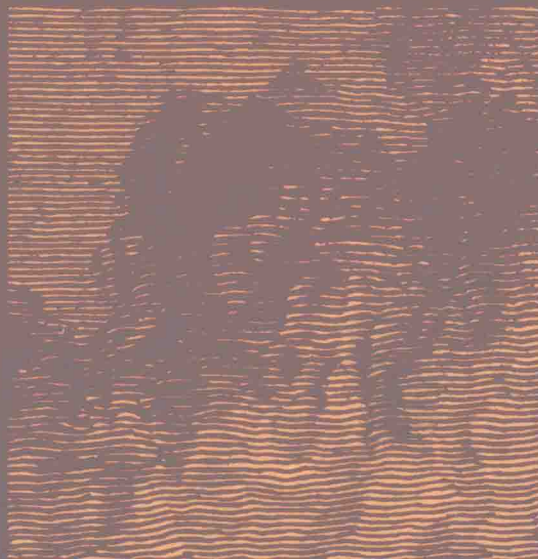


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EXPLORING RELIGIOUS MEANING

THIRD EDITION



EXPLORING RELIGIOUS MEANING

third edition

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To the memory of

Mary Ida and Walter C. Hofheinz

with gratitude to

Carolyn Monk

Carol Lawrence

Sarah Stamey

Patsy Affleck

Judy Yamamori

Preface

This book is intended to serve as a set of tools and resources for exploring the many dimensions of religion as a central activity of human beings. It was designed with introductory courses in religion, religion and culture, and the humanities in mind. It is useful as a supplementary text for courses in comparative religion, philosophy of religion, and sociology of religion. It is indexed in ways that suggest a variety of uses in classroom settings or for independent research. Both instructors and individuals interested in independent study will find the indexes useful.

The design of *Exploring Religious Meaning* suggests an approach to inquiry that may be called inductive and integrative. Many of the readings are taken from the Scriptures and classic literature of the world's great religions. Others are drawn from classic and contemporary sources that seek to interpret religion in its various dimensions—theological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, cultural. Some materials are drawn from areas of contemporary culture where religious experience and stances of religious commitment are actualized, appreciated, or criticized: cartoons, poetry, drama, motion pictures, news stories, song lyrics. The materials are presented in a variety of ways—in juxtaposition with interpretative commentary and questions—that seek to evoke encounter and insight.

Just as the authors of *Exploring Religious Meaning* do not always agree among themselves on questions of interpretation, readers will no doubt find themselves disagreeing with points of view expressed in the sources and in the interpretative commentary included in this book. We hope that readers will confront these materials, and the issues they raise, with questions and responses that arise from their

own experiences. We hope that each individual reader will be stimulated to address uniquely personal questions and formulate personal responses in studying the issues.

To understand religion, religious phenomena must be seen in their wholeness, as they are manifested in society and in the lives of individuals. Religion is first of all something alive. Doctrinal formulations, institutional structures, traditional patterns and practices handed down from generation to generation—these are important aspects of religion. These aspects of religious experience probably receive more emphasis in this edition than in the previous ones. But important too are highly individual elements of feeling, movements of protest and reform, the emergence of new patterns that may modify, give new life to, or put into eclipse the old and the established. We hope that the materials included in *Exploring Religious Meaning* will guide the reader to explore sources and issues that will lead to deeper understanding of and greater appreciation for the enduring and perennially renewed impact of religion on human life.

In the Introduction a functional definition of *religion* is proposed. This definition suggests that religion is important to everyone because each person's life is shaped by—and all persons respond to—critical events that confront them in individual life and in society in terms of basic commitments. An individual's most basic commitments express what the individual values most, how that person defines the meaning and value of existence. Basic commitments, those involving a person's deepest loyalties and ideas about what is valuable and worthwhile, are—according to our proposed definition of religion—*religious*. The reality and meaningfulness of such commitments can finally be determined, expressed, and actualized only by the individuals who make them. But the study of religion—of religious traditions and religious phenomena—even as an academic discipline, may help persons clarify their own basic commitments and come to appreciate them more fully. The study of religion can also help persons come to understand and appreciate the religious commitments, attitudes, and behavior of others. As in all life, from the turbulent arenas of social and political controversy to the sometimes lonely realms of scientific and artistic creation, one must decide for oneself what is best in the realm of the good and the true.

We have been pleased with the response to the first and second editions of *Exploring Religious Meaning*. Instructors and students from a wide variety of academic settings indicate that they have found the book stimulating and useful. In preparing the third edition, we have taken seriously suggestions by those who have used the book about ways to improve or strengthen it. We have retained the general structure of the book and much of the original material. We have tried to remove features of its layout and organization that were found to be distracting. There has been reorganization and updating of material and a thorough revision of some chapters and units.

Perhaps the most important change in the third edition is an expanded and more systematic treatment of the central concepts involved in the analysis of religion. We believe that the story is now a more complete and connected one.

Instructors will see that updating is reflected as much in use of recent theoretical studies as in use of newer illustrative materials.

In the third edition more attention is given to religion in modernized and modernizing societies, but there is also additional material dealing with non-Western traditions. There are several completely new and other significantly updated units dealing with contemporary issues where religion and society interact: intensified religious concern about the threat of nuclear war and world hunger, the quest for human liberation, the rise of new or renewed religious movements, the new religious conservatism, issues related to the status of ethnic culture, women, minorities and pluralism in contemporary societies.

We continue to be indebted to Jacques Bakke for the illustrations that add so much to *Exploring Religious Meaning*. We are greatly indebted to Professors William Barrick and Johnnie Kahl, colleagues at McMurry College, who have given us the benefit of their use of this text. Acknowledgement is long overdue to Professor Joyce Carroll of McMurry College for advice on earlier editions relating to contemporary films dealing with moral and religious issues, and to Professor Nell Senter of Texas Christian University for providing valuable information relating to contemporary moral problems, particularly those concerned with the status of women in society.

The secretarial assistance we have received from Ms. Pat Shackelford, whose dedication is matched only by her skills and diligence, has been invaluable.

We express sincere appreciation to the many persons—especially those professors in a variety of academic settings—who have offered suggestions for improving the text. We also received—and incorporated into the text—many extremely valuable suggestions from the readers who reviewed our proposal for the revision leading to this edition. Finally, to our many students in the different colleges and universities where we teach, and to former students, some of whom are themselves now graduate students or professors engaged in the academic study and teaching of religion, we express sincere and abiding gratitude for suggestions, criticism, and encouragement.

Throughout *Exploring Religious Meaning*, dates of historical events are, for the most part, designated by the abbreviations B.C.E. (“before the common era”) and C.E. (“common era”), which in most older sources and in some more recent ones were commonly abbreviated as B.C. and A.D.

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Toward a Definition of Religion

INTRODUCTION

From earliest times religion has been a pervasive social phenomenon. In our own complex society there are evidences of religion everywhere: religious holidays of particular groups (Christmas, Hanuka, Mardi Gras, Ash Wednesday, Passover, Good Friday, Easter), national holidays that have a distinctively religious component (Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day), church buildings and synagogues, and even controversial social and political issues, such as those concerning abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and capital punishment. Officials of religious denominations take part in public ceremonies, such as Presidential inaugurations—and officials of organizations and private citizens advocating separation of church and state protest such participation.

There is evidence that in our own society, participation in the activities of organized religion is, after a slight decline during the early 1970s, on the increase. **But there is also in our society, increasingly, a new awareness of religious pluralism, and an increasing diversity of religious groups.** There seems to be, also, on the part of many individuals, both a return to traditional religious practices—an interest in finding one's roots—and a new individualism in religion—the individual wants to be his or her own kind of Baptist or Catholic or Jew.

At the individual level, many who have turned away from traditional religious answers, or who have turned away from “organized religion” entirely, give evidence of deep religious concern. Contemporary American Jews who observe *Havurah*—

religious celebrations that bring several families together in the setting of a home—or Protestant or Catholic charismatics may participate in new forms of religious expression that both renew and depart from traditional affiliations. In seeming paradox, there also appears to be a trend toward more traditional religious participation in the return of many to traditional patterns of worship (as in marriage ceremonies) and affirmation of traditional forms of belief. On the other hand, commitments to social justice, to peace, to the rights of women, minority groups, the threatened environment, and animal life, and to helping the starving, famine-threatened human populations of the world give evidence of a *religious* fervor. The many who have responded to the promise of transcendental meditation, or to seminars that promise growth in human potential, assertiveness, and the quest for identity share the basic religious preoccupation with the question of what makes human life meaningful.

Investigation of religion must be broad enough to incorporate the most individualistic and nontraditional expressions of religious concern. While examining the major forms of established and emerging institutional patterns, it must be able to comprehend traditional patterns of religious expression, including those of societies other than our own. Affirming the need for such a broad perspective in religious inquiry makes especially necessary a concrete identification of the ways in which the term *religion* will be used in this book.

Religion is defined in many ways. Radoslav Tsanoff, in his book *Religious Crossroads*, conveniently summarized the linguistic data concerning the terminology used in various cultures to designate what we call “religion.” Tsanoff surveyed the major language stocks of the modern world and noted that no language group has a word meaning “religion” as a universal, inclusive phenomenon. Some languages have terms that designate “law,” “devotion,” “knowledge,” and other components of what in the West has been termed religion. In fact, the Latin *religio* itself originally designated the ancestral customs and rituals of the early Romans. It was not until the emergence of a Greco-Roman culture, encompassing the area from North Africa to the British Isles and from India to the Atlantic Ocean, that the term *religio* began to denote a phenomenon of universal import. Tsanoff considered various ways of defining religion. Several are enumerated and discussed: (1) theistic and other belief, (2) practices, (3) mystical feeling, (4) worship of the holy, (5) conviction of the conservation of values.¹

Everyone has had some experience of religion. Most people use the term on the basis of past experience, acquired beliefs, and favorable or unfavorable impressions. To one person, the word *religion* may produce good feelings. It may connote a close relationship to God—to the benevolent Being or Beings believed to provide life, security, meaning, and purpose. To another, the term may evoke feelings of fear or inadequacy or guilt. It may connote a threatening relationship to stern or hostile and judging Power or Powers. People often reflect their own positive or negative feelings toward religion and toward their own past experiences of it when

¹Radoslav A. Tsanoff, *Religious Crossroads* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1942), pp. 13–25.

stating what they conceive it to be. On the one hand, the behavioral scientist—the psychologist, sociologist, anthropologist—may emphasize religion's *functional* aspect; psychologists may be interested in the role of religion in providing integration or in causing conflict in the individual personality and in the individual's group relationships. Sociologists may attempt to study ways in which religion may be a source of stability or change, unity or conflict, in societies. On the other hand, philosophers may be primarily interested in the *cognitive* claims of religion, in trying to understand the belief statements of particular religious traditions and in trying to discover what the functions and significance of those statements may be, and how one might discover whether they are true. Theologians may seek to explicate the "meaning" aspect of religion, or at least of their own religious tradition. They will perhaps try to show that the religious tradition is meaningful and will provide for the adherent a framework, an orientation that makes sense of life.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has pointed to two major functions of religion: providing a comprehensive system of symbols for understanding the nature of reality, and providing a system of values that demand complete devotion.² He sees these as inseparable. We may express his view by saying that ultimately we value the things we do because we see them as rooted in ultimate reality, and we see them as rooted in ultimate reality because we have learned to value them as having ultimate significance.

Accordingly, in *Exploring Religious Meaning* we will define religion as any person's reliance upon a pivotal value in which that person finds essential wholeness as an individual and as a person-in-community. For that person all other values are subordinate to this central value. The pivotal value spoken of in the definition is authentic to the individual, though it may not be meaningful to others. Here, "reliance upon a pivotal value" includes trust in an unrivaled power or being. The pivotal value may be shared by others. In such cases we speak of a "religious tradition," such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism.

For a person's professed religious commitment to be authentic, the person's life must be governed by the religion's pivotal value. Persons from very different religious traditions, where the pivotal values at least seem to differ greatly, may therefore have great difficulty in understanding one another. An Orthodox Jew who emphasizes (whose pivotal value is) the living of all life in accordance with God's revealed law (the Torah) may find it difficult to understand or to sympathize with a Hindu mystic or a Christian Pentecostalist for whom an overwhelming sense of the presence of God within is the ultimate goal. Even within the same religious tradition this difficulty may appear. A Christian fundamentalist and a theologically liberal Christian may have a difficult time understanding and accepting the authenticity of the other's differing religious commitments, conduct, and belief.

However, a religiously committed person with an open and searching attitude may understand and empathize with a person of another faith by turning inward, to his or her own experience of religious commitment. At that moment a dialogue—in

²See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 89, 126, 140.

its truest sense—between human beings with different idiosyncrasies and different self- and world-understandings can become real. **What is demanded is willingness of the participants in dialogue to open to each other.**

This definition must be seen as a preliminary one. It will receive much qualification in the following units and sections of *Exploring Religious Meaning*. The immediately following units will both attempt to illustrate the definition of religion as “reliance upon a pivotal value” and begin to qualify it.

UNIT 1

We define religion as any person's **reliance upon a pivotal value** in which that person finds essential wholeness as an individual . . .



(Lolly by Pete Hansen. Copyright © The Chicago Tribune. New York News Syndicate, Inc. Used by permission.)

In answer to the question: “What does it mean to have a god?” Martin Luther wrote, “Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol. . . . Whatever . . . your heart clings to . . . and relies on, that is what really is your God.”³ It is sometimes said by religious persons that there are in reality no atheists. In what way is this statement true? In what ways— bearing in mind the definition of religion we have accepted—might it not be true? Do you think that the way Luther talks about what a person’s “real” god is makes sense? Is this a useful way of talking about “religious” commitment?

H. Richard Niebuhr was a twentieth-century Protestant thinker who accepted Martin Luther’s definition of the concept of “God”—what one relies on, puts his or her trust in. Commenting on the definition, Niebuhr wrote: “If this be true, that the word ‘god’ means the object of human faith in life’s worthwhileness, it is evident that men have many gods, that our natural religion is polytheistic.”⁴ Mr. Quimby, the golfer in the comic strip, might illustrate this. In the accompanying cartoon, the

³Martin Luther as quoted by H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, Pub., 1960), p. 119.

⁴Ibid.

object of his supreme devotion—his pivotal value—seems to be to do well at golf. In other cartoons in the “Lolly” series, he was equally concerned about wealth—he experienced severe emotional crises when the stock market fell, or when it was time to pay his income taxes, or when an employee asked for a raise. Are people frequently “polytheistic”? Do the terms *theism*, *polytheism*, and *monotheism* acquire new meanings—or at least other possible meanings—when “religion” is defined as “pivotal value”?

H. R. Niebuhr pointed out that an individual’s pivotal value—that which the individual seeks or adheres to as the source of ultimate meaning or fulfillment—may shift from one value to another, or may be composed of a group of values (such as “health, wealth, and wisdom”). The religions of the world propose supreme or pivotal values to their adherents as that which will bring fulfillment and security. In later units we will focus on some major religious orientations toward pivotal value. For instance, there is a *moral* orientation which holds obedience to the will of a Divine Being (for many adherents of Judaism) or to an eternal code of right behavior (as in Confucianism) as the supreme value to be sought. There are also *mystical* religious orientations which hold that a very intense sense of union with the Divine (Hinduism) or experience of the ultimate, overwhelming, transforming presence of God to worshippers whose will and personality are united to God in love (Christian mysticism) is the pivotal goal of life. We will speak also of esthetic and magical orientations to religion. These need not be exclusive of one another, and this way of classifying orientations to pivotal value is only a conceptual tool; it is not the only way of approaching the role of religion as the center of value and meaning in the lives of groups and individuals.

The following materials illustrate how the concept of pivotal value is present in three of the world’s great religious traditions. In a passage from the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita* (c. 100), the Lord Krishna calls for the entire devotion and loyalty of his devotee Arjuna. In effect, the Divine Krishna asks his follower to make devotion to Krishna the supreme, the pivotal, value of Arjuna’s life.

B

Cling thou to me!

Clasp Me with heart and mind! so shalt thou dwell
Surely with Me on high. But if thy thought
Droops from such height; if you be’st weak to set
Body and soul upon Me constantly,
Despair not! give Me lower service! seek
To read Me, worshipping with steadfast will;
And, if thou canst not worship steadfastly
Work for Me, toil in works pleasing to Me!
For he that laboreth right for love of Me
Shall finally attain! But, if in this
Thy faint heart fails, bring Me thy failure! find
Refuge in Me! Let fruits of labor go,
Renouncing all for Me, with lowliest heart,
So shalt thou come; for, though to know is more
than diligence, yet worship better is