Varieties of Religious Aesthetic Experience

Religion and its Varieties

Just as most societies throughout history have managed to produce and appreciate artistic and aesthetic things without any concepts closely corresponding to our modern ideas of fine art and aesthetic experience, so have they managed to practise religion without making use of the equally modern idea of religion as such – that is, the idea of religion as a general phenomenon that takes particular forms. Religion in this sense is, as recent writers have stressed, a 'child of the Enlightenment' conceived in the scholar's study. Moreover, religion so conceived is not itself the object of devotion and faith. When following a particular religious path, even the self-consciously religious person is not seeking some sort of generic religious experience any more than a connoisseur looking at Donatello's *David* is in search of aesthetic experience in general.

We need not conclude from this, as some scholars do, that by and large we would be better off not to talk about 'religion' and 'religions'. The abstract concept of religion, like that of art, helps one to place, comprehend, and attend appropriately to distinctive kinds of objects, processes, and experiences. Yet, like the term 'art', the term 'religion' applies to a wide range of heterogeneous phenomena and so resists neat and precise definition. Most scholars now realize that the uniquely modern search for the one true essence of religion is misguided. Some of what we call religions emphasize belief, others emphasize practice; some are theistic or indeed polytheistic, others are indifferent to the gods; some pursue immortality, others earthly prosperity; some seek mystical union, others spiritual communion; some are inclined to be theoretical, others to be ethical; some stress values or acts that are personal and solitary, others stress ones that are corporate and social; some religions are hierarchical, others egalitarian; some worry about guilt, others about shame; some concentrate on

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salvation, others on ‘etiquette’ and right relations. The extent of this variety is so great as to be almost impossible fully to take into account; even William James in his classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) ends up discussing mainly varieties of personal spirituality, and of these mostly the Western, modern, and vaguely mystical. It could be argued, in fact, that the varieties of religious experience are as many as the varieties of religious expression.

Nevertheless, as we also found in the case of art, we do discover family resemblances and recurrent patterns among the various things we regularly describe as ‘religious’. On the basis of these resemblances and patterns we can venture a general characterization of religion for which we can claim relative adequacy: On the whole religion is concerned with living life well, in its totality; and religions in various ways not only project a vision of what ‘living well’ means but also recognize that life overall, and in various particulars, tends to fall short of well-being and well-doing. Consequently religions are in the business of transformation and rectification. To that end they provide special kinds of communities and leadership, and often they affect the shape and direction not just of individual lives but also of society at large. By means of sacred stories, symbols, doctrines, and rituals, religions convey a sense of what matters most in life and in the cosmos as a whole; and by celebrating and recalling exemplary lives and thoughts of saints and sages they promote specific actions and attitudes among their followers. In all this they characteristically invoke the necessary aid of – and evoke the praise and honor to be rendered to – certain undergirding or overarching powers and realities that go beyond anything that immediately meets the senses or that can entirely be figured out. These powers and realities are regarded as mysterious, numinous, or divine; as awe-inspiring, holy, or sacred.

Moving from the level of general characterization to the level of a quasi-formal or ‘working’ definition we can say that with respect to its experiential dimension, religion constitutes the individual’s and group’s total response to what is apprehended as the sacred or transcendent realities, or reality, on which we and our world ultimately depend. Second, with respect to its structure and function, religion can be said to constitute what Clifford Geertz terms a cultural and symbolic system that ‘tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experience’, in the hope that life can be