence he got his message. God commanded him not to be contaminated by the world, but to practise prayer, meditation, and good works.

Moving to the religions of China, we find that the Taoists deified Lao Tzu and gathered around him a group of divine followers due to the extraordinary virtues embodied in his biography. The followers of Confucius came to look at their teacher as if he was the son of heaven. This tendency gained strength after Buddhism entered into China, and Confucius was raised to the rank of gods. Miracles were attributed to him and temples erected after his name. In Japan, the Shinto religion ascribed all the perfections to the emperor who was believed to be a god in human form since he is the descendant of the sun goddess Amaterasu. The Japanese seek the intercession of the local gods and the spirits of ancestors for the holiness that they find there and try to imitate. Some of their modern religious thinkers believe that the pure nature of their people dispenses them of written moral laws, and that man's deep reflection on sacred

matters reveals to him the true relation between the divine and the human and allows him to realize divinity in his own self.

Zarathustra, the prophet of Persia, also abandoned his family and isolated himself from the world. He underwent a spiritual experience which carried him to God's presence where he saw Ahura Mazda on the throne surrounded by angels. An abundant light engulfed him so that he could not see even his shadow. In that atmosphere Zarathustra got the divine message. When he set about to propagate it, he came under the temptation of the evil spirit or the devil that lured him to put the true religion aside. Yet his righteousness was such that he overcame the seduction of the devil and persisted in spreading the revelation until he became a model for his disciples who gave him the name of the shepherd of the poor and elevated him to a divine rank after his death. Moses also achieved in himself the perfection of virtue so that he became a mediator between God and his people. He had an intense religious experience after retiring to the holy mountain. God appeared to him in a bush which glowed with fire without being burned. He started posing questions on God, and God talked to him. Then he faced what could be called a conflict with the devil when he found his people worshipping a calf of gold. But he firmly overcame that temptation. Whenever the Jews fell into idolatry, a prophet appeared in their midst who incited them to destroy the golden calf in their hearts and led them back to the right path. Thus Moses and the prophets became the models which they had to imitate.

Jesus was of the nature of God, even God Himself incarnate according to his followers. Humanity and divinity met in him. Before he embarked on his teaching mission when he was about thirty, he retired to the wilderness where he fasted and prayed and was also tempted by the devil. It was normal that Jesus was the winner. Then he was baptized in the Jordan River at the hands of John the Baptist, and started preaching people. Being baptized in the name of Christ came to signify the pledge to throw over the old man and put on the new. According to the theology of the early church, Jesus had no need for purification because he was already pure and not susceptible to falling into sin. Yet he practised things like fasting and baptism in order to serve as a good example in every dimension. Indeed, the essence of Christian morality is to imitate Christ, hence to follow his

purity and bear the cross of suffering without trying to escape, believing that beyond death on the cross lies resurrection.

Muhammad, the prophet of mercy, was chosen by God as prophet and messenger. In his turn, Muhammad experienced standing in divine presence and being overwhelmed by divine light. As he started receiving revelation, he threw doubts on himself and feared to be one of the priests who used to practise divination. Like the other messengers, he did not succumb to temptation, but accepted the mission in full obedience. Although Muhammad was like all other humans by his nature which was liable to sin, yet he did not fall into sin but put his will under God's will and did everything for the sake of God. Thus he became an example of the perfect man, to be followed by the believers. One of the mystics of Islam, Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), looked at himself as the seal of the saints, being convinced that he had succeeded in imitating Muhammad who is considered as the seal of the prophets.

In every religion there is a group whose members are called disciples, pupils, or companions. They accompany the founder after he chooses them or they choose him, and get to know him closely until they are able to carry on his message and spread it over. Some of those were the closest to a certain founder without accompanying him or even coming to know him personally or to be among his contemporaries. Some religions found in a follower of this rank its second founder. We have the names, among others, of Chuang Tzu in Taoism, Mencius in Confucianism, and Paul in Christianity.

5. Saints and holiness

Out of the ranks of those and of others emerged the group of saints. These too are to be found in all religions even if, in many cases, stories that lay fantasy ascribes to them relegate them to the 'popular' rather than the 'official' side of religion. While the disciple chooses his role for himself, sainthood is not a role of this kind. The saint does not know himself as such; but it is people, and perhaps the religious institution as well, that raise him to this rank. Popular imagination has weaved innumerable accounts, sometimes supported by facts and evidences, about extraordinary actions taken to be achieved by saints, among which is the curing of obstinate diseases. Although in a number of hagiographies we come across details

which stir our being in its depths and render these persons as models to be imitated like their masters, yet we find among the accounts about some of them fairy tales which do not render service to the cause of religion. Many a time these superstitions, with the fanaticism that usually accompanies them, have stood in the way of true religion.

Why do some believers turn to saints, seeking their intercession, honouring their shrines, and celebrating their memories? Orthodox Islam rejects the idea of intercession because the Muslim creed recognizes no mediation between man and God. Having destroyed the sanctuaries of saints, the Wahhabites of Arabia proceeded to wipe out the tombstones of the Companions of Muhammad after occupying Mecca in 1806. However, that was a limited rebellion; and shrines of saints remained almost everywhere in the Muslim world, still visited by countless people annually. Saint-worship is widespread in Hinduism and Buddhism. In any case, the answer to our question is that people ask the assistance of saints not only because they believe that God responds to the intercession of the pure who are the nearest to Him, but because the saint is, at the same time, nearer to man since he was a man before achieving sainthood and remained so after achieving it, whereas God, the all-holy, together with the founder of the religion who is specially chosen by God to receive the revelation and propagate it, are far more removed from our finite human situation than is the saint.

The sacred in religion is not restricted to saints. Anything can be sacred if it has a preternatural quality or if it signifies a supernatural force. In religions we come across sacred beings like animals, plants, and inanimate bodies; sacred places like rivers, mountains, caves, and temples; sacred times like fasts, feasts, hours, days, and months; sacred materials like fire, water, wine, oil, and bread; sacred works of art like statues, paintings, melodies, and chants; and sacred writings that record divine revelation. Whether the sacred is the Ganges river to which Hindus make pilgrimages, the Bo tree under which Gotama attained enlightenment, the town of Mecca where Muhammad got the first revelations, the month of Ramadan during which Muslims fast, the town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born or Jerusalem where he was crucified and resurrected, the fire that the Zoroastrians burn in their temples, or the book of the *Granth* to which Sikhs attribute divine qualities, believers face it with devoutness,

reverence, and awe. Man's shudder before the sacred comes from his awareness of the chasm that stands between the finite and the infinite in all aspects of being and holiness.

Sacred things are so not in themselves or by themselves. Rather, they are sacred because they are linked to a source which is itself sacred, namely to God or the Absolute in the final analysis. The reason why people from all religions regard certain things as sacred is that the seen or the tangible has become for them a medium to approach the unseen. It is a symbol. It is a kind of symbol which renders the sacred in itself nearer to our humanity, more personal and caring, and more meaningful. But man is always under the danger of divorcing the symbol from what it signifies. Thus he comes to sanctify the mountain, the river, or the stone in itself, overlooking the source and the meaning of its holiness. It seems that the seventh Christian council which was held in Nicaea (787) in defence of the icon talked for all religions when it considered religious symbols, like icons, paintings, crosses, and bibles, sacred not in their materials of wood, stone, metal, paper, or colour, but because what they stand for is sacred. Spokesmen of that council added that sacred symbols merit reverence since they perform this sublime task, yet they do not merit adoration which is to be restricted to God.

This, then, is religion: a continuous search to achieve holiness in the individual self, imitating the founders of religions and religious teachers. If what ought to be, in ethics, presupposes what is or what can be, man is capable of achieving holiness by virtue of a certain quality in his nature which links him to holiness. Thus he tries to realize actually what he has potentially. Buddhists maintain that every individual has the nature of the Buddha before they assign enlightenment as the highest aim of life. Christians believe that human life has a divine dimension which renders deification, as it were, possible for man. Muslims claim that man is the successor of God on earth. Each religion has expressed this faith in its own way. At any rate, religion claims the highest in man, namely the divine side of his nature, which he must become aware of and behave accordingly. This takes us where we began, namely to the problem of separation and reunion. Man falls when he becomes self-sufficient, or when he imagines that his individual self is the ultimate reality. This means that the capital sin, in all

religions, is self-deification. But what is that ultimate reality of which all religions talked, and which is believed to be the focus of religion?

6. Gods or God?

The answer is: God or the gods. Some religions talk about gods, and others about one God. In the religions of ancient civilizations, Syrian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, European, and others, we come across a great number of gods. The same thing might be said about some living religions like Hinduism and Shinto. Each god in a certain religion represents a force necessary to steer the affairs of the world, and carries an amount of holiness. But in so-called polytheist religions, there are elements which strongly point to monotheism, or rather elements of forthright monotheism. In ancient religions, Marduk the Babylonian stands out as a distinguished god: he killed the dragon then proceeded to create the world and man; Osiris then Aton appear with the Egyptians as the one God that creates everything and preserves creation; Zeus, with the Greeks, takes the lead as the God of gods, who is responsible for reward and punishment; with the Romans this god takes the name of Jupiter who grants light and determines the fates of men; with the Teutonians of north Europe, Odin is the highest among gods. They had a fantastic story about the act of creation, not much different from what the Japanese attributed to their god Isanagi and what the Chinese told about the first man, who made the world. It is not astonishing that the distinguished god was frequently the god of light or the sun god. The sun symbolizes goodness, and it is the opposite of darkness or evil.

In the sacred books of the Hindus there are strong monotheistic elements. The earliest of these books, the *Veda*, says that the creator of the world is one, but given different names like Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni. There is a similar tendency in the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanishads*, where much is said about Brahman, the one and all-inclusive reality which comprehends all and lies beyond sense perception. This reality is the sole entity which can be said to exist in itself or to exist really. No attempt is made to describe Brahman accurately, perhaps because it transcends all description. Yet it is said to be omniscient, omnipresent, the creator and ruler of the world. The human soul (atman) is of the same nature. A similar tendency at monotheism is noted in the *Gita*. All Hindu reformers defended

monotheism and attributed this quality unequivocally to their religion, beginning with its most ancient writings in the *Veda*.

We come across a similar monotheistic tendency with the modern religious thinkers of the Shinto (See, for example, Anesaki and Kitagawa 1987). Kawate Bunjiro (1814-1883) claimed that God is one and good, and that He is the transcendental creator to whom prayer should be raised from an all-believing heart. He stressed the possibility of direct contact with God through religious experience. A few decades earlier, Kurozumi Munetada (1780-1850) had talked about a comprehensive universal spirit and advocated the brotherhood of mankind. He also called for a religious experience based on meditation and aiming at the realization of divinity in the individual self. What the religions of China say about the Tao or the cosmic order is nothing but an emphasis of one eternal principle which is the ultimate or absolute reality. The end of life, individual and social, is to achieve full union with this reality. If we take our start from the problem of separation and reunion in order to arrive at divinity, the logical consequence is monotheism rather than polytheism. Individual selves came from one eternal reality and not from a plurality of such realities; and the human soul achieves its salvation by means of reuniting itself with this one reality.

This talk about an absolute principle to which the individual self belongs and from which it must not be separated if it desires to achieve purity or salvation is found particularly in the religions of India and China. Perhaps it took the most eloquent expression in Buddhism which avoided, especially in its ancient form known as Theravada or Hinayana, to talk about gods or even about one God, to the extent that some scholars have described it sometimes as agnostic and some other times as atheistic. Some have called it a religion without God. Even when much talk appeared concerning gods, bodhisattvas, or angels with later Buddhism (Mahayana), the immaterial principle remained the sole eternal and ultimate reality from which the individual self was separated and outside of which it cannot find its salvation.

Yet this sort of monotheism does not satisfy certain religious thinkers who relate themselves to a monotheism of an extreme and straightforward variety. They maintain that the one God that these religions might proclaim differs from the one God of the three Abrahamic religions. The God of

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is personal according to them, whereas it is an abstract principle in the polytheistic religions which may profess monotheism. Such a God-principle or God-maker, as we find in the religions of India and China and as Plato and Aristotle designated, urged the French thinker Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) to proclaim that he wanted 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' rather than 'the god of the philosophers' (This is what Pascal wrote following a mystical experience. See Pascal 1976: 43).

But what is the meaning of a personal God? Is He not God the creator, to whom believers raise prayers that He answers? Is He not the one who rewards them for their good deeds and punishes them for evil doing? It is true that the kind of language we come across in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reveals a strong personal relationship between man and God. Yet this relationship is not less personal in other religions: the distinguished god in ancient religions is a personal God, whether one calls him Baal, Marduk, Osiris, Zeus, Jupiter, or Odin. Even the ultimate principle to which the individual self belongs in Hinduism, Buddhism, or Taoism puts the self in a personal relationship with this principle, since here too there is separation and need for reunion. Religion, by nature, is a personal relationship between the individual self and its ultimate ontological reality. Prayer is one of the most important means to approach this reality. Nirvana in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism is the fruit of spiritual exercise and prayer. What is said about the futility of prayer in Taoism and ancient Buddhism should be understood in its context, where prayer refers to a submissive attitude on the part of the individual, which makes him wait passively for salvation or enlightenment without trying to exert any effort.

This allows us to say that the personal relationship between man and God did not begin with the Jews, but is rather to be found, to one extent or another, in all religions. The Jews might have borrowed some aspects of the intense personal language with which they addressed God from the Canaanites. We learn about an intimate relation that linked the Canaanites to the Baal; it was the relationship of the slaves with the master or the citizens with the ruler. The innumerable allusions that the Old Testament makes to God as the 'Lord of lords', 'King of kings', 'King of angels' reveal a manifest influence of the religions that had referred to several gods

besides the one God, especially the religions of the Canaanites, Babylonians, and Egyptians.

The concepts of polytheism and monotheism should therefore be reconsidered. Polytheism, as we have seen, was not absolute in any religion. Indeed, the so-called polytheistic religions did not start like that and then advanced to monotheism as some anthropologists might be tempted to say, relying on inconclusive evidences which happen to have remained from time immemorial. The case is that polytheism and monotheism went side by side in the same religion. One of the best solutions to this problem seems to look at the plurality of gods as representing different functions of one and the same God, rather than taking them as entities in the same logical sense that God is said to be an entity. If we look at polytheism in this light, the so-called deities of polytheistic religions appear as incarnate qualities of the one God, or as the attributes of God, each given a holy cosmic dimension. If we restrict the name 'God' to the privileged god of these religions, and at the same time replace the word 'gods' which abounds in these religions by a word like 'angels', 'powers', or 'hosts', we get a religion not irreconcilably different in function from the Abrahamic religions except perhaps in matters like the names of founders, teachers, and saints, and in the names of angels whose roles overlap in all religions.

Indeed, the ancients did not compare polytheism and monotheism in order to determine which deserves preference, as the treatment of some historians and theologians incites us to think. Nor did they conceive their own religions as pluralistic and non-pluralistic. Rather, they understood their religions rightly as ways of life and adoration, and as means to achieve the desired salvation. The problem of alienation and reunion marks all religions. That is why we commenced this chapter with it and not with the problem of polytheism and monotheism. It is worthy of historians and scholars who draw an absolute distinction between what they call polytheistic religions and what they call monotheistic religions to consider the facts to which we have pointed.

However, this distinction is not confined to historians and scholars, but is to be found in sacred books, with the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus, Saint Paul, and Muhammad. In all these sources we notice a frank insistence on monotheism and a downright rejection of polytheism and

idolatry. The Christian confession of faith starts with the words: 'I/We believe in one God', and the Muslim creed opens with 'There is no god but God'. Yet we must be aware of a very significant fact in this context, namely that those teachers did not accuse a particular religion of polytheism, but they accused individuals. If the 'gods-talk' is no more than a way of talking where gods, as we have remarked, signify functions like fertility, preservation, justice, and mercy, it is not unlikely that, in the minds of ordinary people, the function is transformed into an entity and the attribute is hypostatized. By an error of this kind, the followers of any religion can fall into polytheism. If Saint Paul visits many Christian communities nowadays, will not his spirit stir in him as he will see 'the city...full of idols' (Acts 17: 16), as saints have replaced God in some popular practices of Christianity and in the behaviour of some ecclesiastics who have put themselves in the place of ancient gods? Will not Paul remind them anew of that 'unknown god' for whom they erected a temple and whom they honoured formally without knowing him actually?

All religions agree that there is a certain limitation attendant to our knowledge of God, namely that we do not know Him in Himself or in His nature, but that we can get to know Him only in His manifestations and through our experience. Taoism expressed this attitude by saying that it is impossible to describe the Tao because it is engulfed by cosmic secrets, although it is the active force in things. However, it can be intuited. That is why Taoism asks not 'What is the Tao?', but 'How does the Tao act on things?'. This is the attitude of Hinduism and Buddhism towards absolute reality. Eastern Christianity maintains that man's knowledge of God takes place through His 'energies' diffused in the world, not through His nature or essence. It has been characterized by what is called apophatic (negative) theology and mystical theology. Apophatic theology means describing God by what He is not, or negating anthropomorphic, limited qualities from Him, following the early Fathers whose method reached its climax with Dionysius (the Pseudo-Dionysius) at the end of the fifth century. The negative way recognizes the inability of human understanding and the language that conveys it to comprehend the nature of God, and calls for negating human qualities from Him and confining oneself to saying that He is unseen, unlimited, non-present in time or place, and the like. However, asserting that God is the perfection of knowledge, power, will, and holiness

does not form a qualitative deviation from apophatic theology, since we have not defined God's knowledge, power, will or holiness. Dionysius compared the role of negative theology to the process of cleaning a statue so that its marble appears in its best shape. But what happens after having achieved this? One stands in the presence of the statue and contemplates its beauty.

This is similar to that kind of religious experience expressed by mystical theology: here theology is meditation, prayer, life, and deification rather than abstract or theoretical notions. This explains why the language of religion concerning God is a language of symbol or metaphor. The New Testament is full of attempts to describe the kingdom of God by this kind of symbolism. Every time Jesus intends to talk about the kingdom, he gives an example or suggests a metaphor, starting with an expression of this sort: 'the kingdom of heaven is like...'. Perhaps one is entitled to classify religious art, especially the painting of icons, in this category. Man tries to portray the sacred in order to go a little beyond language. Greek art had much influence in this context not only on Eastern and Western Christianity, but also on Buddhism in India, China, and Japan. The function of symbolism here is not to hide what we know and resort to a suggestive style, but rather to try, with the aid of metaphor, to reveal some concealed aspects of what we do not know.

7. Unity in diversity

The issues that we have treated in this chapter, like fall, salvation, evil, ceremonies, righteousness, meditation, holiness, polytheism, monotheism, and religious experience, have evoked various attitudes and reactions which differed not only from one religion to another, but also inside the same religion. This difference was the origin of different schools, denominations, and sects in this or that religion. If it is true that a great amount of interreligious and interdenominational discord is verbal, this does not necessarily mean that any kind of religious discord at present is merely verbal. However, what is regrettable is that formal differences in the names of prophets, teachers, sacred books, and sects have frequently resulted in defective relations among individuals, nations, and cultures. The paradox is that religions, which came with a message of peace, have a way to become incentives of war. But how can one imagine an exit out of this

paradox? Could it be in originating a common religion which assimilates the elements of harmony while neglecting the elements of discord in religions? Religion is not an artificial synthesis. If one may succeed in 'making' a religion, one will be unable to make it replace existing religions. An example in this context is perhaps that 'religion' which was established in the West at the opening of the twentieth century under the name of Humanism with thriving societies, particularly in Britain and the United States. Although this 'religion' is based on noble sentiments and ideas that men entertain by virtue of their own nature, it remains, in the final analysis, a rational synthesis which does not satisfy men's need for the ritual dimension as do the established religions.

Does the solution, then, lie in imposing one of these religions on mankind? It is evident that such an imposition cannot be peaceful; it can be put into effect only by violence which betrays the cause of religion. Even if some religions adopted violence in the past, this does not mean that it is the right path. Were this imposition to take place really, it would not stop deviations or the rise of divisions. If it so happened that the whole world was made a sole empire by force, in the name not of a certain religion but of a political motto like the 'new international order', and a new Rome emerged claiming divinity and succeeded, to a great extent, in subjugating large numbers of people, this pretentious deity would not be able to enter the hearts of men easily; and a time would certainly come when different interpretations and divergent schools would appear inside this new religion, with the possibility of other religions originating at the same time and need arising to seek ways of reconciliation as difference becomes dissention and dissention violence.

Reconciling divergent religions and denominations is an extremely important task always and everywhere. Yet this does not happen by force or by eradicating the other. Most believers do not choose their religion, but rather find themselves inside it, as they do find themselves in a certain country, family, language, society, and culture. Some individuals may change their religion if they come under certain influences or if they are convinced that the religion they have embraced satisfies their needs more than the one they were born into. Yet such conversions remain relatively rare. What is indeed required more than changing one's religion is to accept others despite their religions. This necessitates the emergence of thinkers

and interpreters in every religion, each of whom takes his starting point from one and the same humanity and aims at one and the same humanity, without attempting a preferential comparison between his religion and the other religions or relegating the peculiar elements of this or that religion to the rank of trivialities. A positive lesson that theologians and religious thinkers in general can learn from the contemporary humanistic movement which attributed to itself the name of religion is that Jesus, Muhammad, and the rest of the prophets, messengers, and divine teachers came not to make their followers 'Christians' or 'Muhammadan' in the nominal or formal sense, but to turn them into saved or new persons.

Humanism which is the essence of religion seems to differ from Feuerbach's finite humanism in being infinite. It is the image of God in man. Was not man, as religions say in one way or another, made in the image and likeness of God? Is not sin, as in the Hindu and Buddhist expressions, the alienation of the individual self from the absolute reality to which it belongs, and salvation the reuniting of oneself with that reality? If polytheism and paganism are one, true paganism lies not in the idolization of natural powers like sun, moon, earth, or water, but rather in the idolization of the individual self, finite and limited as it is. This means that man's greatest falling consists in his self-satisfaction, and consequently in his attempt to transform his ideas, opinions, desires, caprices, sins, limitations, and death into a god that he imposes on others. Religions were aware of this danger, and came to awaken man to his reality and direct him to the right path. Man is virtually free to traverse this way with the company of the Buddha, Zarathustra, Christ, Muhammad, or another divine teacher.

What has been attempted in this chapter is the arrival at common elements in various religions through the method of descriptive comparison as contrasted with that of evaluative comparison. At the background of this method lies the understanding that the differences between religions, manifold as they are, may be viewed as mere differences rather than as differences pointing to value judgements like 'lower' and 'higher', 'good' and 'better', 'wrong' and 'right'.

Upon this descriptive comparison, the following common elements have been noticed: (1) Religions identify the fall of man and the whole of the universe with deviation from the absolute reality which gives meaning and value to everything. Salvation, or the regaining of the paradise, is to be

sought through reuniting being with its true and original source. (2) This theoretical acknowledgement is not enough to achieve the reunion which is no less than one between the finite and the infinite. A body of practices called rites, rituals, or ceremonies is to be found in all religions, serving this aim. Besides doctrines or confessions of faith, they give religion its distinctive characteristic. (3) A further element serving the end of reunion is to be found in ethics. Every religion urges its adherents to obey certain principles and base their conduct on them in order to attain purity and salvation. (4) Religious founders serve as models that believers should emulate in their endeavour to realize the goals of religion. (5) At a lesser plane comes a group of saints or virtuous persons who are said to have succeeded in rising to the utmost level that man can attain and consequently in providing believers with good examples to imitate.

The foregoing elements have been based on a personal research in the world's religions from a phenomenological perspective, and on the attendant method of descriptive comparison. While it seems impracticable to compress them, it is possible to elaborate each of them in such a way that their number is considerably raised. As they stand, however, these elements are basic to the concept of religion adopted in this book, and they are sufficient to enable us to talk about an 'essence' of religion referring not to a superstructure over and above the existing religions, but to a set of functional resemblances. It is precisely such an essence that makes words like 'religion' and 'religions' intelligible as they appear in the titles of books and articles as well as in various forms of specialized and ordinary language.

That there are such elements common to religions does not mean that religious diversity is to be overlooked, understated, or overcome. This fundamental similarity is functional, hence should not preclude the fact that each religion has its own way of looking at fall, salvation, rituals, morality, founders, saints, and at godhood or absolute reality. Therefore, the unity we are after is intended not at the expense of plurality, but amid plurality. This unity in diversity may be referred to as the 'religion' in 'religions'. It signifies the unity of meaning within the variety of expressions. It could be viewed as the rational foundation upon which the revealed rests. For the tenets of a particular religion, embodied usually in its sacred writings, have to be accepted by the human mind as truly sublime before their divine

character may be conceded. What we are saying is indeed a reiteration of an old conviction held by many philosophers and theologians, namely that 'natural religion' serves as the basis on which 'revealed religion' is established, and that revelation is added to reason as 'light upon light' - this light, in both cases, being divine.

Philosophy of religion is the philosophy not of this or that religion, but of such common elements as those that we have identified. It is the philosophy not of 'religions' but of 'religion', that is to say the philosophy of 'religion within religions' or of unity amid diversity.

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