

The Word Religion

The word "religion" has no single or absolute meaning, and in the course of history has received a variety of definitions. This point is of great practical as well as theoretical importance. For a person may reject "religion" defined one way as meaningless, and refuse membership in the religious community that subscribes to "religion" so defined, whereas the same person will gladly belong to another community that defines "religion" in another way. This fact is particularly important in view of the present, precarious state of organized religion in the Western world. There can be little doubt in the mind of the objective observer that, taken as a whole, the dominant religious institutions of the scientifically, technologically, and industrially advanced societies of the Western world are declining. Although, therefore, the purpose of this inquiry is primarily a theoretical one, intended to explain a new definition of the word "religion," it has at the same time fundamental practical consequences. For in the author's view, among the primary reasons for the deteriorating condition of Western religious institutions, is the definition of "religion" to which they subscribe. That is to say, although the word religion can be so defined that it is competent for the modern age, as now defined by the dominant Western religious institutions, "religion" refers to beliefs and emotions that ever greater numbers of persons either do not have or which they find unrealistic, and which, consequently, are irrelevant to their lives.

This point may be enlarged on as follows.

1. The definition of the word religion to which a religious institution subscribes determines its essential focus, purpose and activity. To illustrate: the nature of a medical institution is determined by its definition of the word "medicine"; so that a medical institution that defines "medicine" as "supernatural faith healing" will employ procedures and practices which an institution that defines "medicine" in scientific and natural terms will reject. Likewise, religious institutions whose definitions of "religion" differ will pursue dissimilar goals and activities.
2. The definition of "religion" to which the presently dominant Western religious institutions subscribe, either explicitly or implicitly, is "belief in God," in which the term "God" is understood as meaning "theistic absolutism." Theistic absolutism is the view that the word God refers to an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, miracle-working being who created the human race and all the universe, who revealed to humankind commandments they must obey, and who, depending upon their obedience, dispenses to humankind supernatural rewards and punishments in this world and in a hereafter.¹
3. Having thus defined "religion" as "belief in theistic absolutism," Western religious institutions direct all their activities, liturgical, ritual, and educational, to the single, ultimate purpose of serving the concept of theistic absolutism. The services of these institutions consist entirely of praise of, pledges of obedience to, and protestations of total dependence on the deity as conceived in theistic absolutism. The rituals of

¹ This definition in fact, was first laid down in my, "God and Jewish Theology," Elements in a Philosophy of Reform Judaism, Institute of Creative Judaism Press, 1976.

these institutions relate all natural and personal experience to the theistic absolutistic deity. And religious education consists primarily in efforts to indoctrinate the congregation, particularly the young, with a blind belief in theistic absolutism, along with an unquestioning loyalty to the institution which presents itself as divinely and uniquely "chosen." It may be taken as evident - if only from the great numbers of persons who choose to be unaffiliated with religious institutions, and the very large numbers of those affiliated who do not participate in religious activities - that despite the considerable cultural visibility and political strength of the institutions that espouse theistic absolutism, the importance of the theistic absolutistic view of deity is steadily diminishing in modern life. (One need only glance at the history of the Middle Ages to see what societies do look like that take theistic absolutism seriously.) Accordingly, it can be expected that the presently dominant religious institutions of society, based as they are on religion defined as "belief in theistic absolutism," will continue their decline, perhaps to the point of dissolution. Thus it is not too much to say that the future of organized religion in Western society depends upon the development and institutionalization of a definition of religion that is broader and deeper than the restrictive and limited "belief in theistic absolutism."

Whence is a new definition of religion to come? It is certainly unreasonable to expect such creative innovation from the traditional theistic absolutistic institutions of the Western world, Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholic Christianity, Islam, Fundamentalist Protestantism, and their externally similar modernistic outgrowths such as traditionoid Reform Judaism and Liberal Protestantism. These institutions share a vested interest in propagating the view that "belief in theistic absolutism" is the only true definition of religion. Theistic absolutism is their primary dogma, part of their essence, and if they are able to preserve and spread the view that the only proper definition of religion is "belief in theistic absolutism," (along with the related misconception: that theistic absolutism is the only correct meaning of the word God) they can then perpetuate the myth that the concept of theistic absolutism is necessary to religion, and that they alone, therefore, teach and serve the only true form of religion. Once the word religion is so defined as to include meanings other than "belief in theistic absolutism," then the theistic absolutistic religions can no longer claim a monopoly either on the word religion or its practice. If there can be authentic religion without theistic absolutism, there can then be authentic religion that is not Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Fundamentalist Protestantism, traditionoid Reform Judaism or Liberal Protestantism.

It is perhaps here, then, in the development of a new definition of "religion," that Polydoxy, aside from its own emergence, has its most important contribution to make to the evolution and history of religion. For a polydoxy, unlike the aforementioned religions, can produce a new definition of "religion." The reason is that a polydox community possesses the two basic qualifications necessary to the development and institutionalization of a new definition. First, a polydoxy has no vested interest in theistic absolutism as the meaning of the word God. A polydoxy allows all views on the word God, from theistic absolutism (a form of theosupernaturalism) to atheonomatism. Consequently, a definition of religion that includes the option of theistic absolutism, but to which theistic absolutism is nevertheless unessential,

is appropriate to a polydoxy. Second, a polydox community affirms the ultimate personal freedom of every member, which includes the right to understand the word religion as the individual deems proper. Such freedom not only releases the creativity necessary to develop a new definition of "religion," but also encourages the institutionalization of the definition; namely, the incorporation and integration of the definition's principles into the liturgical, ritual, and educational materials of the community. Proceeding, then, with the recognition that the individual members of a polydox community have the right to judge for themselves its merit and relevance to their lives, we turn now to the following discussion in which a new definition of religion will be developed and proposed.

Laying the Groundwork for a New Definition: Fundamental Aspects of Human Existence

It will be helpful before proceeding to the proposed new definition of religion itself, to present a description of three fundamental features of the human person upon which the definition is based. These are: finity; infinite conation; and the conflict between awareness of finity and infinite conation.

Finity

Finity, as revealed by introspection and observation, is a pervasive feature of the human person. This means that all structures and powers of the human being, psychic and physical, are finite; they come to an end before reaching an ideal state, always falling short of perfection and self-sufficiency. The human person is a finite being enclosed by a limiting boundary within a state of imperfection. Basic categories of human finity include: psychic finity; physical finity; territorial finity; and existential finity.

1. ***Psychic finity*** is exemplified by the intellect and emotions. Both fall short in a striking fashion of attaining an ideal status. Were the human intellect to function in an absolutely perfect way, it would know all there is to know: the past, the present, and the future. It would know why and how the universe and the human person came into existence; all natural laws; and the universe's ultimate destiny. As it is, even the greatest of human intellects, the Freuds and the Einsteins, have acquired only small and partial fragments of knowledge. The human intellect being finite, one cannot know for sure the next moment of existence, even whether it will occur. Uncertainty and risk are the inevitable consequences of intellectual limits. Similarly, the emotions reveal their finity. Humans lack emotional self-sufficiency, unable by their own power to achieve a state of happiness. A person cannot attain felicitous emotional states in isolation from other humans. Human happiness generally is dependent upon relationships of esteem, affection, or love with other persons, and particularly is this true of infants and children.
2. ***Physical finity*** is seen in the senses and the body generally. The sense of sight shows well what it would mean for a bodily power to function in an absolutely perfect manner. Ideally, sight would perceive without error and at one time everything in the universe that is visible. Owing to its inherent limits, however, sight cannot see objects

too small or too far; and can apprehend nothing at all with absolute certainty of accuracy. The body is the most obvious example of the human lack of self-sufficiency. By itself, without air, water, or food, the body quickly perishes. Moreover, even if its basic needs are satisfied, the body is at all times vulnerable to injury and disease, and subject to aging.

3. ***Territorial finity*** is the limit on every human's power to possess things, dominate events, and rule other persons. However much wealth and power a person may have, there are always possessions, events, and persons beyond control or out of reach.
4. ***Existential finity*** is the inability of the human person to continue in existence, so far as ordinary observation can tell, beyond a very limited period of time. The natural consequence of existential finity is death, the most dramatic of all instances of finity.

Infinite conation

The second feature of the human person germane to religion is infinite conation. ("Conation" is the general philosophic term for desiring, willing and the like.) Infinite conation is the intense willing within humans that wants without limit or end whatever is conceived or imagined to be pleasurable. Infinite conation is itself a pervasive or general will that is expressed through particular desires, imparting to them an infinite quality. As might be expected, the principal categories of particular desires through which infinite conation is expressed correspond to the general areas of human finity: psychic desires; physical desires; territorial desires; and existential desires. When infinite conation is expressed through a category of particular desires, these desires themselves become infinite and may be termed: infinite psychic conation; infinite physical conation; infinite territorial conation; and infinite existential conation. The categories of infinite conation, briefly described, are these.

1. ***Infinite psychic conation*** includes the desire to know everything knowable with absolute accuracy and certainty. Particularly desired is such metaphysical knowledge as the complete truth about ultimate reality and the meaning of the word God; whether there is a hereafter; and its exact nature if there is one. Also included in infinite psychic conation is a desire for absolute emotional invulnerability and self-sufficiency.
2. ***Infinite physical conation*** includes the desires for omnipotence and bodily invulnerability. Infinite physical conation can also be expressed through the various bodily appetites, as, for example, sex. Infinite sexual desire craves unbounded libidinal experience without regard for social or reality limits.
3. ***Infinite territorial conation*** is the desire to own and rule the universe: to possess all things; control all events; and dominate all other persons. Infinite territorial conation may extend to the point where there is not only a desire to own and rule all that there is, but to be all that there is.
4. ***Infinite existential conation*** is the will to live forever; the desire never to die.

Finitude

The third characteristic of the human person relevant to religion is the conflict produced by the aforementioned two characteristics of human finity and infinite human conation. When existing simultaneously within a person, the awareness that one is finite and the passionate desire to be infinite are two mutually incompatible, antagonistic, and clashing forces. The human person, bounded and limited, yearns intensely to be what she or he is not, unbounded and unlimited. This conflict between the awareness of one's finity on the one hand, and infinite conation on the other, will be referred to as the "conflict of finitude," or simply as "finitude." Four basic observations are to be made with respect to the conflict of finitude.

1. The first is that the conflict of finitude takes place on both a conscious and unconscious level. This point is of fundamental importance in attempting to understand and evaluate the conflict of finitude. For to the degree that finitude occurs on an unconscious level, it is not present to consciousness except in a disguised and distorted form. Yet despite the considerable extent to which finitude does reside in the unconscious, a fairly adequate idea of the conflict can be attained by consciousness. For one thing, some aspects of the conflict of finitude are present to consciousness. The most notable of these is the conflict between existential finity and infinite existential conation; between the awareness that one dies and the profound wish not to die. Still, the fact that much of the conflict of finitude takes place in the unconscious produces difficult problems with respect to understanding and recognizing the conflict for what it is.
2. The fundamental point to be made regarding the conflict of finitude is that, unresolved in a person, the conflict annihilates the meaning of existence. The negative moods produced by finitude, such as terror, despair, anxiety and melancholy are so intense that the meaningful aspects of existence are overpowered and life's value corroded. One need only think of the mood generated by the concrete contemplation of one's own death while fervently wishing not to die. Also, many destructive moods that appear to consciousness to be rootless and without a cause are actually to be attributed to those aspects of the conflict of finitude that take place in the unconscious, and are concealed from ordinary consciousness.
3. The conflict of finitude, from all available evidence, is an inherent problem of the human being. This means the conflict is not produced by some particular culture, economic system, or political structure, although place and time considerations can influence the way in which the problem is dealt with.
4. Inasmuch as the conflict of finitude is an inherent and universal problem of the human existent and fundamental to meaningful human existence, the entire structure of the conflict, which includes the awareness of finity, infinite conation, and the conflict itself can appropriately be referred to as "onta" or the "ontal structure." ("Onta" is derived from the Greek word for existence or "being.") The ontal structure behaves much as a single, dynamic system, with changes in its basic constituents affecting and reshaping the entire structure. When a change takes place in a person's awareness of

finitude or infinite conation which affects the conflict of finitude in a lasting manner, this is an "ontal change" or a "change in the ontal structure." The act of will that produces a change in the ontal structure is an "ontal decision."

Religion Defined as Response to Finitude

The negative moods produced by the conflict of finitude create intolerable psychic pain, and an urgent need, therefore, to deal with the conflict. The way in which a person deals with the conflict of finitude will be referred to as the person's "response to the conflict of finitude," or briefly, "response to finitude." With this we have arrived at our definition of religion: **Religion is the human person's response to the conflict of finitude.** Stated more fully: Religion is the human person's response to the psychic conflict produced by the awareness of finitude and infinite conation, the passionate desire not to be finite. The ideal purpose of a religion is to provide a response to the conflict of finitude that enables a person to resolve the conflict and thereby attain a state of ultimate meaningful existence that the conflict's negative moods would otherwise destroy. The state of ultimate meaningful existence that is attained when the conflict of finitude has been resolved will also be referred to as "soteria" (from the Greek word for salvation). Thus the function of a religion is to produce soteria. Asoteria is the name given to the state of meaningless existence that arises from a failure to resolve the conflict of finitude.

Different Responses to Finitude: Infinite, Discognitive, Finite

There are three major categories of responses to finitude, or religions: the infinite response; the discognitive response; and the finite response. In the discussion that follows, the three major categories will be described and commented upon.

The infinite response to finitude

The conflict of finitude, as described earlier, is produced by the simultaneous presence within a person of two clashing psychic forces: awareness that one is finite, and the intense desire to be infinite. The infinite response resolves the conflict by denying the truth of the perception that the human person is finite, which removes one of the conflicting psychic forces, and by asserting that on the contrary the human individual is infinite, which satisfies the other. In this way, with the consciousness of finitude removed, and the wish to be infinite fulfilled, the human's ontal structure becomes integrated. This integration and wish fulfillment produce soteria, the state of ultimate meaningful existence. There are two major kinds of infinite responses to finitude: the infinite personal response; and the infinite relational response.

1. ***Infinite personal response:*** The general features of the infinite personal response are the beliefs that the person is infinite, and that this power of infinite existence comes from no source other than the person. The person, consequently, is not dependent on any other being for infinity. The common form that the infinite personal response takes is that the person believes herself or himself to be "God." God here is usually understood in a pantheistic (or acosmic) sense, and refers to a being who is uncreated

and absolutely independent, illimitable, timeless, omniscient, and the sole reality. The perception that the human person is finite, according to this view, stems from illusion or partial knowledge.

A less usual form of the infinite personal response is that the person, although not "God," is nevertheless independently infinite. The way this happens is that the person is conceived of as possessing an uncreated soul or consciousness which is by its nature eternal, so that the person is not dependent upon any other being for infinity.

2. ***Infinite relational response:*** The general features of the infinite relational response are the beliefs that human persons, so far as their own powers are concerned, are finite, but they can attain infinite status through a dependent relation on an infinite being, namely, the God of theistic absolutism, who has the power to grant infinity to others. The classic and original formulation of the infinite relational response in the Western world was framed by Pharisaic Judaism, and it has been followed in its basic principles by Roman Catholicism, Islam, and Fundamentalist Protestantism. Pharisaic Judaism exists today, unchanged except for minor details, as Orthodox Judaism. The infinite relational response has for some two thousand years been the Western world's basic response to finitude and its primary means of attaining soteria. For this reason, and because it is now becoming increasingly ineffective, the salient aspects of the infinite relational response deserve enumeration.

The cardinal requirement of the infinite relational response to finitude (as of all infinite responses) is that the religionist making the response believe with the profoundest conviction in the existence of the beings and the reality of the events that the infinite relational response presupposes. *Genuine belief is required; lip service will not do. Not because lip service is wrong, but because it is ontally (structurally) ineffective.* The conflict of finitude exists entirely in the human psyche, and can be overcome only by potent psychic action, that is, by a conviction powerful enough to produce ontal decisions that forge the beliefs and desires of a person into an enduring integrated structure. An allied point, but no less significant, is that the infinite relational response (as is true of all responses to finitude) is ultimately made alone. The human person is in an awesomely unique and privileged relation to her or his own existence, so that only the one who has the conflict of finitude possesses the necessary access to self to resolve it. No one for another can resolve the conflict. No one for another can assent to the beliefs and perform the acts of will that constitute the ontal decisions which resolve the conflict between awareness of finity and infinite conation. This is not to say that philosophers, theologians, depth psychologists, sages of all kinds, and parents cannot provide guidance and support to those who seek help in responding to finitude. Without such assistance there are countless numbers who would never reach the point from which they could then proceed to respond to finitude successfully. It is simply that in the end, we all confront and respond to finitude alone.

The primary belief of which one must be convinced in order to make the infinite relational response of Pharisaism and Western religion generally is that theistic

absolutism is true: namely, there exists an infinitely perfect personal deity who exercises providential care over humankind in this life; and after death continues this care in a hereafter; and this providential care is now and will be in the future granted the believer. It is understandable from this analysis how "belief in theistic absolutism" has come to be synonymous with "religion" in the Western world. The response to finitude of the dominant religions of the Western world is totally dependent upon belief in theistic absolutism. Also, theistic absolutism pervades Western cultural, educational, political, and economic institutions. Still, the notion that "belief in theistic absolutism" is a competent definition of religion is philosophically and historically inadequate, and fails to reveal the basic nature of "belief in theistic absolutism" as a response to finitude. Accordingly, "belief in theistic absolutism" is not a unique phenomenon, but merely one of several possible responses to finitude. Consequently, as the fundamental and general activity underlying and including the infinite relational response, it is "response to finitude" and not "belief in theistic absolutism" that merits the general name "religion."

The primary event that must be believed in for the Pharisaic Jewish infinite relational response is that "God" (as the word is defined in theistic absolutism) supernaturally and infallibly revealed to Moses the commandments that appear in the Pentateuch and Talmud. Without an infallible communication of commandments, there would be no way to know and obey what the "God" of theistic absolutism wants believed or performed, and hence no way to receive the reward of a blissful afterlife. In Christianity, Moses and the Pentateuch are replaced by Jesus and the New Testament, and in Islam, by Mohammed and the Koran.

It is perhaps a subtle but still significant point to distinguish between the nature of the infinite desire represented by the infinite personal response and that represented by the infinite relational response. In the infinite personal response, the nature of the desire expressed is to be infinite through one's own power, either by possessing an uncreated and immortal soul, or by being "God" (pantheistically conceived), absolutely self-sufficient and all that there is, the only reality. In the infinite relational response, the nature of the desire is to exist in perfect security in and through another. That is, the desire is to be not only finite, but to be passive, impotent and cared for, and receive infinite existence through a dependent relation to a deity (as conceived in theistic absolutism.)

As stated above, a person must be genuinely convinced of the truth of the basic beliefs that underlie the infinite relational response (such as the theistic absolutistic concept of deity) for the response to be efficacious and produce soteria. Historically, genuine conviction has been achieved by basing belief on evidence. The only evidence for the Pharisaic infinite relational response is contained in the Pentateuch; for the Christian infinite relational response, the New Testament; and for the Muslim, the Koran. Consequently, if the credibility of these three works were to be vitiated, no evidence for the traditional Western infinite relational response would exist. Accordingly, the ability of the infinite relational response to provide a successful response to finitude in our age depends upon the ability of the Pentateuch, New

Testament, and Koran to convince the modern Western mind that one or all of them is literally and infallibly true. There are persons, it is true, who do not require evidence to support their infinite relational response. Such responses, however, are generally vague and inconsistent, which is to be expected from subjectively fashioned and objectively baseless responses.

The discognitive response to finitude

The discognitive response deals with the conflict between awareness of finity and infinite conation in an essentially different way from the infinite response. The infinite response removes one of the antagonistic forces, awareness of finity, and satisfies the infinite desire that remains. The conflict of finitude is thereby resolved. In the discognitive response, however, the conflict is not resolved, it is concealed. As noted earlier, the conflict of finitude when unresolved produces negative moods that annihilate the meaning of existence and cause unendurable psychic pain. The discognitive response obscures from consciousness either knowledge of the conflict, or knowledge of the intolerable anguish it causes, or both. Among the discognitive responses subscribed to in our time, these are especially prominent: psychosis and neurosis; alcoholism; drug addiction; and suicide.

Several comments on the discognitive response to the conflict of finitude are in order.

1. The question can be raised why the discognitive responses to finitude are so widespread in our time. There are two points that taken together provide, if not the entire answer, a good part of it. The first is that in our scientific and critical age, ever greater numbers of people simply do not find the evidence necessary to support an infinite response convincing. It has always been difficult in Western society to believe oneself "God" (even in the acosmic sense) as is required by the infinite personal response, although some increased acceptance of such notions has taken place with the emergence of various exotic cults. More significant is the fact that only recently have massive numbers of persons in Western society been unable to accept the beliefs required for the infinite relational responses of the traditional Western religions: Orthodox Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and their modernistic outgrowths such as traditionoid Reform Judaism. No small part of this disbelief has been created by scientific and critical inquiry into the three works referred to above as constituting the only ostensibly objective evidence that exists for the infinite relational response, the Pentateuch, New Testament, and Koran. The conclusions of such inquiry are invariably that the three works are clearly fallible, of uncertain accuracy, and consequently, of no real value as theological evidence. What is ironic about this, is that the vast majority of scholars who have come to these conclusions are professors at theological seminaries. Many other reasons may be cited for the widespread rejection of the infinite response religions, but the point is that they are widely rejected, and this fact is momentous. For these religions have provided Western civilization with its primary means of resolving the conflict of finitude and achieving soteria. Added to the rejection of the infinite response is the second point, that no other response to finitude that resolves the conflict, such as the finite response to be presented next, is generally known, let alone recognized as a

religion, institutionalized in a religious organization, systematically taught, and culturally sanctioned. Accordingly, many modern persons are trapped, unable to subscribe to the traditional infinite responses on the one hand and unaware of or unschooled in any other resolving, soterial response to finitude on the other. Thus beset by the unendurable anguish of the conflict of finitude, they resort to discognitive responses in the hope of concealing, at least for the time they can, the asoterial agony that annihilates the meaning of their lives.

2. The conflict of finitude is most intense during adolescence. We may expect, therefore, that during this period such discognitive responses as drug addiction, alcoholism, and suicide will be particularly frequent.
3. The discognitive responses cannot be considered authentic responses to finitude. The reason is they do not resolve the conflict, they only make the person unaware of it, and in the case of suicide, through death. Moreover, except in the case of suicide, the unconscious remains aware of the conflict, and great suffering takes place even though diffused or disguised by the illness or chemical employed. The conflict of finitude, until it is properly resolved, is an essential and fundamental part of the human person, so that it is not possible to destroy awareness of the conflict and its pain without destroying the person as well.

The finite response to finitude

The third response to the conflict of finitude is the finite response. The finite response contains essentially three elements: acknowledgement of the truth of the perception that one is finite; renunciation of infinite conation; setting and accepting limits in all areas of desire. Several forms of the finite response occur, based on different views of ultimate reality, and requiring different degrees of renunciation, but all share in common renunciation of infinite existential desire and acceptance of the finality of one's own death. Accordingly, with infinite desire given up, the conflict of finitude, which is produced by the clash between consciousness of finity and infinite desire, is resolved. The finite existence of the human person, consisting of psychic, physical, territorial, and existential limits, satisfies a finite will; the finite being that a person is, is that which the person wishes to be. Being and will having thus been integrated, the harmony brings soteria.

An obvious question is: how is it possible to renounce infinite desire, accept the finality of one's own death, and still attain soteria, ultimate meaningful existence? As the efficacy of the infinite response for the modern human weakens, the answer takes on fundamental significance for the success and quality of the individual's life in modern society. In the following brief outline, the author's view why the finite response can bring soteria is sketched.

1. Ultimate meaningful existence, and all positive moods, whether eudemony, happiness, or contentment, result from the satisfaction of conation, that is, of will or desire.

2. There is in the human person a profound will to exist. The mere act of existing satisfies this desire, so that one's individual existence is in itself intrinsically meaningful since it satisfies a desire flowing from the depths of one's being.
3. If the will to exist desires infinite existence, however, the only act of existing, that is, the only form of human existence that will satisfy it, is infinite existence. Accordingly, the conflict of finitude arises when the person perceives her or his existence as finite, and the will to exist is infinite. For finite existence cannot satisfy an infinite will; it is not what an infinite will desires.
4. There are three general modes or forms the human will to exist can take: two are necessarily infinite, the third is not. The first is the will to exist as an all-powerful, all-knowing, unlimited being which constitutes the universe or, indeed, all of reality. The second is to exist in and through another, that is, as a being encompassed by an infinite parent who provides peace, protection, and security. The third is the will to exist in and through one's own being even though that being is finite. These three modes of the will to exist are all present in the human person in infancy and childhood. In the course of time, as the person moves toward adulthood, one of these three modes of the will to exist becomes dominant. (This should be qualified: often enough no one mode will dominate, resulting in conflict sufficiently intense to produce asoteria.) The mode of the will to exist that becomes dominant is the fundamental constituent of the personality and determines what the person generally and ultimately wants from life.
5. The reader will by now have recognized the first two modes of the will to exist enumerated above. The first, the desire to constitute all of reality and exist without bounds, forms the desire that is satisfied by the infinite personal response to the conflict of finitude. The second mode of the will to exist, to exist in and through another, is satisfied by the infinite relational response. The third mode of the will to exist, to exist in and through one's own being although finite, has not yet been discussed. This mode will be referred to as "the substantive will." (The name substantive is derived from the term "substance" which has a rich philosophic history and possesses the basic meaning: "a being that subsists by and through itself; a separate and independent being.")
6. It is through the substantive will that a person who makes a finite response resolves the conflict of finitude and attains soteria. The conflict is produced by the clash between the awareness that one is finite and one's infinite desire. When the substantive mode of the will to exist becomes the dominant will, the infinite modes of the will to exist are to all purposes given up, and play no further significant role. Thus the conflict of finitude is resolved. The substantive will is to exist in and through one's own being, and it matters not that such being is finite. Accordingly, despite the psychic, physical, territorial, and existential boundaries that limit finite being, finite being satisfies the substantive will. The psyche that contains one's own authentic thoughts and feelings; the physical accomplishments of one's body; the territory that consists of mutual relations with consenting persons and the just possession of things;

and existence that is deeply and genuinely experienced, fulfill the dominant substantive mode of the will to exist and bring to those who make the finite response the intrinsic meaningfulness of soteria.

The process through which one of the three modes of the will to exist becomes dominant consists of a series of ontal decisions. Ontal decisions, which produce enduring changes in the fundamental structure of the human being, take place both consciously and unconsciously, and beginning with infancy require many years before they finally give lasting shape to the person's religion, or response to finitude. When the necessary ontal decisions have been made, the person will then exist in a state of soteria. It is, of course, possible, when all the ontal decisions required have not been made, to achieve a partial state of soteria. In our time, the malaise of partial soteria is widespread.

The Inadequacy of Theistic Absolutism as a Definition of Religion

Aside from the incompetence of the definition of religion as "belief in theistic absolutism" that is revealed by semantic and logical analysis, compelling evidence of the definition's inadequacy derives from the "religious" history of the Jews. The religious history of the Jews is invaluable for an overview of religion in the Western world. For Jewish religious experience begins before the emergence of Pharisaic Judaism, whereas Christianity and Islam are both descendents of Pharisaism and dominated by its concepts. Consequently, the Jews alone among the major Western religious communities possess non-Pharisaic religious origins, which produces a qualitative difference in the width and depth of their perspective on the uses of the word religion. This having been said, we may put the matter directly. The Jews over the ages have subscribed to systems of belief and practice that have been responses to the conflict of finitude, but which would not be "religion" defined as "belief in theistic absolutism." The following examples illustrate this point.

1. A cardinal principal of theistic absolutism is that there is an absolute separation between the being of the infinite, perfect deity and the finite and imperfect universe in general and the human person in particular. Yet pantheism, in which the deity, the universe and the human person are one, is subscribed to explicitly by some Kabbalist Jews and many early Hasidic Jews, and implicitly by the author of the Zohar and the Habad school of Hasidic Judaism. (Pantheism is commonly equated with atheism by theistic absolutists.)
2. Another cardinal principle of theistic absolutism is that the deity grants eternal life to the human person; death is only the gateway to eternal life in a hereafter. Yet the original belief of the Jewish "religious" systems preceding Pharisaism is that there is no afterlife and death is final. Thus belief in a hereafter appears nowhere as a belief of the religion of the Pentateuch or Torah. (There is no intention here to confuse the reader. It is true, as stated earlier, that the Pharisees employed the Pentateuch to provide evidence of a hereafter, but the interpretations of Scriptural passages they employed for this purpose have no basis in the text, and resemble more than anything else wishful thinking.) Moreover, the concept of a hereafter appears nowhere as a belief of any Biblical system. Ecclesiastes explicitly rejects the notion. Sadducaic

Judaism bitterly rejected the Pharisaic belief in an afterlife. Maimonides, in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, as did other Jewish philosophers, rejected belief in individual survival in an afterlife.

3. Accordingly, the total theological experience of Jewish history requires a richer understanding of religion than "belief in theistic absolutism." This is provided by religion defined as "the human person's response to the conflict of finitude." So understood, the different Jewish systems referred to above are clearly all religions, but they are differing religions, that is, different responses to finitude. The pantheistic Kabbalist and Hasidic systems are infinite personal response religions. Pharisaic Judaism is an infinite relational response religion. Pentateuchal (Torah) Judaism, and the Judaism of Ecclesiastes, the Sadducees, and Maimonides are finite response religions.
4. The various Jewish responses to finitude, or religions, to which the Jews over the ages have subscribed give rise to this thought. There is clearly no single religion called Judaism. Judaisms that prescribe different responses to finitude are simply different religions. All Judaisms, however, do share an essential purpose in common: this is to provide humans with responses to finitude that enable them to attain soteria. Thus the Judaisms of the ages can be referred to by a single term: the Jewish religious enterprise. The function of the Jewish religious enterprise is not to serve the past but the living, to bring to humans of any given present age whatever guidance they may require to reach soteria.

Final Thought

The overall theme of this essay has been that the definition of religion as "the human person's response to the conflict of finitude" should, at least in a polydox community, replace Western society's traditional definition of religion as "belief in theistic absolutism," that is, belief in an infinitely perfect personal deity who exercises supernatural care over humankind in this life, and provides infinite existence to the deserving in a hereafter. The reason is that "belief in theistic absolutism" as a definition of religion is neither sufficiently deep nor broad. It does not reveal the fundamental human activity of responding to finitude that religion expresses, nor does it include the full variety of ways in which finitude has been dealt with that have a semantic and logical right to be known and treated as religion. Without a definition of religion, of course, the freedom a polydox community affirms is blind. The community has freedom, but it has no notion of what it is to which the freedom pertains. With the definition of religion as "the human person's response to finitude," the freedom of the polydox community has focus and direction. The freedom it affirms is every member's right to respond to finitude in a manner that brings to the individual soteria.

The definition of religion as "the human person's response to finitude" enables us to apprehend sharply and clearly what is meant when a religion is said to be irrelevant or obsolete. A religion is irrelevant or obsolete when it fails to provide a response to finitude that brings soteria. The harsh judgment that history lays down on irrelevant religions is extinction. Our analysis of the conflict of finitude reveals why this is so. The conflict of finitude produces in

human persons the intolerable pain of meaningless human existence. They must, therefore, in loyalty to that which is every person's primary responsibility, the authenticity and integrity of their own existences, seek out the religion and community that will provide them with soteria. The claim of a religious community to the loyalty of its members must ultimately rest on its ability to provide soteria. If it cannot provide this, experience teaches us that all other claims to loyalty, on the basis of birth or nostalgia, for example, will prove empty.

The major categories of religion, or responses to the conflict of finitude, have been categorized as the infinite, discognitive, and finite responses. As has been stated, the infinite response has become increasingly ineffective in Western society. This has led to a striking increase in the numbers of persons who employ the discognitive response. The only alternative for persons who cannot subscribe to the infinite response, and who refuse to deal with the conflict of finitude in the unauthentic manner of a discognitive response, is to make a finite response. A finite response, however, requires knowledge, training, and an environment of approval. Only a polydoxy, which affirms its members' right and freedom to choose whichever response to finitude they wish, can institutionalize the finite response, and provide the instruction needed to understand the philosophy of the response, as well as the liturgy and rituals required to bring it concretely to the will and the emotions. The essence of a finite response is that persons can through finite existence, although death is final, achieve and live in the meaningful state of soteria. Despite the fact that the finite response is often coupled with a belief in deity, even a supernatural deity, as in the Pentateuch and Prophets, for example, the theistic absolutistic religions look upon the claim of the finite response to bring soteria as hubris and sinfully presumptuous. They insist that without the gracious and miraculous gift of infinite existence from the theistic absolutistic deity there can be no soteria. And so they indoctrinate the children. Consequently, it is only the polydox community, which teaches and approves of all responses to the conflict of finitude, that can institutionalize the finite response, and create the environment of affirmation, approval, and insight that is necessary for the finite response to bring soteria.

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