

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF RELIGION
By
F.B. Welbourn
Department of Religious Studies
University of Bristol.
© Fred Welbourn 1960
First published in the Makerere Journal]

When the Kikuyu Karing'a Association, in 1929, declared its intention of returning to the purity of tribal custom, it decided also to have nothing to do with religion for seven years. In the same spirit, the Buganda Government officially describes pagans as abataline ddiini men without religion. In both cases the word religion is applied to imported systems of ritual, creed and myth; it is not seen as applicable to those aspects of tribal life which western observers would distinguish as religious in contrast to other aspects which are secular.

It is not, I think, going too far to say that, within the tribal frame of reference, there is no distinction between religious and secular; rather tribal society is shot through and through at every point with awareness of the supernatural. In this it is extraordinarily akin to the outlook for the Bible, which is concerned not with religion as a separate activity but with a whole life lived in obedience to God - not with religion but with faith

But there is more to it than this. I think it is true that, in tribal life, the ground and meaning of life is the tribe itself. Birth is entry into the tribe; initiation (whether by circumcision or other rite) the confirmation of membership; marriage the means by which the tribe is increased (and therefore marriage outside the tribe is frowned upon); death the entry into the extended tribe composed of ancestors. Not biological death, but expulsion from the tribe, is the final disaster. The ancestors themselves have a distinct function in the life of the tribe; their well-being must be cared for in order, at least, that the this-worldly portion of the tribe may flourish.

The gods (who are often enough famous ancestors raised to a new dimension) are concerned with the welfare of the tribe in procreation, agriculture, war; the appropriate cultus is concerned with ensuring that the gods will do their part for the tribe. What western observers call religion is functional to the life of the tribe as a whole; in the terminology of Herberg, whom I shall shortly quote, it is subordinate to a tribal orthodoxy.

There is ample evidence in the Old Testament of the survival, among the Jews, of this outlook in which all activity is directed to the welfare of the tribe; and much of the prophetic protest is directed against it. But, at some time in the development of the Jewish tradition, Yahweh emerged as an entirely different sort of God: not one god among many but the only God; not the property of one tribe only but the Creator and Preserver of all peoples and all things; not a god who was in any way dependent on men, but existing entirely in his own right and independently of what men do or do not do; not a god who could be used to promote the wishes of men, but a God who demands that men should do whatever he wishes; not a god who simply preserves the

tribe as it is, but the God who is constantly pressing forward to create a better society. This last point is important, since it implies that the coming not only of western government and commerce, but also of the Christian mission, introduces a dynamic conception into the largely static character of tribal life.

In this sense I have no doubt that the American Way of Life, as described by Herberg, is what the Bible understands as a faith. Despite 65% of Americans in the churches, he says, religion is subordinate to an American orthodoxy, the critical features of the biblical tradition to the American Way of Life. For an American to be an Anglican rather than a Methodist is the same as for a Muganda of old to follow Mukasa rather than Kibuuka, or for a modern Muganda to be a Catholic or a Protestant.

Surely it is the same attitude which persuades the British and Foreign Bible Society to preface its annual report with a photograph of the Queen receiving a Bible. For western, as for tribal, man his faith - the ground and meaning of life - is in his tribe or nation; his religion is simply functional to the crucial integrating factor which is his national inheritance; the God, to whom in the symbols of his religion he attributes absolute worth, is in practice no more than a tribal deity. One can imagine Amos (5:21-24) commenting on this situation:

I hate, I despise your worship-services,

and I take no delight in your councils of churches.

Even though you offer me your nuclear weapons and your surplus cotton,

I will not accept them,

And the peace-offerings of your disarmament advisers I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your hymns; to the melody of your Hammond organs I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

For the American (or the British)'Way of Life',. substitute the 'Classless Society' or the 'Nationalist State' or the 'Scientific Method' and you have exactly what William Temple meant when he said that it is just as bad to worship a false mental image of God as to worship a false mental image; for it is not the so-called alternative religions but the alternative faiths which are the challenge to Christianity; and, from the point of view of sociology or psychology, I become increasingly convinced that the category of faith provides a much more radical analysis than the study of religious institutions or religious sentiments.

It is, I know, questionable whether it is right to put in the same category faiths which, like communism, have an unambiguously this-worldly reference and those, such as the faith

of the Bible, which are religious in the sense that they are concerned with what is called the supernatural. But what is psychologically an alternative to faith must itself surely be also a faith, whether or not it contains an overtly supernatural reference. It is, indeed, doubtful how far an overt supernatural reference is essential to the biblical faith. The Jews were emphatically reluctant to name Yahweh, so that Adonai (Lord) became the normal substitute.

A name both defines and classifies as a member of a particular family; but Yahweh can be neither defined nor classified since he is the infinite, one God. He is simply Lord; even this degree of definition leads, through association with other types of lordship, to a conception of God's role which has to be discarded by Jesus; and the word God today calls up a picture of a white-bearded old gentleman which discourages faith. In the end God cannot be spoken about; he can only be spoken to; and, at the high points of Old Testament faith (Gen. 12:1, 21:24-30; Ex. 3:14), the emphasis is on a mystery which can be known only through obedient adventure into the unknown.

There is a sense in which the attempt to name the mystery marks the point where it has already entered into the reflective consciousness as a matter of doubt; and the religious attempt to eliminate doubt by argument, though it may lead to an enrichment of faith, too easily ends in narrowing definition, in which the mystery becomes simply one concept among many to be considered by the discursive reason, one object among many to which man may choose to make active response.

It is the mystics who insist that God cannot be described except in negatives; and Spengler expressed the fundamental quarrel of faith with religion, when he wrote: "Atheism, rightly understood, is the necessary expression of a spirituality which has exhausted its religious possibilities" Spengler, that is, as quoted by Allport, who has a point to illustrate. What Spengler actually wrote was... "a spirituality that has accomplished itself and exhausted its religious possibilities, and is declining into the inorganic". He sees it as a negative attitude "entirely compatible with a living wistful desire for real religiousness".

But surely there is a positive kind of atheism - that, for instance, of Sartre - which knows that nation or class or science are, like the traditional symbols of religion, too narrow to define the mystery, but nevertheless, however desperately, asserts a mystery which is, at the same time, absolute demand and ultimate succour - *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* - but too infinite to be defined by myth or creed or ritual of any kind.

Yet, if the mystery cannot be defined, it is perhaps important to try to avoid misunderstanding by indicating what I have in mind when I speak of mystery. Religion too often manages to give the impression that it drags in God to "explain" what cannot be explained by Philosophic or scientific methods. God becomes what Lenin called "the external equivalent of nescio"; and as science succeeds in explaining more and more, we are left only with a "God-shaped vacuum".

But the religious attempt to explain is at odds with the true nature of faith. Explanation (at least in scientific categories) of event A involves placing it in a class with other events A1 A2.... with which it shares common features. The universe is, by definition, unique; it cannot be classified along with other events; it contains within itself all events, all classes and the process of classification itself. It comprehends all things but is itself - by the nature of the process of comprehension - incomprehensible.

It may be wholly reasonable but is not to be explained by the discursive reason, which it includes. What is unique is and always must be, mystery and can be approached only through adventure into the unknown. This is not to set up an opposition between faith and reason. It is simply to say that reason is one of the means of faith's adventure: and that reason demands (even if, in the process, it purifies) a faith from which to start. Faith's failure to define the mystery is reason's inability to classify the unique.

But the central issue is that this God now takes the place of the tribe as the ground and meaning of life. He is not a God of the same order as the tribal..... alternative to them in the sense that a white District Commissioner is an alternative to an African Chief, but one who - just as science drives out magic by proving it to be illusory - drives out the old gods by proving them to be nothing. Or, to put the matter in Tillich's terminology, the God of the Bible is the symbol for ultimate concern; it is wholly misleading to use the same word for beings who (whether they exist or not) are simply functional to the ultimate concern which is the tribe.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the validity of this conception of God. What I am trying to say is that he is not the god of what is commonly called religion - of a system of ritual, creed and myth associated with the idea of the supernatural. He is the essential clue to all history the director of all living; and this is true even if it is as difficult to understand history intellectually in terms of God's action, as to accept his directions practically in personal life.

Ritual, creed and myth are the summary expression of faith in propositional and dramatic terms; but they can never express faith fully, and they may distort it. Nor are these summary expressions of faith any more essential than its expression in politics, commerce, art. As intensive symbols of an extensive commitment, they are effective in that they vitalise and inform the extensive effort; but it is the extensive effort, the universal concern of God, which they exist to effect.

It is, I think, essential to insist that the distinction between the religious and the secular - the distinction which makes it possible to talk of religion as a separate activity - is foreign to the central biblical tradition and not only because biblical society is sufficiently small in scale to avoid the wide variety of choice in which modern man can regard religion simply as one of many possible hobbies. When the Bible speaks of faith, it is speaking about something which is below (or perhaps beyond) the level of choice.

There is, of course, specialisation: kings, priests and craftsmen all have their proper and distinctive roles. And specialization is apt to misinterpretation: if priests are set aside for

the service of God, they may seem to have a religious significance denied to other men. But the whole prophetic emphasis, confirmed by Jesus, denies the validity of this distinction: priests may differ in function, but they are not, more than others, the elect of God; sacrifices may have a special symbolic value, but they are wholly secondary to economic justice; Corban (Mark 7: 11f) does not release us from a primary responsibility to our parents; the sabbath (Mark 2:27) was made for man, not man for the sabbath.

All are subject to the one God and disagree not because theology has no place, for instance, in politics but because priest and king have different theological interpretations of the same event. Saul was perhaps a better theologian than Samuel (I Sam. 13 when he preferred the ritual detail the need for military haste. What matters is not whether a man is religious but whether he is obedient to the God who is concerned as much with digging latrines (Deut. 23:12 f.) as with ecclesiastical ceremonies: whether he has faith - in the God who cares not only for men's souls but for the sparrow which falls to the ground. It is in this sense that I describe "positive atheism" as a faith.

If it finds it impossible to express faith in any overt symbols, it nevertheless partakes of the essential character of biblical faith: a relationship with something other-than-me, recognised as the ultimate ground and meaning of life; a relationship which integrates the personality, is involved in every response - intellectual, emotional or practical - and gives meaning to life at least in the sense that it provides, in the face of every hardship, a conviction that life has a satisfying meaning to be found.

Having introduced the conception of faith as the integrating factor of personality, I must try to examine it psychologically, but I want, first, to insist that Christianity, thus defined (as I believe it defines itself) not as a religion but as a faith, can be validly studied only in the same category as the other faiths - nationalism, communism, scientific humanism. I have spent a fair proportion of my life not only being a priest of an orthodox religious institution, but studying some of those which are less orthodox; and I become increasingly convinced that, however significant such institutions may be in the life of individuals and of society, their fundamental importance, from the point of view of understanding society, lies not so much in their institutional character as in the fascinating variety of motives which leads men to express their underlying attitude to the universe in terms of particular religious symbols or in symbols of a wholly other kind.

An English Anglican congregation at Easter contains men who follow the same ritual of receiving the sacrament, repeat the same creed, accept the same resurrection myth. In terms of a behaviourist definition, they all fall in the same category. But in the same congregation may be men who value the Eastern communion as a social tradition; who find in the sacrament an almost magical potency; who see it as no more than a memorial of a historic event which saves individual souls; who think primarily of establishing a "Christian order" of society. They belong to the same religious institution, but their private affinities may be with agnostics, with Roman Catholics, with revival sects, with Free Church politicians; and they may have institutional affiliations with monarchists, artists' clubs, family capitalist enterprises or the Labour Party.

Thompson, in his recent study of four Birmingham parishes, has pointed out that it is these so-called secular affiliations which, much more commonly than church-membership, have an integrating function. From the point of view of the biblical tradition, these, rather than their overtly religious practices, are the clue to the faith of their members. The behaviourist definition of religion is, in fact, as inadequate as to describe science simply in terms of experiment and calculation. The failure of a scientist to obtain confirmation of a particular experimental result may be due to an error in experimental technique; to a fault in his materials; to the interference of a previously unobserved factor; or to the non-uniformity of nature. He will investigate thoroughly the first three; it will be a very rare man to whom the fourth even occurs as a possibility.

Faith in the uniformity of nature - a subjective assurance of the character of the objective universe - is basic to scientific activity; when the first three possibilities of error are eliminated, tomorrow's experiment must confirm today's or the exploit is future. Because it is so rarely challenged, it is an uncriticised - perhaps a largely unconscious faith; but it has to be made conscious when discussion arises (as it does) as to whether the Principle of Indeterminacy implies that no experimental method has yet been devised by which the behaviour of individual electrons can be predicted or that their behaviour follows no uniform pattern, that it is wholly spontaneous and "uncaused". The possible consequences of an uncaused electron getting loose in an elephant were seriously discussed, if only to be dismissed, I think by R.A. Fisher; and, if it is a possibility, then faith in the uniformity of nature is challenged at a fundamental point and the whole structure of science has to be re-examined.

It might be argued that to be content with what Jeans called the Monday, Wednesday, Friday view, that matter can be regarded in terms of particles or waves according to the needs of the moment, is to admit a fundamental agnosticism as to the nature of the universe. Equally the statistical interpretation of quantum mechanics (if it is regarded as a final statement of universal law) implies an agnosticism as to the nature of individuals, whether or not it is interpreted in ultimately causal terms. On the other hand, it is clear from Einstein's general writings that his determination, to unify all physical phenomena in terms of a field theory, arose from a conviction of universal causation which he himself traced to the Jewish tradition to which he rejoiced to belong but whose religious symbols he had rejected. If this is a true assessment, the work of Einstein and that of a Harwell physicist, concerned primarily with the practical problem of producing fifteen million degrees of temperature, might be described behaviourally in very similar terms. They are nevertheless fundamentally different activities, distinguished in the dimension of faith.

Seen from within the biblical tradition, Einstein - despite his refusal of traditional religious forms - was nearer to that tradition than the statisticians: the statisticians, for all their controlled experiment, for all their (sometimes) evangelical piety, nearer to the heathen who peopled their world with arbitrary and unpredictable gods. It is surely true, also, that the tendency of modern scientists to recognise that their essential work lies not in finding final answers, but in obedient adventure into an unknown which is likely to

explode all their dearest hypotheses: that this attitude is nearer to the biblical tradition than that of Christians whose religion consists in glib formula of salvation.

The inadequacy of the behaviourist definition of religion is seen clearly by Allport, who, writing as a psychologist, regards the religious sentiment as an integrating factor not wholly revealed in overt behaviour. But his own failure to understand the biblical approach is shown when he writes: "belief is both a reflex of their striving, and on the whole a reasonable consequence to draw from the very fact of striving...when belief rests on probabilities, as the majority of beliefs do, we speak of faith". I would be the first to admit that, often enough, the recognition that I do in fact go on striving recalls to consciousness a faith of which the Christian myth alone seems to make sense: "belief is...on the whole a reasonable consequence to draw from the very fact of striving".

But this faith is not the result of balancing probabilities, it is something which I sucked in with my mother's milk. It has no doubt developed through experience, through ratiocination and through acts of will; but fundamentally it is an attitude to persons, and to the whole universe seen as casual and beneficent, which has its origin in pre-rational, infantile security and finds its most natural mode of expression in continued advance into the mystery which is approached at the same time in Christ and in the scientific adventure; and, at the risk of seeming to exaggerate my hesitations about the behaviourist approach, it is necessary to say that, at the level of faith, which seems to me to be the essential biblical level, I continually find myself in closer accord with men who would not call themselves Christians than with some who most earnestly accept the same religious symbols.

This faith, then - and the faith of the prophets in God, of primitive men in the tribe, of scientists in the uniformity of nature - is something very different from the faith of which Allport writes. It is itself the relationship which he describes when he says: "What reasoning does is to lend support to a relationship that is already inherent in every sentiment - the relationship between the intention and the idea which is its object". In order to define biblical faith more clearly in these terms, it is necessary to insist that the intention (the psychological element) should cover all the activities at least of the subject: and that the relationship should be not with an idea but with something other-than-self experienced as objectively existent.

While, then, the religious sentiment, in Allport's terminology, may have an integrating function in personality and may, or may not, express itself in membership of a religious institution, it may very well remain subordinate to an unrecognised "faith-sentiment" (such, for instance, as the American Way of Life, whose intention is all-embracing and whose objective reference is the American people). It does not itself become a faith-sentiment until it develops what Allport would call its maximum potential maturity with an all-embracing intention directed towards the "I am" of the Bible - not the God of religion only but the mystery which embraces every event. I entitled this essay "Towards a definition of religion". This was perhaps unwise; because all I have done is to attempt to define faith more clearly and to suggest that, for psychologist and sociologist, it provides

a more fundamental category of analysis: for missionary and administrator a more radical understanding of their problems.

From the point of view of faith, a closer definition of religion and of its proper function must, I think, be left for further debate. But two things may perhaps be said in conclusion. The first is that if the biblical faith is as I have tried to describe it, then an attempt to divorce biblical religion from politics (or from any other human activity) is to deny the faith which it attempts to express. The second is that in these terms, Christianity is right to claim to be not a religion but a faith. The Christ of the New Testament does not define the mystery in religious terms. Rather, the Cross makes more absolute the demand; the Resurrection enlarges the ultimacy of the succour; the Creator deepens the mystery by becoming a suffering servant. Christians have, of course, tried to turn him into an object of religion. But that is another matter.

Bibliography

Allport, G.W. (1951) *The Individual and His Religion*,

Einstein, A. (1954) *Ideas and Opinions* - pp.40, 185, 262

Herberg, W. (1955) *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*

Spengler, O. tr. Atkinson C.F. (1946/47) *The Decline of the West* - 2 vols.

Thompson, R.H.T. (1957) *The Church's Understanding of Itself*;

Tillich P. (1957) *The Dynamics of Faith*