An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Religion

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Introduction

Said Waldershare, 'Sensible men are all of the same religion.'
‘And pray what is that?’ ... ‘Sensible men never tell.’
Benjamin Disraeli

There is no such thing as ‘religion in general’, any more than there is any such creature as an ‘animal in general’. Every animal is of some or other species, and each has its own distinguishing marks. So, too, every religion is characterised by its founding myths, its sacred scriptures, its dogmas and doctrines, its codes and commandments, its rituals and sacraments, its deities and demons. Every faith has its contrasting denominations, sects and tendencies. A few years ago I was visiting a university in Southern California and wanted to find out what churches there were in the area. Having found nothing in the vicinity of the university, I stopped at a garage forecourt and borrowed a telephone directory. Very quickly I discovered page upon page of entries for churches, by which I mean not just different places of worship but different faiths and denominations. It is said that there are over 20,000 different Christian denominations alone, and for all I know it may well be that half of these are represented in California. Additionally, the United States is home to a vast array of faiths and cults, reflecting, perhaps uniquely within the confines of a single state, the religious diversity of the wider world. An admittedly crude measure of that diversity is the fact that around the globe there are now over nine thousand distinct and separate religions, with a hundred or so new ones coming into being every year.

Abstract generalised discussion of religion is thus liable to suffer a fate analogous to that of generalised, non-credal religious education which, in its British state-school manifestation, was once described as ‘the religion of nobody taught by anybody and paid for by everybody’. As practised in schools such education fails to the extent that it either confronts children of different backgrounds with beliefs which they do not hold, or else fails to instruct them about what they and their families do believe – and often it is culpable on both counts. (Such, indeed, is the ground advanced by Christians, Jews and Muslims for having their own schools.) Similarly, a survey guide to religion which did not adopt the policy of providing an introduction to the history, beliefs and practices of different faiths but sought instead to introduce the reader to ‘religion in general’ would be liable to be similarly flawed.

Besides being intellectually suspect, focusing on religion in general can result in a kind of spiritual journeying which, far from being a serious pursuit of religious truth, is more akin to tourism. In Victorian and Edwardian times there was a limited fashion for experimenting with various
religions, usually moving from some species of Christianity through Eastern religions or ‘oriental cults’ to one or other form of syncretism, often with a markedly ‘spiritualist’ character. Though this once seemed quite the most radical experimentalism, and was denounced by clergymen as liable to lead practitioners out of their minds and into that of the Devil, it seems staid by standards now established among ‘spiritual seekers’ in North America. The author of one text recounts how, following a near-death experience, she began a religious search that led her first to Lutheranism and from there to taking spiritual direction from native Americans, from a Hassidic Jewish Rabbi, American yoga and Buddhist teachers, a Sufi master, a German Roman Catholic monk, Russian Orthodox monks, ‘Scotch mystics’ (sic), a Korean Taoist master and, most recently, a Sikh visionary in whose Indian community the religious festivals of all faiths are celebrated.

No doubt such wide-ranging travels broaden the mind, but it does not follow that they produce any deeper appreciation of the meaning and value of religion than would be achieved by staying within a single faith tradition, exploring its teachings and practices and then, if this should seem pointful, identifying parallels and counterparts in other faiths. Certainly in the educational case the wise policy is to explore religion from the perspective of some particular faith or tradition, encouraging in due course extrapolation and the drawing of analogies between the structure and substance of one religion and those of others.

The present exercise, however, is not primarily an educational one. This book is not a student text or a layman’s introduction as those are generally understood – though I hope students and general readers will find it stimulating. Its purpose is rather one of engaged, broadly philosophical, exploration of the position of religion in the contemporary world. A survey of the religious studies shelves of a well-stocked bookshop will reveal a number of good introductions to world faiths and particular denominations, and to different approaches to the study of religion – anthropological, historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, theological and so on – as well as to its various aspects: the doctrinal, the mystical, the organisational, the ritualistic, etc. There is a plentiful supply of good introductions and scholarly monographs, and I am not aiming here to add to either category. Instead, I wish to confront the suggestion that religion has no proper role to play in the intellectual, moral and – odd though it sounds – spiritual life of educated and intelligent persons.

That the claims of religion to explain the existence and character of the world are undermined by science is now a common idea, owing principally to (certain interpretations of) advances in physics and biology. That the role of religion as a source of moral guidance has been subverted is also a familiar notion thanks to psychology, sociology and the emergence of secular ethics. Times must have been hard, however, for priests, ministers, imams, rabbis, and their other-faith counterparts when news came
through of ‘post-religious spiritualities’. Yet this is precisely the status claimed by various new age theories and practices, and no doubt their influence is part of the reason why in Western societies more people are now said to believe in the soul or spirit than to believe in God.

Scholars have wearied themselves, their students and their readers in trying to define religion. The basic problem is avoiding an account that is too narrow, while also avoiding a definition that is so broad as to fail to capture any distinctive character. Older dictionary definitions of religion, fashioned in less culturally pluralistic times, typically refer to ‘a belief in, and worship of, a god or gods’. These specifications fail in the first respect. Recent writers aware of the large array of ‘belief systems’ sometimes favour definitions couched in terms of ‘a commitment to a perspective of ultimate and universal value’, but this is clearly too broad – if not, indeed, quaintly vacuous. Another tendency is to present one’s own favoured theory of religious motivation or value as if it were a definition of the very phenomenon. This sometimes results in quite eccentric and contradictory accounts, as in the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s observation that religion is ‘what the individual does with his own solitude’ and the sociologist Emile Durkheim’s dictum that religion ‘is an eminently collective thing’.

It is tempting to trace these suggestions to the professional preoccupations of their authors, for while philosophers spend a good deal of time on their own working out ideas, sociologists and social anthropologists occupy themselves watching others living out social practices. To the extent that a general definition seems called for, religion is best characterised as a system of beliefs and practices directed towards a transcendent reality in relation to which persons seek solutions to the observed facts of moral and physical evil, limitation and vulnerability, particularly and especially death. As well as abstract and general classification, however, there is also the alternative of ostensive definition – that is, pointing to cases of the phenomenon in question. Admittedly this has the limitation that having recognised one or several examples one may yet not have the means of determining other cases. Yet the claim to ‘know one when one sees one’ is not vacuous either. It is, after all, how most of us proceed most of the time and its general success is not in doubt.

In the West we are familiar with a range of major religions that are united around certain basic philosophical/theological ideas, the general term for which is ‘theism’. By ‘religion’, this is what I shall have in mind, unless indicated otherwise – e.g. in relation to Buddhism, Hinduism and ‘new age religions’, which are generally not of this sort. Theism is the belief in a single, all-knowing, all-good, all-present and all-powerful, eternally existing God who created and sustains the universe. More specifically I shall have in mind the so-called ‘Abrahamic faiths’ or ‘religions of the book’: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These descriptions derive, first, from the account given in the Torah (the first five books
of the Hebrew Bible, by tradition ascribed to Moses) of God's promise to Abraham 'I will bless you ... and by you all the families of the Earth shall bless themselves' (Genesis 12:3); and, second, from the fact that all three religions recognise the authority of the Hebrew Bible as the word of God to humankind. The differences between them reside in what else they do or do not accept as revelation, and in what they take to follow from this.

Yet more precisely, the perspective from which I will be viewing the challenge that religion is otiose is a Judaeo-Christian one; since, ironically, it is principally within societies which once occupied this perspective that the charges of its redundancy, irrelevance and falsity are most often brought. The issues, however, are more general, and anyone interested in the intellectual and moral position of religion in the infancy of the third millennium, particularly if they are positively disposed to or even just open-minded about faith, will, I hope, find themselves stimulated by what follows, and perhaps even persuaded by it.