MEANING IN RELIGION AND THE MEANING OF RELIGION

Ninian Smart

The present paper is a
first draft: but here
presented warts & all.

The aim of this paper is to show:

(1) That 'religion' can be defined;

(2) That there is point in defining xxxxxxx 'religion';

(3) That the meaning of 'religion' raises important questions about the methods to be employed in exploring religion.

Section 1 deals with difficulties in the definition of 'religion' and suggests a way of defining the term relevantly to the study of religion. Section 2 expands on the motives that we might have in defining 'religion', in relation to various ~~topics~~ enquiries such as the sociology of religion, the psychology of religion and so forth. Section 3 draws some further morals about meaning in religion.

SECTION 1

1.1 There is a xx prevalent feeling that religion cannot be defined.

1.11 First, because there is no such thing as religion, but only particular religions, which have what Cantwell Smith has called an 'inebriating variety'.

1.12 Second, because even the notion of _a_ religion is misleading, and is a relatively recent Western invention leading to the tacking xf on of the suffix '-ism' in wild ways ('Hinduism' -- is there any such thing?).

1.13 Third, because religion has to be defined in terms of its goal -- God, nirvana, the religious ultimate: and this goal is indefinable.

1.14 Fourth, because lots of definitions have been attempted, all seemingly unsuccessful.

1.15 Fifth, because even if a definition were successful it would be empty because of the variety of the phenomena it would have to fit (note for instance the emptiness and question-beggingness of the phrase I have used, 'the religious ultimate').

1.2 There is also a question about the point of attempting a definition. We can in general use words without having them formally defined. And further, we would want to know what aim is in view before framing a definition -- defining is not a contextless activity.

1.21 Against this latter objection, I would simply point out that various people are institutionally engaged in various activities, such as the sociology of religion, the philosophy of religion, the history of religions, religious studies and so forth. Both from a theoretical and from a practical point of view there is advantage in being clear about the scope of these enquiries.

1.211 Theoretically, because if we find that a religion has various marks or typical characteristics and that some of these are shared by a political movement, it is not _a priori_ ruled out that the ideas and techniques of, say, the sociology of religion will be

relevant to political sociology and conversely.

1.212 Practically, because the institutionalization of enquiries should not simply be determined by tradition but also by the 'logic' of the situation. It is not altogether clear that academic investment in this country, for example, has been very logical in relation to the study of religion.

Returning however to the first set of objections, the following ripostes are in order:

1.111 The notion that there might be something like religion in general, forming a substance worked into various molds in actual religions, in part arises from an essentialist approach to definition, and in part to the notion that an essence must be relatively simple. The latter notion does not follow from essentialism -- a definition can be as long as you like, running to three or four pages. In any event essentialism may not be the correct approach to definitional problems.

1.112 In part the search for 'religion in general' has been assisted by the desire to find the essence in experience -- consider the tradition of Schleiermacher and Otto. The question of whether there are universal religious sentiments (universal at least in the sense that they are detected centrally in religions or among religious folk) is doubtless a vexed one. But it does not follow, even if there were a core of religious sentiment, that this by itself enables one to talk of religion in general, since other factors than experience may be equally or more important. Yet all this is by the way: for even if there are only religions and no such thing as religion in general, it in no way follows that there can be no definition of religion. Thus is in one sense no such thing as pictorial art in general but only particular paintings, but it may still be possible to give a general account of what pictorial art is.

1.113 Another source of the drive to discover religion in general is the hook-up between definition and explanation. The fashion for trying to discover the origin of religion, whether in time or structurally, has depended on trying to pinpoint central characteristics of religion. These can easily be selected in order to conform to a theory, or even a theological diagnosis. For example, the treatment in some contemporary theology of religion as a human projection, a product of human culture, etc., depends on excluding from religion those elements regarded as not being a human projection, etc. It is wise, in my view, to define religion in a manner which is initially independent of any theory, so far as that is possible, to avoid the possibility of circularity in explanations -- or, to put it more bluntly, cheating.

1.121 An exponent of this (1.12) objection is Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who concludes that at the end of the day it is religious persons we have to deal with, not constructs reifying contructs called religions. A lot of what he says about '-isms' and so forth is sound and refreshing.

However, to say that we only have to deal with religious persons is open to criticism.

1.1211 Thus, persons can be more or less religious. It is not clear that a religion can be more or less religious. To say that a person is very religious may mean that he is assiduous in religious practices, sincere in his quest for God, etc.; but it does not make much sense to say "Christianity is a very sincere religion".

1.1212 Secondly, a religion xx typically has institutions, and in dealing with (say) the Church Assembly one is not dealing just or at all with a mere collection of religious persons. Again, a religion has teachings and rites handed down, buildings and what have you. Cantwell Smith's account, then, is not sufficiently sociological and corporate.

1.131 Even if we have to define a religion in part by reference to its goal and though the goal may be in some sense indefinable, it does not follow that the definition of religion is impossible.

1.1311 First, because the goal is not totally uncharacterized, directly or indirectly. If it were totally uncharacterizable it could not be a goal because there would be nowhere to turn, no path to tread, no worship or prayer which was relevant to it.

1.1312 In any case, something itself indefinable may enter into a definition. Thus colours may be held to be indefinable (save ostensively, a queer case), but I can define 'brindled'.

1.141 The fact that there have been lots of unsuccessful definitions should not trouble us unduly.

1.1411 First, because the study of religion in the modern sense is still very young.

1.1412 Second, because often people have attempted epigrams rather than definitions proper. Epigrams can be illuminating, but not as definitions (consider Whitehead's epigram).

1.1413 The subject of religion bristles with axes being ground and with strong expressions of deep-seated feeling. It is not surprising if there is a certain lack of professionalism in many approaches to the subject.

1.151 Success at the price of emptiness is not the necessary outcome. But here the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

2.1 There are different approaches to the problem of definition. One is what I have called 'essentialism'; namely that there is a common essence of the various phenomena to be defined -- or more linguistically, that there is a form of words not including disjunctions, which applies to the things to be defined, such that it does not apply to those which do not properly fall under the word xxxphxxxx which is being defined.

2.2 The second is the family resemblance theory, owing much to Wittgenstein, which could be crudely represented as meaning that if a, b and c are phxxxxxxx things falling under a 'general' name, it is in virtue of the fact that properties P, Q, R, S apply to a, Q,R,S,T to b and P,Q, R,T to c. (But that is a very crude account,

such that a quasi-xxxx essentialist disjunctive definition could'
takæ care œff of family resemblance. Of this, more anon.)

2.3 The third is to present a model of the definiendum, relying on
the typical and not too worried by the odd exception.

2.11 The trouble with essentialism is that it may sacrifice the
crucial for the general. Thus Melford Spiro defines religion as 'an
institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with
culturally postulated superhuman beings' (Banton, 96). He is reacting
here against a too doctrinal and idealistic account of, e.g., Theravada
Buddhism, which he has encountered deeply as an anthropologist. Yet
to use this definition to cover Theravada Buddhism is to miss the
main point that 'superhuman' beings are not strategic in the faith.
Consider some problems here.

2.111 Less importantly, there is trouble with the word 'superhuman'.
Does it mean those endowed with power greater than men's (or
believed to be), as Spiro suggests (Banton, 98)? But not all spirits
are like this in Thxxxxxxxx Theravadin countries. They may be
threatening or beneficent, but what of the king, for a start? It
can hardly be said that all spirits were thought to be more powerful
than Par$_a$krama Bahu, et&.

2.112 More importantly, the Buddha and other liberated followers are
culturally postulated as being superior to superhuman beings. They
are human not kuperhuman. The definition misses the main point about
nirvana and liberation.

2.113 One major conclusion about definition of religion follows from
these criticisms (and others that could be made of Sipro(s attempt).
One should not be too influenced by what the majority of adherents
seem to believe, looking at them in one particular context. This is,
however, a dangerous conclusion and can raise questions about the
essence not of religion as such but of a particular tradition. At any
rate, it would look as though Spiro has sacrificed the crucial in
relation to Theravada Buddhism.

2.12 Conversely, essentialism can sacrifice the actual for what is
taken to be crucial. It is not uncommon to treat Buddhism as a
philosophy rather than as a religion, on the ground of looking only
to the 'commanding heights' of the doctrines (actually not so much
philosophical as something else -- our Western categories do not easily
fit). This move is to neglect the actual instantiation of Buddhism as
a religion with rituals, myths, institutional embodiment and so on.

2.13 Thus it is necessary to drive a middle path between the actual
and the ideal. This is not absurd, since the ideal is itself actualized
in theprinciples adhered to, in the sense of being recognized. In
brief a religion is both itself and its idea of itself. This follows
from its very nature, as will be seen.

2.21 The family resemblance theory is a licence for disjunctions in
definition. Kxx But it can only be a final solution if there are
analogies (rather than straight similarities) between the major
items in the disjunctions. To simplify: If religion a has crucial
properties A and B, while religion b only has A and religion c only
has B, the three can only be clustered together if there is a

reason why A and B should go together in religion a -- an analogy.
To take a non-religious example: Government a is described as
fascist because it shoots xxxxxxxxxx workers and is capitalist;
government b is described as fascist because it is capitalist;
government c is described as fascist because it shoots xxx workers.
The 'fascist'bracket only works if there is some intrinsic connection
between being sapitalist and shooting workers. Otherwise one should
entertain the possibility (to put it no more strongly) of
categorising the three governments in different ways. The disjunction
incidentally is this: a fascist government is defined as one which
wither shoots workers or is capitalist or both.

2.22 The family resemblance approach is not itself convincing, but
there is no reason why disjunctions should not be used partially in
a definition of religion. One could have a mongrel between essential-
ism and family resemblance, in principle, so long as there were
different crucial aspects of religion, some to be treated essentially
and some to be treated disjunctively.

2.31 The reason for not taking family resemblance as too convincing is
that the model theory does its job better. h The point of a model is
that it typifies the definiendum: it can also 'ride' counter-
examples, provided that the latter can be shown to be atypical,
marginal.

2.4 We can now move in the direction of providing a model. But first
there are some important observations to make about types of
religion and religiousness.

2.41 First, there are several sorts of problem about identifying a
religion.

2.411 Thus first religious rituals, sentiments, etc., may be built
into the life of a tribe or ethnic group in such a way that it is
artificial to distinguish the religion from the rest of the
activities of the group, as though they were institutionally separable.
Religion could here be treated as an aspect of the group's life not
institutionally separable from other aspects. This type might be
called 'group-tied integrated aspect of life'. Our hesitation about
calling such a phenomenon a religion simply arises from the fact that
we think of a religion more often as a cross-societal tradition to
some extent separately institutionalized. And one does not get
converted to a group-tied integrated aspect of life: one is simply
born into a group which has this aspect.

2.412 Second, a variant on the group-tied aspect type is found in
conditions where the religious aspect is in principle group-tied, but
where not all members of the group may practice or recognize the
validity or importance of the aspect. Thus one could treat Judaism
as group-tied, but not all Jews practice Judaism. This would be a
case of gxxx a group-tied separately institutionalized religion,
such that the institution is identifiable within the activities of
the group but not coterminous with it. For short I shall call this

2.451 It is realistic to say that some rituals are an ingredient of all actual and religions which are indisputably religions. This is a small step in explaining the function of the institutional aspect of religion -- it exists partly for the continuance of the rituals. The way in which this occurs varies, of course: there may be ritual special- ists, such as priests; or there may in effect be little specialization. Where rituals themselves are seen strongly as effective in themselves, and not as means to existential encounters with ultimate reality, etc., the institutional aspect of a religion tends to be more specialized and more sacred in itself.

2.442 Embodying the ritual dimension then in our characterization of religion, we can say: a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized activities of a ritual kind. But this is of course a very inadequate model of religion, partly because to understand what religious rituals are we have to move on to sentiments and beliefs. 2.45 But here we must pause for a moment to consider briefly the role of morality and social custom in religion. Although it is possible to have people who possess a non-religious morality, in the sense that their moral attitudes are not integrated with ritual activities, religious sentiments and religious beliefs, it is obvious that moral beliefs and social customs typically form part of the fabric of a religion (or of the religion of a group). I shall count a moral attitude as religious where it is affected by and seen in the light of religious beliefs -- for instance Christian agape as distinguished from humanist love of fellow men (as fellow men and not also as children of God, brothers before in Christ, etc.). Similarly marriage is a religious custom when it is also interpreted in the context of ritual, etc : for instance the Christian marriage seen as a sacrament). Thus in the ensuing list of sentiments which may be taken as typically religious it must be remembered that those which are also moral attitudes are held sub specie sacramenti or sub specie salvationis, etc.

2.46 The following sentiments can be counted as typically religious: awe, dread, peace, exaltation, compassion, zeal, sense of sin, trust, etc. Some of these sentiments are aroused by rituals or in the context of rituals; and some thing or person with a propensity to arouse these sentiments will tend to acquire a religious aura. More dramatically, certain experiences, such as conversion, prophetic experience, the sense of mystic union, the achievement of higher gnosis and so forth will both incorporate and stimulate such sentiments. Though Otto's delineation of the numinous is not enough to cover properly some crucial cases, such as the attainment of nibbana in Theravada Buddhism, it catches a lot of the flavour of many typical religious sentiments. What it tends to underplay is the sense of gnosis and of peace and insight in that context. What is needed is a category to unite and bring together everything from dread and fear to a sense of beatitute and serenity. Of course, it is not only hard to characterize human sentiments in isolation from their typical objects,

but also over-optimistic to try to define religion from a psychological point of view. How often does it then become necessary to say: Not any sort of trust, but religious trust -- and so forth.

2.461 However, let us cheat a bit and invent a category to cover the spectrum from fear to serenity. Let us call these 'sacral' sentiments, being one major aspect of the existential impact of rituals. What is being achieved here is merely a nomenclature concealing that family resemblance of sentiments is being used. The justification -- namely the demonstration of the analogies between the numinous and the contemplative-mystical sentiments -- would take long here: but I would claim that the justification is available for those who wish to read it.

2.462 (following 2.442) The stage of definition now to be reached is this: a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized ritual activities expressing and evoking sacral sentiments.

2.4621 I leave aside for a moment the objection that a religion is identified with ritual activities. Later we xiiixmmmi shall need to adjust the wording rather considerably in any case.

2.47 But one cannot hang everything on sentiments, and the sentiments need to be hung on to their phenomenological objects. What are the typical objects of religious belief?

2.471 It is too easy to begin by saying 'gods'. For one thing are we concerned with entities or, say, events -- God rather than the Exodus? However, let us begin with entities and the like. We shall see later the way that these enter into the fabric of religious beliefs. Of entities or quasi-entities that one might list as typical foci of religious actigities and sentiments the following are a selection: Creator-God, gods, spirits, ancestors, holy men, cows, sacred mountains, the Self, nibbana, demons. Some of these, however, are rather incident-al. Let us leave aside mountains, demons and cows as being mere parts of a wider fabric: they enter into stories and rites, of course, but the rites pxintxixxkkmrand stories point to a wider fbric of belief. Let us say that an entity or group of entities form the central focus of a given religion (or of the religion of a group). By 'central focus' I mean that the religion tends to interpret other relationships in the light of our relationship kmxkmmm to this focus. Sometimes the focus is a set of gods, sometimes one God, sometimes a liberated state kxkhmxx)(nibbana, for example), sometimes a set of different sorts of entities -- God, a holy man, liberation, for instance. What do these entities have in common?

2.472 The difficulty of saying what they have in common is a reason why we tend to take flight in empty place-filling phrases, like ultimate reality, the transcendent and so on. It is doubtful whether such phrases fit the gods of Olympus, in any case.

2.473 If, then, we are going to be empty let us be so consciously, for the time being at least. Let us simply talk about 'the central focus'. A religion (or the religion of a group) is so far then: a set of ritual activities expressing and evoking sacral sentiments. xxxxx

which are related most crucially to a central focus. (Remember that
the focus can be a set of entities.) But we immediately here wish to
ask: What sort of focus must it be if rituals are appropriate to it?
I do not pray to my pyjamas.

2.474 Here we begin to arrive at a solution to the problem of emptiness.
For it is a common observation that a god is the sort of entity one
would expect to worship (conversely a demon the sort of entity to
ward off ritually). The problem only arises because some entities or
quasi-entities are not properly speaking divine -- e.g. nibbana and
sunyatā. But by a happy coincidence such entities or quasi-entities
at least transcend the gods: they are of more worth, if realized,
than anything else and they lie 'beyond' the realm of the gods. (Thus
too the Buddha, who displays enlightenment, nibbana, sunyata, transcends
the gods.) We also arrive at a solution which gets over the Spiro
defect. It would be realistic to say of the central focus of actual
religions that it either is divine (god or gods) or transcends the
divine.

2.4741 Thus religion is: an institutionalized set of ritual activities
expressing and evoking sacral sentiments which are centrally directed
to a divine or trans-divine focus.

2.48 But xh how and why does the direction occur?

2.481 First, as to the 'how': the rituals somehow are instrumental in
bringing about a good relationship of the group or of some individuals
in the group with the central focus -- this may be because they
express and evoke appropriate sentiments, where the relationship is
considered psychologically. But this in turn typically implies that
the rituals derive their validity from the focus in some way.

2.4811 Such a derivation is above all understood in terms of myth (later,
doctrine -- but not all religions are much doctrinalized). Thus the
rituals often are the repetition of a mythic event (consider Eleusis
and the Eucharist); and often they are, though not repetitions,
validated by reference to origins xxxxhux (thus homage to the Buddha
is justified by the fact that from his enlightenment there stems the
whole possibility of our attaining nibbana). By 'myth', of course, I
mean sacred stories, which can be historically true or non-hist orically
true -- or false in both ways too.

2.482 Hence we can say that the 'why' of direction has to do with a
scheme of mythic belief which shows how the beneficial central focus
has entered into relationship with men.

2.483 Thus a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of
institutionalized ritual activities expressing or evoking sacral
santiments directed at a bxxdxxixixxxxentxxi divine or trans-divine focus dxxxxixxdxxxxki
which is partially described by xxxxxdxxixxrixxx myths.

2.484 However, it has to be noted that the dx beneficent central focus
is naturally conceived as having relationships with things and beings
other than men: for instance the gods have to do with the environment.
This environment has to be regarded not merely as the actual

environment but rather as the phenomenological one. Thus the world of a
given group is not necessarily the planet earth (it depends on their
education) or more generally the cosmos, but the world-as-conceived-by-
them. A whole spectrum of myth and doctrine will concern the relations
of the central focus with the phenomenological environment. This may be
one of virtual identity or inclusion -- for the cosmos itself may be
treated as divine, and the gods may be an important part of the
phenomenological environment.

2.485 Thus more fully: a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set
of institutionalized rituals expressing and evoking sacral sentiments
directed towards a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of
the human phenomenological environment and partially described by myths.

2.49 It is worth noting that xx a number of religions, including the
major world faiths, tend to have evolved a doctrinal scheme which refines
xx and metaphysicalizes elements of and presuppositions of the mythic
stories. This is especially obvious in religions aimed at a trans-divine
focus. It is not unreasonable to add this point on to our definition:
a religion (or the religion of a group) is a set of institutionalized
rituals expressing and evoking sacral sentiments directed towards a
divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenol-
ogical environment and partially described by myths or by myths and
doctrines.

2.50 But we still need to tidy things up. What is not brought out here
is the fact that a religion has a history, a biography so to say (for it
must be seen that in many cases a religion still has the rest of its life
to live, and the future has to be taken into account). In talking of
the Christian religion or of the religion of the Kikuyu we are not
simply talking about what happens now -- this time-slice. But it is not
enough to say that the institutionalized rituals are traditional -- or
rather it is too much to say this: for rituals and beliefs and so forth
change, while the implication of 'traditional' in such a context is that
the rituals are simply the same as they were. We can perhaps overcome
this objection, and simultaneously bring out a point about identification
made earlier, by saying that: a religion (or the religion of a group) is
a set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition and
expressing and evoking sacral sentiments directed at a xx divine or trans-
divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment
and partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.

2.51 It might be objected throughout this discussion that rituals have
been over-emphasized. But I hope that it is clear that these can be
very informal (like a meeting of Friends). Further, differing religions
place differing emphases, as do differing groups within a given
religion. Thus some religious movements, etc., stress ritual, some
experience (sentiments, etc.), some the institution, some myths,-some
morality. Here (with regard to definition) we do not need to give an
account of differences of emphasis, save that they are there.

2.60 Our definition then: a religion (or the religion of a group) is
a set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition
and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments
directed at a divine or trans-divine focus
seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment
and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.

SECTION 2

3.1 The point of a definition such as the above is that it calls in
question of a number of studies defined in terms of religion, such as
the psychology of religion, the history of religions, the sociology of
religion (theology need not be called in question, because it ought to
be the systematic expression of a religious position, namely a
phenomenon rather than a direct constituent of the study of religion).
3.2 Thus we meet a nice dilemma. Two positions here could be adopted.
3.21xXxx It is possible, firstly, that a definition such as the above is
a 'tight' definition. Religion is tightly definable or the edges of the
study of religion are squashy. But if they are squashy then the study of
religion has a wide reach, because (for instance) there is no determinate
sociology of religion, but rather the sociology of various factors which
are in differing contexts common to religion and to other things (e.g.
ideology).
3.22 Or we rely on analogies to knit together family resemblances. This
is in effect what has been done in the above definition. In brief the
conclusion is as foreshadowed in 3.21.
3.3 The conclusion is this: that the study of religion has at least
analogical connections with the study of ideologies, non-religious
rituals, and so on. In brief, the study of religion should not be
exclusively institutionalized. There is, for instance, no a priori
reason for thinking that the sociology of religion should not throw
light on the sociology of Maoism. Again, there is like to be an
analogy between religious sentiments and 'others' -- for the simple
reason that religious sentiments as above described do not uniquely
collect their phenomenological objects. Once the sentiments are
operative, so-called non-religious objects may be invested with
a religious aura (consider charisma in politics).
3.4 Consequently, the definition of religion raises the question of
the relation between so-called religious studies and other fields. Here
I say am not talking about theology in the proper sense, but religious
studies. Theology in the proper sense can talk about anything, because
it is itself an expression of a religious position -- it is part of
religion -- and religion can have attitudes to virtually everying, as
being the human phenomenological environment.

SECTION 3

4.1 The definition used above is intentional. It is not possible
to determine what its constuent parts mean without seeing that the
rituals (for instance) are 'directed' at a 'focus' and so forth.
4.11 It follows that the study of religion, if it is the study of
religion as here defined, involves ineluctably the study of the
intentional.
4.12 Or to put it better: in studying a ritual or other activity it
is necessary to understand the focus at which it is directed -- in
brief the 'student' must in imagination mimic the adherent. (He may
not need, however, to mimic, if he is perchance an adherent of the
religion in question.)
4.2 If mimicing the student participates imaginatively in the
phenomenon he studies, then he lives methodologically in imagination.
That is, he takes the focus seriously, even if it be imaginatively
bracketed (to use a term of continental phenomenologists). His
methodology thus is, negatively, strictly agnostic. It is not the
'methodological atheism' of Peter Burger, for instance.
4.3 All this has to do with method and the terms of reference of the
'scientific' student of religion (note how the term 'science' has to
suffer a sea-change with the subject-matter: quite rightly, for
'science' is methodologically defined, not institutionally in terms of
the present big brothers in science, such as physics, which does not
have to bother with intentionality -- electrons not having sentiments).
But the method itself cannot determine who is good or bad at the
study of religion. This is a more personall issue. All that can be
said is that commitments, whether religious or atheistic, can sometimes
be of a quality to prevent the persons in question from being
sensitive and effective in the study of religion. But most actual
commitments are not of this quality.
4.4 At any rate methodological stances stances should not be
confused with selection criteria for students of religion. Methodological
agnosticism is at quite a different level from theistic, atheistic or
any other sort of ideological commitmrnt.