1 Rethinking the Meaning of Religion

This book adds its voice to the growing call for a radically new understanding of religion, because the ones we have inherited cannot do justice to the global phenomenon of faith in all its basic forms and characteristics. And since this phenomenon has been a dominant concern of people in virtually every society for thousands of years, until we improve our understanding of it we are unlikely to develop reliable concepts of what it means to be human either.

There is as yet no standard conception of religion even among believers, which is itself a sign of the problem before us. Seeking insight into the spiritual life, enquirers who consult the writings of famous experts will find there as many views of the subject as there are authors. Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote that faith is a well-founded sense of absolute dependence, while Freud thought of it as an obsessional neurosis. William James on the other hand declared that religion comprises a relationship with what he called friendly, higher powers. Emile Durkheim pronounced it to be the result of social causes, whereas A. N. Whitehead defined it as what people do with their own solitariness. For his part Rudolf Otto saw the basis of religion as a sense of the holy, but Paul Tillich, a younger contemporary of Otto also from Protestant Germany, described it as ultimate concern. When influential writers dealing with a common subject come to such diverse conclusions we have every reason to suspect that much rethinking still needs to be done.

In particular there are seven problems that seriously undermine most existing views of religion. Seen in isolation each one is disturbing; taken together they imply an urgent need for sweeping conceptual improvement. Let us consider them in turn. The first one relates to our revolutionary modern understanding of the
nature and discovery of knowledge itself, in any field of enquiry. We ourselves create not only the concepts that express our findings but also the world-views that coordinate them into meaningful patterns. As human creations they reflect and share humanity's cognitive characteristics: fallible, evolving, experimental, incomplete, provisional and tinged with local colour. We have learnt that the search for knowledge is always affected by these factors and that within the limits they impose the most fertile method is rigorous logical and observational testing of surmises about the problems we try to solve. Above all we have come to recognise that although immense progress is possible our understanding of things is never complete and that in this respect there are no such things for us as prefect accuracy, absolute certainty or immunity to supersession by better ideas. Finite mental equipment like ours means that there will necessarily be limits to what we can grasp or produce with it.

Religions generate concepts and world-views. Therefore our understanding of them must be changed by the new insights we now have into the nature of human cognition. In particular we now recognise that world-views are especially provisional because they say so much more than any of us or even all of us could presently verify. Among them the greatest reliability attaches to ones that are consistent with and can be supported by the largest number of tested observations. All world-views have what we could call a built-in expansion factor. This is the extent to which they go beyond the observations and experiences which support them. Some rest on few, others on many. The less there are, the more speculative the world-view and the more tenuous its account of things, though many people, especially those who are unaware of this limitation, may none the less find immense personal satisfaction from it. We must of course take great care not to confuse psychological considerations of this kind with logical and cognitive ones. In any event, the point at issue has momentous consequences for religion. All the existing faiths involve world-views which formed when relatively or even extremely meagre amounts of rigorous, observational support was available. Therefore their cognitive status is correspondingly tenuous. Yet they are among the most influential ideas ever propounded. The great ages of religious creativity and the modern mind are on opposite sides of a mental revolution with far-reaching, relativising implications not only for the way modern scholars should perceive the spiritual