

## Origins of the Religious Quest

AMONG MODERN INTELLECTUALS—especially in the universities—the subject of religion seems to have gone into hiding. Is it because the educated portion of mankind is learning to live with less finality and is coming to distrust embracing formulae of all types? Or is it because in their zeal to liquidate pseudo-knowledge and to discover truth in a piecemeal fashion the universities have found it necessary quietly to adopt a thoroughgoing secularism? Whatever the reason may be, the persistence of religion in the modern world appears as an embarrassment to the scholars of today. Even psychologists, to whom presumably nothing of human concern is alien, are likely to retire into themselves when the subject is broached.

During the past fifty years religion and sex seem to have reversed their positions. Writing in the Victorian age William James could bring himself to devote barely two pages to the role of sex in human life which he labeled euphemistically the "instinct of love." Yet no taboos held him back from directing the torrent of his genius into the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. On religion he spoke freely and with unexcelled brilliance. Today, by contrast, psychologists write with the frankness of Freud or Kinsey on the sexual passions

of mankind, but blush and grow silent when the religious passions come into view. Scarcely any modern textbook writers in psychology devote as much as two shamefaced pages to the subject—even though religion, like sex, is an almost universal interest of the human race.<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to understand the reluctance of psychologists to enter a field that is both technical and tortuous, where institutional interests and historical considerations are of overpowering concern, and where methods of psychological research are few and undependable. It requires a certain hardiness of spirit for a psychologist to pronounce upon a subject that involves so many departments of life, and to which he brings little in the way of special research or knowledge.

Yet he has no right to retire from the field. Fully two-thirds of the adults in our country regard themselves as religious people, and at least nine-tenths, by their own report, believe in God.<sup>2</sup> A sentiment and a belief of such extent cannot be disregarded whether for reasons of professional modesty or disinterest. What is more, at just this juncture of the world's history literate people are growing more and more concerned with the relation between psychology and religion.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the reason is that while the majority subscribe to the tenets of an historic faith they find that they hold the faith with many mental reservations. Why, they

<sup>1</sup> A detailed analysis of the treatment of religion in currently used textbooks is to be found in *College Reading and Religion*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948. Chapter 3 deals with the place accorded to religion in modern textbooks of psychology.

<sup>2</sup> The evidence for these estimates is diverse but fairly secure. See *Opinion News*, April 15, 1948, Chicago: National Opinion Research Center; G. W. Allport, J. M. Gillespie, J. Young, The religion of the post-war college student, *Journal of Psychology*, 1948, 25, 3-33.

<sup>3</sup> One sign of the times is the enormous popularity of a book that attempts to fuse psychiatry and religion: Rabbi Liebman's *Peace of Mind*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946.

wonder, do doubts increasingly haunt them? They note too that, while they still "feel" religious, the regulative principles for their conduct are coming less and less from their religious belief and more and more from psychology, psychiatry, and mental hygiene.

This trend toward doubt, toward secularism, toward psychologism, does not in the slightest degree mean that religion is a thing of the past, or that it is on the way out. History shows that as fast as institutional religion decays it has a way of reviving. The nineteenth century, marked as it was by increasing secularism, none the less witnessed the Oxford Movement, the Evangelical Revival, the birth of Christian Science, and the founding of the Salvation Army. The present century has seen the further spread of these movements and the resurgence of many fundamentalist sects, as well as a striking growth of ecumenicism. But it is not with the condition of organized religion that we are concerned.

The argument of this chapter is that the subjective (personal) religious sentiments of mankind—whatever the fate of institutional religion may be—are very much alive and will perhaps always remain alive, for their roots are many and deep.

#### *Is There a Single Form of the Religious Sentiment?*

Before we ask about the roots of religion in the life of the individual we do well to inquire whether there is a single basic form of experience that is inevitably a part of every religious sentiment.

It would be convenient if we could discover such a common denominator for the religious sentiment. Many attempts have been made to do so. One of the best known of these is Schleiermacher's. This writer claims that the distinctively

religious experience is a "feeling of absolute dependence." In the last analysis religion is a sense of appeal, dependence, surrender. Many subsequent writers have been fascinated by Schleiermacher's attempt to find one central and distinctive attribute in the religious sentiment. But each has preferred his own version of the case.

Rudolf Otto felt that Schleiermacher had overlooked the cognitive counterpart of dependence. After all, the individual, overwhelmed by his own nothingness, is yet aware of a mysterious reality, "tremendous and fascinating," on which he is dependent—a reality "wholly other" than man himself. The intention of the Sanctus in the Mass would, to Otto, represent the quintessence of religion. *Holy, Holy, Holy* is the heart of all religion. Since no other aspect of human experience entails this "amazement absolute," the religious sentiment, Otto concludes, is basically unique and unlike any other human experience.<sup>4</sup>

But even while we are admiring Otto's analysis we turn to Wobbermin and discover that to his mind the feeling of security and the sense of longing are insufficiently represented in either Schleiermacher or Otto. The psalms and prayers in all religious cultures, he insists, are replete with references to both longing and security. In Buddhism, for example, the feeling of dependence, so central to Schleiermacher's analysis, recedes while the feeling of security and poignant longing are dominant.<sup>5</sup>

I shall not multiply examples, for this type of analysis,

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher's argument for the autonomy of the religious sentiment is contained in his *Addresses on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers*. Rudolf Otto's famous work, to which, of course, my brief digest does scant justice, is *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford: University Press, transl. 1923. An excellent secondary survey of the subject is contained in R. F. Davidson's *Rudolf Otto's Interpretation of Religion*, Princeton: University Press, 1947.

<sup>5</sup> G. Wobbermin. *The Nature of Religion*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, transl. 1933, Chapter 6.

however gratifying to the individual author, is foredoomed to failure. Each analyst seems to pinch a bit here and pull a bit there, in order that the formula for subjective religion may include his own introspections. Writers of this type are essentially autobiographical and unconsciously project their own delicate states of religious sensitivity upon all mankind. It is important to reject this approach at the outset, for if the religious sentiment were of uniform composition, marked by a single phenomenal core, then our task of psychological analysis would be straightforward; but if this simplicist approach is not acceptable—and it is not—then our attack must be pluralistic and varied.

Most psychologists who have written on religion seem agreed that there is no single and unique religious emotion, but rather a widely divergent set of experiences that may be focused upon a religious object. It is the habitual and intentional focusing of experience rather than the character of the experience itself that marks the existence of a religious sentiment. The wide variety of emotions that may enter into the religious intention is depicted by James:

There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking in the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations; and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons.<sup>6</sup>

Dunlap denies both a unique or universal religious emotion and likewise the existence of universal religious concepts.

<sup>6</sup> William James. *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902. Modern Library Edit., p. 28. By permission of Longmans, Green & Co.

Although historical religions, he finds, frequently deal with certain common concepts, they do not invariably do so. Interest in divinities generally exists, though not universally. Daimons, spirits, and souls are commonly but not always a matter of concern. Problems of cosmology and metamorphosis are usually present, but there may be exceptions. Sin, salvation, and life after death are topics of only frequent interest. Mystical states and the idea of holiness are usually, but not invariably, included. In dealing with this core of conceptual interests, which is only approximately common, the individual himself experiences an infinite variety of mental states. There are "no feelings and no emotions that are not experienced by devotees of one religion or another; and in most of the religions of the world the whole gamut of feelings and emotions is involved, each emotion or feeling being experienced in appropriate circumstances."<sup>7</sup>

True, James and Dunlap are somewhat extreme in their pluralism. Many authors prefer to establish a fixed norm for the religious sentiment and then to admit, a bit grudgingly, that individual variations do occur. One recent writer, Max Schoen, goes so far as to speak of the religious experience as "subject to a variety of distortions."<sup>8</sup> It seems odd for a psychologist to speak of "distortions of experience." An experience is what you have. While it may conceivably distort reality, it can scarcely distort itself. The error of Schoen, and of the majority of writers on religion in its subjective aspects, is that they do not refer the task of characterizing the religious consciousness to the only authorities capable of knowing what it is—namely the individuals who experience it.

In denying that the religious pattern in the individual's life

<sup>7</sup> From *Religion: Its Function in Human Life* by K. Dunlap, 1946. Courtesy of McGraw-Hill Book Co.

<sup>8</sup> Max Schoen. *Thinking about Religion*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1946, p. 12.

possesses a standard form, we are not thereby denying it a personal form. Quite the contrary, in any given individual there are characteristic feelings and recurrent concepts highly typical of his own mental life. He is likely to have a well-organized personal sentiment that can presumably, with intensive psychological study, be accurately construed and understood. Even though in their religious lives people are not consistent with one another, they are as a rule markedly consistent with themselves.

### *Is There a Common Origin of the Religious Sentiment?*

Just as there is no standard pattern of content in subjective religious experience, so too there is no common point of origin. To deny the existence of a single religious *instinct* entails no heresy in modern psychology, for it would be difficult to find any writer who makes a case for such an instinct. Even McDougall, the arch instinctivist of the present century, found no evidence for a single underlying religious propensity. Rather, he considered the emotion of reverence to be very complex. Into it enters awe which itself is a blend of *fear* and *admiration*. Admiration, in turn, represents a fusion of *negative self-feeling* and *wonder*. In addition, reverence includes *gratitude*, a binary compound of the *tender emotion* and *negative self-feeling*. Underlying this emotional complex at least four McDougallian propensities are at work: curiosity, self-abasement, flight, and the parental instinct.<sup>9</sup>

Though we fail to find psychological support for a single and specific religious instinct we do find a tendency to identify religious thought and feeling with the operation of some one single bodily or mental mechanism. The theory of sex repres-

<sup>9</sup> W. McDougall. *Outline of Psychology*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923, p. 334.

sion, for example, has its devotees. For evidence they cite the prominence of sex symbols in religion and the orgiastic nature of some forms of religious frenzy and mystical fantasy.<sup>10</sup> Religion, they maintain, is a thinly veiled sublimation of the aim-inhibited sexual impulse. But this line of reasoning overlooks the even greater emphasis that religion gives to symbols of nutrition, security, repose. It is likewise specifically guilty of confusing all forms of excitement with sex emotion, or else of darkening counsel by equating sex with completeness. In any case it overlooks the passionlessness that marks so much of religion. Also, we know, religion flourishes over the face of the earth in places and in epochs that know no sex repression. If further refutation be needed, we have reports from present-day youth. Given a free and anonymous opportunity to comment on this subject, only 8 per cent of 500 students recently interrogated thought sex turmoil was a factor in their religious awakening, while 23 per cent mentioned gratitude, 17 per cent sorrow and bereavement, and 42 per cent fear and insecurity.<sup>11</sup>

As if to discredit the evidence of such introspective reports another simple and sovereign correlate of the religious life has been advanced, namely, the alleged operation of the "unconscious." If the roots of religion lie wholly below the threshold of awareness, then, of course, introspection is valueless. The famous exponent of this view is Freud who maintains that the individual's conception of God "is in every case modeled after the father." Our personal relation to God is dependent upon our relation to our physical parent. "God is at bottom nothing but an exalted father."<sup>12</sup> If true, the

<sup>10</sup> Cf. James H. Leuba. *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925; and Theodore Schroeder. "The erotogenesis of religion," *The Alienist and Neurologist*, 1913, 34, 3-25.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter Two, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud. *Totem and Taboo*, New York: Moffat, Yard and Company (translated by A. A. Brill), 1918, p. 242.

correctness of this statement depends upon the existence of deeply repressed, infantile ideas which, Freud thinks, strive to express themselves whenever the individual finds life rough going.

There are many other ways in which religion has been tied to the unconscious. William James, for example, invoked the hypothesis of a subliminal connection between the individual's mind and a universal mind. The island of individual consciousness, to use his analogy, rests ultimately upon the limitless ocean floor from which it draws its composition and support. The theory that the individual mind is merely a fragment of a universal mind is common in many religions as diverse in type as Hinduism and Christian Science. To some extent this theory seems to be present in nearly every religion. Its merit, as James himself clearly saw, is metaphysical rather than psychological. It provides a possible channel for the inrush of divine consciousness into the individual mind.

Psychologically, any theory of unconscious origins is difficult to prove or to disprove. The only thing we can be sure of is that such theories are one-sided. The force of the unconscious cannot be the whole story, for a large array of conscious causal forces lie also at hand.

Perhaps the most striking fact about subjective religion is the contrast between its essential simplicity when, well-formed, it is playing its part in the economy of the personal life, and its extreme complexity in the process of forming. It is a rich pudding, smooth and simple in its blend, but intricate in ingredients. Or, to dignify the metaphor, it is a white light in personality which, though luminous and simple, is in reality multicolored in composition.

To make a spectroscopic analysis is not easy, since the prisms of each personality are unique. In nearly all instances, however, we find that in the course of development the religion of the individual has been refracted by (1) his bodily

needs, (2) his temperament and mental capacity, (3) his psychogenic interests and values, (4) his pursuit of rational explanation, and (5) his response to the surrounding culture. Each of these formative factors requires separate comment, although it is only through their synthesis that they engender the religious sentiment.

### *The Role of Organic Desire*

All of human life revolves around desire. And, as Dunlap says, "there seem to be no desires that are not, or have not at some time been, items in religions. Prayer certainly is an expression of desire, and there is nothing which man could desire that some man does not or has not prayed for."<sup>18</sup>

Among the basic desires of men are those pertaining to food, water, and shelter. Fear, too, is an early and important ingredient in the individual and in the race. Man's life, bracketed between two oblivions, is haunted by fear—of enemies, of nature, of sickness, poverty, ostracism; most of all of death, for of all creatures on earth man alone knows that he will die. Do we invoke the protection of an amulet, do we trust ourselves to the everlasting arms, do we discipline ourselves to seek Nirvana and so escape the threats that hover over us? To demand some form of reassurance is a spontaneous response to insecurity. The typical religious supplication results, with variants in all faiths:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land.  
I am weak but thou art mighty,  
Hold me with thy powerful hand.

The reciprocal of fear is the desire for companionship. In most human beings the capacity to love is great and the desire

<sup>18</sup> Dunlap. *Op. cit.*, p. 126.

for love insatiable. It is doubtful whether even the happiest of earthly lovers ever feel that they love or are loved enough. A margin of yearning remains. And if death takes the beloved from this world, the desire mounts. A small child in her bereavement nightly addressed her prayers to her dead mother. Culture did not sanction this practice; it was not taught by her elders. Rather it was for her a spontaneous solution of an insupportable conflict. Her religion was nourished by her orphan hunger.

Customarily it is in the critical periods of life, when desire is more intense, that religious consciousness is acute. Many people are religious only in moments of crisis; the rest of the time they rub along comfortably and godlessly, content to let their religious sentiment lie dormant. But it is important to note that what is felt as a crisis by one person is often not so regarded by another. One young girl became devout in the course of praying that her parents might not obtain a divorce, another in her desire to be delivered from haunting nightmares. Bereavement or self-reproach often engender vivid religious experience. The longing for a suitable marriage may lead the Catholic maiden to say a Novena for divine assistance. Over and over again in a multitude of ways, the religion of the individual brings to a focus the mingled motives and desires of an unfulfilled life.

It is unnecessary to exhaust the list of contributing desires. Their multiplicity is indicated by the varying conceptions of deity held by different individuals and by one and the same individual at different periods of time. Sometimes the attribute of power is stressed; God is omnipotent—the creator and able to still the tempests; the heavens declare His glory. Sometimes He is the source of security and strength, an ever-present help in time of trouble. Often He is cosmic perfection, to be worshiped in the beauty of holiness. When we need affection, God is love, knowledge, He is omniscient; consolation, He granteth peace that passeth understanding.

When we have sinned, He is the Redeemer; when we need guidance, the Holy Spirit. Divine attributes plainly conform to the panorama of desire, although the individual is seldom aware that his approach to his deity is determined by his present needs.

An interesting rite in the Hindu religion here comes to mind. Around the age of sixteen or eighteen, the Hindu youth receives from his teacher a name for God which all his life long shall serve this youth as a private instrument for prayer and for binding himself to the deity. In this custom Hinduism recognizes that the temperament, needs, and capacities of the initiate himself must in large part determine his approach to religious verities. A young person with an unusually affectionate nature will seek in God the complement to his love. Hence the name "Beloved" may be privately assigned to him. A theoretically minded youth may be advised to select *Soham*, a name that affirms the unity of all existence. In preparation for this rite the teacher assumes the responsibility for correctly assessing the personality of his charge. Although other religions provide personal counsel for the initiate at the threshold of maturity, probably none goes to such lengths in making a close analysis of the youthful personality. In this practice we have a rare instance of an institutional religion recognizing the ultimate individuality of the religious sentiment. The fact that the teacher takes upon himself more responsibility than a psychodiagnostician in the West would like to assume is not here the issue.

In India it is not enough that each individual should have a name for the deity suited to his own personal needs; it is also strictly advised that this name be kept secret even from one's bosom friends and from one's spouse. In the last analysis each person confronts his deity in solitude, and it is thought well to symbolize this fact, especially in overcrowded households and communities, with the seal of

secrecy. It has been said that a congenial husband and wife, or two bosom friends, not infrequently have received identical names for God, thus signifying the astuteness of teachers in perceiving the likemindedness of two developing personalities. But so closely are the names guarded that the frequency of this occurrence cannot accurately be estimated.

### Temperament

This Hindu rite clearly recognizes underlying differences in temperamental constitution. Some men live always close to the region of pain and melancholy; they are bound to emphasize the grimmer aspects of whatever they encounter, and to stain their religious sentiment with their sense of futility. Others have started in life with sparklets and bells; even in their moments of dependence they incline to take a sanguine view of the operations of Providence. Both the gloomy and the gay may be concerned with the wrongness of life and may seek a religious mode of righting it, but their paths will be separate. Their theological and ritualistic preferences will differ according to their emotional thresholds, according to the quality of their prevailing mood, and according to their tendency to express or to inhibit feeling. Moreover, they are likely to be sharply biased in favor of these preferences, and correspondingly critical of others who find a different sort of religion better adapted to their needs. In this obdurate fact of temperament there lies a practical limitation to the aspirations of the current ecumenical movement.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> I do not mean, of course, that the ecumenical movement is foredoomed to failure. Roman Catholicism and Hinduism, both quasi-ecumenical, find place for a great variety of temperaments. But it is difficult to write a formula for church unity in advance that will adequately respect the varieties of temperament seeking satisfaction in organized religion.

The roots of religion that lie in temperament are but poorly understood. Indeed, the entire relation of genetics to the temperamental foundations of personality is still unexplored territory. The time is fast approaching, however, when psychologists who have banked so heavily upon the forces of the environment in fashioning personality will have to devote an equivalent amount of energy to the study of the inborn climate of personality. Until they do so, a false picture of human nature will prevail.<sup>15</sup>

### *Psychogenic Desires and Spiritual Values*

I have suggested that subjective religion is, in the first instance, the flower of desire. Many desires, including those having to do with nourishment, rest, sex, and physical safety, are clearly organic in character. We share them with all animal life. For the most part these viscerogenic desires have a one-to-one correspondence with the tissue needs of the body. But there are other desires, psychogenic in character, that are very different from viscerogenic desires. We recognize the latter as subjective and private, and though they may indirectly nourish the religious hunger, especially when they are blocked, yet in themselves they normally clamor for objects which bring direct bodily satisfaction. Psychogenic desires, by contrast, are objectified. We long for information, let us say, and we locate the desired knowledge somewhere outside ourselves, calling it Truth. Or perhaps we long for fair and just social relations, and call them Good, again objectifying the value we seek. A symphony or a stained glass window furnishes satisfaction to our aesthetic hungers. Beauty

<sup>15</sup> William H. Sheldon's *Varieties of Human Temperament*, New York: Harper, 1942, is a book that somewhat alleviates our ignorance but at the same time makes us aware of the long road of research that lies ahead.

too we locate outside ourselves. The inner restlessness that seeks satisfactions of this order is more complex than the specifically localized, segmental drives of the body. It is also a distinctively human, as opposed to animal, motive.

Now anything that yields a satisfaction or provides a means for such satisfaction we designate a "value." Chronologically the viscerogenic or "bodily" values precede the psychogenic or "spiritual" values. Further, all values grow ever more generalized. The infant, who at first merely "consumes" one concrete value after another as they are successively presented to him, soon comes to recognize food, companionship, playthings, as broad categories of desiderata. Similarly in the psychogenic realm, not only does some particular act of justice yield satisfaction but it does so for the reason that it conforms to an abstracted class of activities that constitute our sense of what is good and right. Gradually then we come to regard Goodness, Beauty, Truth, Holiness as categorical. They exist outside ourselves, in some realm of essences, and determine the objects toward which much of our striving is directed. Not all psychogenic interests are socially or spiritually desirable. There are hungers for self-expression, for adventure, for power, which, I believe, are properly classed as psychogenic, but these are readily recognized as being relatively self-centered and not so widely removed from the viscerogenic drives in which they originated.

To illustrate the evolution of values and their final bearing upon subjective religion, let us take the central phenomenon of egoism. The infant, so far as we can tell, is not at all self-conscious. He reacts to stimuli, expresses his wants, consumes the satisfaction offered, and lapses into quiescence. Philosophically we are probably required to attribute to the infant from birth, if not before, the possession of a self; but with almost perfect assurance we can assert that only in the second year of life does he commence to relate his experiences

to himself and begin to act as a reflexly conscious agent. Only when he comes to resent offenses against his person, encroachments upon his dignity, is he building up a sense of his own ego as an object of value. This stage in a child's development, marked, as it usually is, by stubbornness and negativism, is unmistakable. From the age of two onward the most universal of all values resides in the keen sense of individuality which constantly demands self-expression, craves power, and feels pride. Our organisms are so constructed that our personal life is the highest value that we ever know directly. Yet by indirect stages the evolution of this value continues much further.

Soon I come to ask myself, "If I am acutely self-conscious and disposed to brook no lese majeste against my person, are not others, in all probability, equally attached to their egos?" And thus abstracting from my physical individuality the general concept of selfhood, I gradually come to value whatever makes for the conservation of personal integrity anywhere. The Natural Rights of Man, the Golden Rule, the Second Commandment of Christ, are varied statements of the value that I affirm, I affirm it because in the course of my own development the generalizing powers of my mind have brought my own sense of selfhood into higher combinations. Where once only my personal life was the supreme value, I now acknowledge the worth of any person. And this enlarged value may come to subsume, depending on my own trends of logic and the teaching offered me, many subordinate values such as charity, tolerance, equality. My concept of the person may by now be even divested of corporeal attributes without thereby losing its insistent character. God Himself I may declare to be the supreme expression of personality, a necessary and final value required to explain and to conserve all other values of selfhood.

This psychogenic interest in the integrity of personality beginning with my own ego, and developing finally to em-

brace both an ethics and a theology, is only one illustration of the process I am depicting. The world of art, the world of science, as well as the social universe around us, are all concerned with the production of values capable both of satisfying us and enlarging our horizon. We become eager that no value should perish. God as Beauty would guarantee the conservation of the values in art; God as Truth would assure them to science and philosophy; God as Love would conserve all that strikes us as valid and worth preserving in human relations; God as Infinite would establish the interconnectedness of values in all these realms. It is this line of thought that led Höfdding to declare all religion to be motivated by the individual's desire to conserve value.<sup>16</sup> What he will wish to conserve depends upon his own needs, and needs vary from individual to individual, from nation to nation, and from time to time. When values do not rise above the egoistic level, the resulting religion is designed to conserve self-interest; when they are more highly abstracted and generalized, as in the affirmation of the worth of personality, the character of the religious faith broadens. Höfdding notes further that it is when values come into conflict with the struggle for existence that subjective religion is most acutely felt, for when values are threatened a conserving agent is most needed. Thus it comes about that under conditions of fear, illness, bereavement, guilt, deprivation, insecurity, the restoration of values through religion is commonly sought.

#### *Pursuit of Meaning*

Now the factors that we have been considering—desire, temperament, values—are relatively speaking the more emotional roots of the religious sentiment in the individual. It is

<sup>16</sup> Harald Höfdding. *The Philosophy of Religion*, transl. B. E. Meyer, New York: Macmillan, 1906.

unfortunate that limitations of vocabulary force psychological analysis to treat emotion and reason, affection and cognition, as if they were separate provinces of mental life. From the point of view of the concrete functioning of the human mind nothing could be more false than is this division. In reality every emotional state is freighted with knowledge. Take two such elementary passions as terror and anger. The distinction between them, odd though it seems, is largely cognitive in character, for the bodily changes in both are virtually identical. In terror we know we are trapped; in anger we figure we have a fighting chance. Though the cognitive ingredients are swiftly and subtly marshaled, no emotion is devoid of them. Conversely, even our most crystal clear moments of logical reasoning would not take place at all unless they were sustained by present motivation (that is to say, by some state of desire).

It follows that subjective religion, like all normal sentiments, must be viewed as an indistinguishable blend of emotion and reason, of feeling and meaning. When we study it we are dealing with neither rationality nor irrationality, but rather with a posture of the mind in which emotion and logical thinking fuse. We are dealing with a mode of response wherein a combination of feelings is tied to a conception of the nature of things that is thought-provoking, reasonable, and acceptable. It is regrettable that we have no term in the lexicon of psychology to designate this cognitive-affective fusion. The only term that approximately fills our need, and the one we shall adopt, is "sentiment," though its flavor unfortunately suggests feeling more than meaning.

Because of this unbalanced connotation it is necessary to call special attention to the explanatory significance of the religious sentiment in the individual's life. He may, in a cool Thomistic manner, be able to demonstrate to himself the steps of proof for the existence of God, and continue, in the

same fashion, to define the world in such a way that all his thoughts and feelings slip nicely into place. Under the guidance of such a sentiment, unifying feeling and meaning, his life proceeds fluently, and he experiences both ease and peace. All the great religions of the world supply, for those who can subscribe to their arguments and affirmations, a world-conception that has logical simplicity and serene majesty.

Most individuals, however, are not sufficiently contemplative nor sufficiently imitative to adopt in toto the explanation offered by any one master theologian. They may grasp parts of his system of thought, and sense the direction of the system as a whole. But they find that they require their own interpretations when they are in the grip of the engrossing pressures of their lives. In times of acute desire it is not the perfection of a system as a whole that satisfies but some aspect of it that renders intelligible and supportable the needs of the moment.

I am saying that all the while we are fretting, desiring, valuing, we are often busily seeking to interpret our own unrest. Early we come to realize that our frustrated longings are not in any literal or direct way satisfied through religion. Terrestrial food, drink, shelter are still necessary for survival; justice, beauty, truth, are still sought; but we do ask why we have such longing, what is the purpose of seeking its satisfaction? What is it all about anyhow? In many lives questions of this sort are remarkably insistent, and the curiosity they engender, like the clinging ivy, fiercely demands a support.

The universe is simply incomprehensible. Fragments of it may be fairly well understood, but not the interrelation of these fragments, and certainly not the design of the whole. Every man wonders at times about the void which gave way to creation, and about the successive links that connect this original void to his own momentary state of wonder. To many

men, religion is primarily a search for complete knowledge, for unfissioned truth.

This appetite for meaning differs from person to person, and owing to nature's preference for diversity, some are satiated earlier than others. Furthermore, the capacities of individuals for comprehension differ, as do ability and inclination to make use of scientific explanations or of poetic metaphor. No two people have identical intellectual difficulties or powers, and hence no two reach identical solutions.

#### *Is This Rationalizing Tendency Magical?*

Some writers scoff at this rationalizing tendency in religious thinking, and regard it merely as a prelogical prelude to empirical and scientific thinking. This view was a favorite with certain older anthropologists who, possessing a handful of evidence from primitive tribes, argued that people who think religiously are, like primitives, living in a magical phase of development. The argument holds that we confuse the utilitarian and the sacred. Unable to control scientifically the propagation of plants, the navigation of ships, the construction of durable and effective tools and weapons, the primitive is said to have recourse to incantation, ritual, and prayer. Similarly in our own culture the child or the ignorant adult resorts to religious practices instead of adopting empirical procedures in order to solve his dilemma.

The error in this derivation of the religious sentiment is partly a mistake in fact and partly a mistake in interpretation. Pointing to the error in fact, Malinowski has shown that the Trobriand Islander, for example, possesses an impressive and accurate store of scientific knowledge that governs his fishing, gardening, and boat-construction. He is realistic and genuinely scientific in much of his thinking and behavior. It is

true that, side by side with this severely empirical mode of thought, there exists a system of magical practices and beliefs, but these are specifically not confused with it.<sup>17</sup> The native knows full well that successful results will follow only from empirically proper manipulations. At the same time he knows there are factors in the situation beyond his rational understanding and control. For this reason he engages, just as do the majority of people the world over, in a dual set of expressions, the one to deal with factors within comprehension and control, the other with factors beyond comprehension and control.

Take the case of sickness and death. All people of all times have had scientific remedies to employ, medicinal herbs, techniques of first aid, therapeutic exercises. But they have also invoked religious aid. In our own culture the dual nature of these resources is clearly recognized. We know that when we summon a doctor and when we summon a priest we are acting on entirely different levels. Probably to the primitive the boundary is somewhat more obscure, and yet, according to Malinowski, he too is not unaware of transposing his problems to the religious plane.

The point is even more clearly brought out in bereavement. Probably no people on earth, primitive or civilized, believe that incantation, ritual, or prayer will resuscitate a corpse. Yet, as Parsons has pointed out, in no society does death lack ritual observances far in excess of the utilitarian need for disposing of the corpse and for making other practical adjustments. The strong emotions caused by bereavement have everywhere resulted in the development of religious ceremonies that are engaged in simply because minimal practical adjustments are felt to be inadequate. Thus, we cannot concede that funeral ceremonies, whether in the primitive or

<sup>17</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1948.

in the civilized world, are the result merely of an unscientific view of death.<sup>18</sup>

If religious thinking were identical with prelogical thinking we could not account for many facts in the development of our own culture. History shows us that with relatively few exceptions religious institutions themselves have fostered the development of logic, mathematics, and scientific method. Church schools, with few exceptions, teach the same science as do private universities. And we could probably prove that throughout history those Christians who have accomplished the most practical benefit in this world are those who believed most fervently in the next.

The fact of the matter is that scientific thought is known by most people, primitive or civilized, to be able to cover only part of the ground. It goes a long way but not far enough. In Max Weber's terminology science deals with problems of empirical causation, religion with problems of adequate meaning. For most people, even for primitives, it is not hard to assign to science that which is science's and to religion that which is religion's. How the atomic energy of the sun reaches the earth or how it may be released through nuclear fission are problems of empirical causation. Problems of the creation, purpose, and ethical control of atomic energy are all of a different stripe. How a young child came to be burned to death is an empirical question that can be answered; why such things must happen is a question of a wholly different order.

#### *The Bias of Intelligibility and the Bias of Optimism*

For the most part the problems of meaning which people commonly refer to the religious mode of thought have to do

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Talcott Parsons. The theoretical development of the sociology of religion, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1944, 5, 176-190.

with the issue of creation or with the issue of evil. Cosmological wonder is surely one of the commonest of all origins of religious thinking. "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the world?" the Lord asks of Job.

But even more insistent is preoccupation with evil, reflected in the great literature of all religions. Typical are the opening pages of the *Yogavasishta*, a sacred Hindu text dating probably from the sixth century.<sup>19</sup>

What happiness can there be in the world where everyone is born to die? Everything comes into existence only to pass away. . . . Life is as evanescent as autumnal clouds, as the light of an oilless lamp, and as the ripples on the surface of water. . . . Desire is as fickle as a monkey. It is never satisfied with the objects already in hand, but jumps to other unattained ones. . . . There is nothing good in the body. It is an abode of disease, a receptacle of all kinds of agonies, and subject to decay. . . . What delight can we have in the portion of our life called youth, which comes like a flash of lightning, soon to be inevitably followed by the thunderclaps and the agonies of old age? . . . What direction is there from which cries of suffering are not heard? . . . Let me know the best possible secret of becoming free from the sufferings of life.

Like many religious systems the *Yogavasishta* is intended for people who are keenly alive to the undesirable aspects of life and eager to know the secret of self-liberation.

The purpose of creation and evil are twin problems of meaning that have throughout the ages been referred to religious systems for their solution. In virtually every life these problems exist side by side, although it is quite customary for one individual to direct his quest more pointedly toward the solution of one of these problems than of the other.

To the extent that the individual finds some approximate or partial solution to these vexing problems, his whole life

<sup>19</sup> B. L. Atreya. *The Yogavasishta and Its Philosophy*, Benares: The Indian Bookshop, 1939 (rev. ed.).

is shifted in some degree toward intelligibility and optimism. Religious people are often heard to say, "I don't know what I would do without religion." This remark testifies to the relatively satisfying framework of meaning they have attained. To destroy such intelligibility and such optimism would be to cut much of the ground from under their existence.

Does this frequent bias of religion toward optimism, intelligibility, and the conservation of value indicate wishful thinking? Although the charge is commonly made, it is usually superficial. For one thing it overlooks the fact that the character of the hope and the tenor of the explanations involved in religion have very little to do with the clamorous wishes of ordinary life. What is demanded by the great religions is self-abnegation, discipline, surrender. To find one's life one must lose it. Such a transposition of values is too extensive to be covered by the formula of autism that is applied appropriately only to daydreams and to the rationalizations of daily life that are transparent in their self-centeredness. Only occasionally, I think, do we find individuals in whom religion runs its course on the level of wish-fulfilling fantasy. When this occurs we are dealing with a merely abortive religious sentiment in the individual.

The bias of intelligibility is by no means peculiar to the religious outlook on life. It saturates mental processes of all types. Take simple sensory perception, for example. As we let our eye wander about the room in which we sit, we conveniently overlook the sensory gaps that result from the blindspots in our retinas. When we read a page of proof we are satisfied with the meaning we derive that we may overlook many typographical errors. When we think of a race of people, perhaps with a feeling of dislike or hostility, we have created an inner world of meaning that finds little or no support in biological or anthropological fact. All our life is biased in the direction of obtaining simplified perceptions and categorical meanings. If we say that the intelligibilities

of religious people leap far ahead of verifiable evidence, we must not forget that the intelligibilities of irreligious people do so likewise. All our cognitive operations press toward coherence and unity. Whether we be theists or atheists, we are prone to stereotype the world we live in.

Equally inevitable is our bias toward optimism. No young man, says G. B. Shaw, ever *really* believes that he is going to die. The doctor and his patient usually assume, and always act, as though health will result from the medical service. Yet a doctor who himself lived long enough would be bound to lose every one of his patients, and equally bound to suppress this certainty of defeat in favor of the optimistic bias. Most college students, we know, have a rosy and unreal view of the income they will earn after leaving college. But we regard this optimistic tendency as a wholesome mark of aspiration and legitimate ambition, and not as illusion, because after all there is a genuine element of uncertainty involved. All of us expect to be alive next year and yet actuarial estimates indicate that one and a half per cent of us will not be. Wherever there is uncertainty, hope springs eternal. The irreligious individual no less than the religious plans for a happy landing.

And so we see why it is unsound to trace the origin of the religious quest to the desire for escape from reality. It is true that religion tends to define reality as congenial to the powers and aspirations of the individual, but so too does any working principle that sustains human endeavor. Those who find the religious principle of life illusory would do well not to scrutinize their own working principles too closely.

### *Culture and Conformity*

I have argued that desiring and valuing and the pursuit of meaning, conditioned by temperament and capacity, spin

the threads that become woven into the subjective religious pattern, and that the infinite diversity of these threads guarantees that each weaver's design will be unique. But am I not in danger of overstating the case for pluralism? Must we not grant that culture imposes rigid constraints that tend to offset nature's preference for diversity? A child brought up in the Confucian tradition could not possibly arrive unaided at the intricate system of Christian theological beliefs held by many inhabitants of the Western world. And why throughout the ages has proselyting into far lands been necessary except to offset the strict cultural determination of religious belief?

Conformity to culture, especially during the period of childhood, is indeed an important origin of the religious quest. In all lands the social training of the child directs him to translate tribal ritual into personal habits. At first the religious practices prescribed for the young child have no meaning for him, at least none of the meaning that they will later come to have. He regards the ritual as something that his group (his family or his tribe) engages in, and learns that to perform the required act is to cement his identification with those who provide him security, affection, approval. The fast of Ramadan, the prayers of the rosary, grace at table, a silent Quaker meeting—a child ordinarily learns to participate in these rites before he learns the corresponding myth that explains their purpose. And when the myth is learned it too is at first accepted without question for the same reason the ritual was adopted. The in-group is safe and familiar and therefore whatever it does and says is good and right.

We accept this interpretation offered us by cultural anthropology, and we accept likewise three additional facts of importance taught by this discipline. First, the cultures of all peoples in the world give great prominence to ritual and myth, and all possess some mode of organization or priesthood to sustain religious beliefs and practice. Secondly, wherever religious systems are hopelessly disrupted, the consequences

for the life of the people are disastrous, unless some equivalent systems of belief replace them. Thirdly, religious systems are not independent of the remaining portions of a culture, but are intimately integrated with them. For this reason the supplanting of one religion by another is not possible unless the culture itself is basically altered. The threads of religion are lockstitched into the social and economic fabric. Agricultural peoples worship deities of fruition. In India the caste system has been closely bound to the belief in the transmigration of souls; for if one's deeds in a previous existence are responsible for the state of one's life in this world, there is little point in protesting against one's present placement in a caste. And our own Protestantism, as Max Weber makes us see, is inextricably related to the rise of capitalism in the West. Whether we could have had one without the other is doubtful.

In view of all these indisputable ties between religion and culture would it not be wise to define the former in terms of the latter? Should we not say that religion is merely a culturally created design for living, acting as a potential guide for the behavior of men? That its utility within the culture guarantees that it will be handed on from father to son? And that the child believes what he believes because he was taught to believe it?

Many social scientists are content with this type of analysis, but it is far too gross. For one thing it assumes that the religious sentiment of an individual is a faithful replica of the cultural model that is offered him. We can put this assumption to a test very easily by asking ourselves whether our religious views do in fact mirror faithfully those of our parents, teachers, or clergy. There would be few affirmative answers to this question. How then does it come about that so many individuals within a culture fail to reflect the systems of belief that were carefully taught them?

The reason is that the place of religion in the personal

life is basically different from its place in society. The social scientist argues that the function of religion is to produce social stability. Yet no individual, I venture to assert, is religious for any such reason. Indeed, most people would hasten to discard their religion if they thought it was merely a device to keep them out of the hands of the police and out of their neighbor's hair. Further, the social scientist tells us that religion is a culturally sanctioned vent for the release of overstrong emotions which would be disruptive if expressed in society. But from the individual's point of view strong emotions are only rarely involved in his religious life, and their social control is a matter of no particular concern to him.

It is certainly true that rulers in all ages have enjoined religious faith and observance upon their subjects in order to secure social stability and prevent untimely outbursts of passion, but the *individuals* concerned are not motivated by any such political considerations. Machiavelli saw in the Church an instrument for maintaining civil peace, while his contemporary, St. Catherine of Genoa, found in it the motive and meaning for a life of exceptional charity and devotion. There is a world of difference between the ruler's view and the participant's view.

Up to now the social scientist has looked so closely at the prescribed codes of institutional religion and at their consequences in terms of social control, that he has failed to think of the participant. The person who conforms to a religious custom does so for his own private reasons and derives from his conformity some special significance for his own life. In the Middle East on Fridays one may enter a mosque and witness a sea of humanity kneeling and bending low in the direction of Mecca. The wave of conformity is like that of a vast impersonal tide. Yet, from the point of view of subjective religion, the significance of the devotion is different for each Moslem. All over the world on Sundays millions of

Christians recite a common creed, with innumerable shades of interpretation. Such variety neither invalidates nor weakens any historic faith. It does, however, if properly taken into account, rectify and enrich the approach of both social scientists and theologians to their respective tasks.

### Conclusion

The conclusion we come to is that the subjective religious attitude of every individual is, in both its essential and non-essential features, unlike that of any other individual. The moods of religion are so numerous, the weight of their influence in individual lives so varied, and the forms of rational interpretation so endless, that uniformity of product is impossible. Only in respect to certain basic biological functions do men closely resemble one another. In the higher reaches of personality uniqueness of organization becomes more apparent. And since no department of personality is subject to more complex development than the religious sentiment, it is precisely in this area that we must expect to find the ultimate divergences.

This conclusion, I know, will be uncongenial to many. It will offend some scientists who will ask, "How can we possibly classify phenomena that are unique, and does not all science of necessity proceed by classification?" It will disturb some historians and sociologists who like to think that the individual cannot help but mirror the cultural model offered to him as a guide to his development. It will be unpalatable likewise to those theologians and churchmen who deceive themselves by thinking their followers are safely and entirely within some particular ecclesiastical fold.

Yet this conclusion, rightly understood and carefully pondered, will, I maintain, ultimately benefit psychological and

social science, and theology as well, if these disciplines will but flex themselves to accommodate the one disturbing truth that there are as many varieties of religious experience as there are religiously inclined mortals upon the earth.

T W O

## The Religion of Youth

JUDGED BY ADULT STANDARDS the young child's world of experience is peculiar. Parents are likely to be alternately amused and harassed by their offspring's unruly view of reality. It is not that the child's sensations, pains, and pleasures are so different from the adult's—though from what we know they seem to be comparatively more acute—but the interpretations he places upon them are wholly his own. What to his elders is a stick of kindling wood is to him a beloved doll. What to his elders is a mysterious occurrence, may by him be taken for granted; and what is taken for granted by his elders, may to him be mysterious. Since religion, whatever else it may be, involves meaning and interpretation at every step, we must concede at the outset that religion of childhood is of a very special order, having little in common with the religion of adulthood.

### Early Childhood

In infancy, of course, religion is lacking. Desires there are, and a rudimentary social responsiveness; but neither intelligence nor self-consciousness are sufficiently developed to sustain anything that might be called a sentiment, least of all