

Chapter 21

The Vital Variety of Religious Practices

Because religions are created by human beings and because human beings live in numerous and very different cultures, religion takes on a huge variety of practices, beliefs, and moralities. This variety is so great that it may seem at first that little can be said that applies to all religions. And that would be true if we were looking at specific beliefs, specific practices, or specific moral guidelines. It has been my aim in Chapters 17-20 to talk about religion in general terms, nevertheless, it may seem to some readers that my description of religion as a general category excludes some of what is often called "religion."

Part of such difficulty may stem from my aim to describe universal qualities that I claim apply to all *good* religion. I have thereby implied that there is such a thing as *bad* religion, religion that functions in ways that are opposite or almost opposite to the essential functions I have described. We humans unavoidably apply criteria of good and bad to all humanly formed social processes. We speak of good education and bad education, good economics and bad economics. We assume that there are ways of evaluating these aspects of society – such as workability, justice, effectiveness, truthfulness, etc. We experience a similar need to evaluate "religion." I am assuming that credible ways exist for evaluating each specific manifestation of the social process I have named "*Religious Formation*." For example, I have written essays on how so much religion has fallen into intellectualism, moralism, and sentimentalism. I mean this as criticism.

Clearly, I am assuming that each and every religion can be evaluated good-better-best, or bad-worse-worst. And my criteria for this evaluation is how each particular religion corresponds with: (1) the realism of the scientific approach to truth, (2) the realism of the contemplative approach to truth (especially, does that religion attempt to express and open us to our true nature – that profound humanness that I have explored through the concept of the "I Am"?) and (3) the realism of the workability approach to truth (especially, does that religion enable us to be more prone to the "accident" of realizing our true nature?).

Nevertheless, it is still a credible possibility that I could be using *my* religion as the criteria for the judgment of all religion. It is my aim, however, to avoid using my specific form of Christian religion as the definition of all good religion. I am attempting to articulate a philosophy of religion that is broader than "my religion." I am attempting to provide my own religion with a philosophy of religion that applies to all religion. Whether I am succeeding with this intent is open for examination, but I firmly believe that such a philosophy is needed and possible. We need such a philosophy because we now live in interreligious communities, cities, nations, and planet. We must learn to think and work interreligiously. To do so we need a definition of religion that is broader than any one religion and that provides us with ways to honor all religions in their always fragmentary means of assisting people to access their profound humanness.

With my adventures into universal statements about what religion is and what makes religion good or bad, I do not want to slip into any implication that this universality is a subtle version of my religion that I am using as a criteria for the judgment of other religions. I count such a view as bigotry and view such bigotry as the source of much needless conflict and violence in the world. I am seeking a criteria that is deeper than my religion, a criteria that judges my religion as well as every other religion. And the word "criteria" is misleading if it means a set of rational statements. I am using the word "criteria" to indicate a base line in human experience about

experiencing our experience of the profound roots of human consciousness. This is a pre-rational “standard” that also transcends the word ‘standard.’ Applying this experiential consciousness “standard” is not the same as applying a set of rational principles. I am envisioning a sort of enigmatic “un-standard standard” that we can apply intuitively, based upon our own experience of our own profound experience.

For example, I am assuming that the profound humanness that Buddhist practices can access is the same profound humanness that Christian practices can access. These two religions (actually two groups of religions) open us to slightly different aspects of that profound humanness, but it is the same “elephant” that is being touched by all the various “blind men” in the wide variety of Buddhist practices and in the wide variety of Christian practices. Whether any of these practices are good depends on whether they actually put us in touch with the “elephant” of our profound humanness. And if any of these practices are judged “bad,” it needs to be because they cloud or escape from or prevent our consciousness from touching the “elephant.” I am attempting to develop a sense of profound humanness that stands in judgment of all religious practices. Religious practices are not good or bad because they are finite human creations, for such finitude is true of all religions. The issue is whether each finite human creation of religion has the power (or even the intent) of making us more prone to the “accident” of profound humanness discovery. If you grant me the statement that good religion (true religion) is any practice that assists humans to access the “I Am” profundity of our true nature, we clearly face a vast variety of religious practices that are *good* and an even greater variety of religious practices that are *bad*.

Furthermore, each religion comes into being within an ongoing dialogue with the vast religious diversity that surrounds it. Religions quite commonly learn from one another. A huge “borrowing” is going on between Buddhism and Christianity at this moment in history. Christians are enhancing the contemplative qualities of Christianity with help from Buddhist meditation practices and theoretics. And Buddhists are enhancing the social engagement qualities of Buddhist practice with help from the ethical intensity that Buddhists are learning from the best of Christianity and Judaism.

Christians who argue that Christian ideas and ways of practice dropped down from heaven are clouding the fact that the New Testament formation period was doing wholesale borrowing from Judaism and Mediterranean Paganism, as well as from sophisticated forms of Greek religion and philosophy. Some have argued that early Christianity was so eclectic that it can claim nothing unique to itself. I believe that to be an exaggeration: I believe that the religious elements that those first Christians adopted from their surroundings were given a unique cast that flowed from the breakthrough in awareness that was initiated by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection among the bodily lives of his followers. But however that may be, it stands as factual history that all religions take elements of religion from the planet-wide religious treasury; they take whatever assists them to enable their unique formation of religion to become what works for them as an assistance toward the maturation of the profound consciousness that they are discovering. And we do well to continue doing such interreligious swapping today.

The above insights are important for undergirding what we now call “interreligious dialogue.” We now live in a planet-wide ferment of interreligious cultures. We live on one planet, mixing the antiquities and futures of all expressions of human culture. Furthermore, this dialogue has become more than swapping ideas or moral principles. For example, many Christians now realize that to be fully engaged in interreligious dialogue, they need to meditate with the Buddhists, attend festivals with the Jews, pray head-on-the-floor with the Muslims, sit sweat lodges with the Pagans, and so on. It is these down-to-Earth practices that make a religion a workable religion. So the aware ones among us are already trying out practices on a planet-wide scale and adopting

what works for them into their chosen religious emphasis.

The vast variety of religious practices is a vital treasury precisely because of its variety. It is understandable that the many finite approaches created by religiously creative humans have been and will continue to be various, multiple, many, and ongoingly creative. While each of us may focus our creativity on one religious heritage, we do so within a planet-wide interreligious dialogue among a of vital variety of religious practices.