THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS ACTION

Much has been said about the nature of religious experience, but very little about religious activity; and, quite often, the two are thoughtlessly lumped together. However, a distinction must be recognized between man's religious responses resulting from an experience of divinity and man's religious actions which are perhaps occasioned by, but are not mere effects of religious experience. It is important to make such a distinction since man may be held accountable for his acts, but not for his emotional responses, unless, of course, they stand in a dependence relation to the acts. Although my main purpose is to characterize religious activity, I think the above distinction will be clearly brought out in the process. But before being able to locate and explain actions which are religious, some machinery for a general theory of action must first be proposed.

It must be noted that in this proposed theory of action, intentional actions alone will be considered, not actions that someone might do accidentally or inadvertently. With this restriction in mind, the logical structure of action is very similar to that of desire. Consider these two statements: (1) 's desires that the tree (t) be chopped down', and (2) 's acts to chop down (t)'. In the case of both (1) and (2) respectively there can be found an event (a desiring and a doing) by a subject s (a person who desires and an agent) who focuses his desire or efforts toward an object (t) with a certain objective or aim (y) in mind – viz., the chopping down of (t). Now certain implications follow from this structure.

(A) Both (1) and (2) have indefinite results. The objective of the desire could be either satisfied or unsatisfied, and the aim of the doing could be either successful or unsuccessful. Even though s tries to do (y) and fails, s nevertheless has engaged in an action. (N.B. I am assuming that all trying-to-do's are intentional actions.)

(B) Both (1) and (2) are existentially non-committal. Simply because s attempts to chop down (t), this does not imply that there is a (t) to be chopped down. However if (t) is merely a figment of
s's imagination, then it follows that the pursuit will be unsuccessful. Of course, if s does succeed in chopping down (t), then there must have been a (t) for s to have chopped down.

(C) Both are referentially opaque. If s is trying to chop down (t) which is the one which blocks s's view of the lake, and (t) = (x), which happens to be the tree in my neighbor's yard, this does not imply that s is trying to chop down (x).

(D) Both involve certain belief commitments. If s is trying to do (y), then s at least believes that there is a (t), and s may also believe if it is removed, then there will be a better view of the lake, which, let us say, serves as the reason for the desire as well as for the action. (It seems to me correct to say s's belief structure must include both a belief concerning the existence of the object as well as a belief concerning the reason or reasons for the desiring or the doing of (y).)

(E) The main difference between (1) and (2) lies in the fact that in (2) s may be acting upon (1). As far as (1) is concerned, s might not do anything to satisfy his desire – i.e. that s desires (y) does not imply that s tries to do (y) – e.g. s might be an invalid in a wheelchair. All (1) implies is that s desires (y) to happen. Therefore something must be added to (1) to get (2) – viz., a decision (act of willing) by s to do (y) in order that (1) might be satisfied.

With the help of this machinery I shall now take a look at religious activity. But first a unique property must be located which will enable one to distinguish the sphere of religious activity from other areas in which actions may occur. I contend that such a property is s's state of being ultimately concerned about the object (o) toward which he is directing his actions. This may be unpacked in the following way: Because of certain properties that s believes (o) to have, s accepts (o) as ultimate, thereby placing his highest concern in (o) such that s subordinates all other interests to his interest in (o). Briefly, (o) is of greatest importance to s. Under such a description one can say that the Third Reich became the object of religious activity for many of the German people. In other words, the content of the (o) is indifferent to the logical structure of religious activity, although it may matter infinitely to s.

Classically this state of being ultimately concerned has been called faith which may be analyzed in terms of belief; however contrary to many writers on the subject (Augustine, Kierkegaard, Tillich, Jaspers), I do not think religious faith is sui generis. Rather