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### Is Christianity a Religion?, Part 3

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Well, now today we come to the second method of studying religion. The first was a psychological method and I did my best to undermine its value, show that it was impracticable, and now we come to the comparative method and I have the same intention with respect to this also.

The ideal of classifying religions as members of the lily family are classified in botany is too attractive to be discarded because of the failure of one attempt. Another method of approaching the problem is the method of comparative religions. If similar emotions blossom in different religions and divergent emotions within one religion and all of them without the benefit of any religion, perhaps the nature of religion is to be found in its intellectual aspect. Surely the systematic exclusion of the so-called bare-bones, that's a quotation from one of the previous authors, surely the systematic exclusion of the bare-bones of intellectual content is an extreme position. A study of the beliefs or theologies of a religion, the beliefs or theologies of a religion, is indispensable to an understanding of it. Only by grasping the doctrinal or intellectual system of each faith can one avoid vague and misleading abstractions. And in spite of the first impression of incompatible differences among religions, must not there be some basic similarities? Otherwise why should they all be called religions?

### Is God Essential to Religion?

At first sight it would seem that there is a greater variety of beliefs than of emotions, and that the nature of religion could never reside in any theological formulation. But the hope of comparative studies is of course to find in this welter of beliefs some common denominator. Some minimal consensus. Some general agreement. No doubt Mohammedanism and Christianity have different conceptions of God, but they both believe in some sort of deity. Perhaps then this is the common element and essential nature of all religion.

Karl R. Stoltz in *The Psychology of Religious Living* argues on pages 75 and 76, argues that "humanism is not a religion because it invests the word religion with a connotation that is absolutely foreign to it. A godless religion is a contradiction in terms." For the moment let us grant that Stoltz and King are right in denying that a religion can be godless. We are now confronted with the philosophy of Spinoza and with the superstitions of savage tribes. Did Spinoza have a religion? Did Spinoza have a god? Some people have called him an atheist, and if this is the truth he could not have had a religion in Stoltz's sense of the word. But others

have called him a *getrunkenen mensch*. There's a typographical error here, there was a c in the word that was dropped out in the printing somehow. But anyhow, other people have called him a *getrunkenen mensch*. A god-intoxicated man. He spoke frequently of God. Of *Deus sive natura*. I think our Latin expert is absent this morning. Is she? That's too bad. This is *Deus sive natura*. And if you remember two or three days ago I put *sive* on the board. I hope you all know what it means now. Do you?

Audience: ???

God what?

Audience: ???

Yes, the trouble is, there isn't any English word that is unambiguous. So you have to put in a phrase to explain it. God, or in other word, nature. They make God and nature synonymous. And so you will find time and time again in the philosophy of Spinoza the phrase *Deus sive natura*. Of course he wrote in Latin as I suppose you know.

Therefore he must have been very religious. Unfortunately, however, if God and nature are identified, and if Spinoza's God is the universe itself, can it be said that he believed in God? Isn't God something other than the universe? What is meant by the term *god*? Or, to turn from the complicated philosophy of Spinoza to the superstitions of uncivilized people, clearly whatever God the Inca religion acknowledged or whatever gods are worshiped in the various animistic cults, it is not the God of Christianity. If the term *god* is broadened as to include the usage of both Spinoza and the animists, the term and the definition of religion in which it is used become meaningless. Therefore, if religion is to be defined in terms of belief, perhaps it must be a belief in spirits or merely in immortality or some other widespread belief that examination will show to be the uniform ingredient of every religion.

I hope you get the idea that I'm sorta insistent on defining terms. I don't like ambiguity because you can't think straight if you are deceived by ambiguous language. So maybe instead of *god*, which is very ambiguous, maybe we just say *spirits* which is a more general term or maybe the belief in immortality or something else. Yet this expedient of substituting the more inclusive term *spirit* for the more definite term *god* faces exactly the same difficulty. Spirit would have to be defined. And one would have to question whether Spinoza's *sub specie aeternitatis* could properly be included under the notion of immortality. But beyond these difficulties there are decisive reasons why the method itself, the very search for a common element, is unsatisfactory.

Now the next subhead is The Hunting of the Snark. I all hope you have read Lewis Carroll. He's a sorta prerequisite for any course in philosophy. And if you're past 12 years of age and haven't read Lewis Carroll you better go back and read him. You know he was a professional mathematician. That's why he was so witty. His real name was Lutwidge Dodgson. But he took

the pen name of Lewis Carroll and you can find his manuscript in a booklet with ksewen k-s-e-w-e-n ksewen pages just a few feet from the magna carta in the British Museum. I think that was an appropriate place to put it.

The Hunting of the Snark. The method is unsatisfactory because it requires at the outset the knowledge it aims to obtain at the end. In order to discover the common element in all religions, it would first be necessary to distinguish religions from all non-religious phenomena. If there were an authoritative list of religions, a student could begin to examine them for a common element. But before the common element is known, how could an authoritative list be compiled? If Lewis Carroll tells Alice to examine all snarks and find the common nature of the snark, Alice, at least in her waking moments, would not know if all the objects before her were snarks or even whether any of them were.

Now we are not in a much better position than Alice would be. In our attempt to find the common nature of religion we believe we are safe in assuming that Christianity and Mohammedanism are religions. But is Hinayana Buddhism a religion? If it is, then a belief in God is not essential to religion. But if a belief in God is essential, then this form of Buddhism is not a religion. Should we examine buddhism or not? Should we include Buddhism on our list? To answer this question one would first have to know the essential nature of religion. And yet this essential nature is the still unknown object of the search. It does not help to advise us to begin with a smaller undisputed list. In the first place, there is no undisputed list. Until religion is known, nothing can be put on the list. And in the second place, even if we had a small undisputed list, its common elements could not be assumed to be the nature of religion for with religion even more than with botany the common element of a longer list is not likely to be the common element first observed in the shorter list.

Nor is Buddhism the only or most embarrassing difficulty. Consider Communism. Ostensibly it is the enemy of all religions. Fundamentally and vociferously anti-religious. Indeed, it is religiously anti-religious. Its anti-religious zeal makes it a religion for its adherents. Should the student of religion therefore list Communism as one of the world religions? And search for the common denominator of Communism, Christianity, and Buddhism? How should the student decide what to do? Unless he first knows what religion is, he will not know whether or not to examine Communism along with the others with the hope of discovering the essential nature of religion.

In addition to this objection of the method, there is also the objection to the usual conclusions it offers. Let it be assumed that Christianity, Mohammedanism, and even Buddhism have been examined. Perhaps it is claimed the common element is belief in an original being. The phraseology in which such common elements are stated must be so general, and is interpreted by the various religions in such incompatible and antagonistic ways that nothing common seems to remain but a name or empty form of words. Original being for Buddhism may be nirvana. For Christianity it is the Trinity. For Communism it is the atoms. But if the Trinity is spirit and not matter, and if atoms are matter and not spirit, and if nirvana is neither, it is hard to see that there

is any real element in common. Original being is just a name, a name of nothing, a sound in the air.

Now, if in answer to this criticism, it be said that the three original beings, that is in Christianity, Communism, and Buddhism, if in answer to this criticism, it be said that the three original beings perform analogous functions in the three systems and that this function is a real common element, the reply will be a repetition of the argument.

The defense often speaks of the several religions fulfilling the needs of their adherents. And thus the common factor in all religions is that they satisfy certain needs. However, this answer will not do. It will not do because the several religions do not agree on what a man needs. Of course there can be verbal agreement that men need what is good for them. But when the specific contents of the good or the need are spelled out, they will be found to differ. Does man need the heaven where Christ sits at the right hand of the Father? Or does man need nirvana and personal extinction? No devout Christian will admit that nirvana or atoms can perform the same function that the Trinity does. Nor will the Communist or the Buddhist admit that the Trinity can do what nirvana and atoms can do. Only the critics who have no religion can so light-heartedly identify them. The adherents themselves do not claim that their original being performs the same function that is claimed for the original being of other religions. Functions and need, like original being, are nothing but empty names. There is therefore no element in common among those phenomena that are popularly designated as religion.

What then is religion? Colloquially, the word is applied to Mohammedanism, Buddhism, Christianity, but because it is vague it can be applied to communism also. Then the definitions of religions take on the form of "what a man will live and die for." Such definitions are completely without content and do not specify any definite subject of scientific investigation.

Now the next subhead is Meaningful Words.

Conversely, to have a definite and meaningful subject to study, the colloquial and empty word must be relinquished and some specific contents must be selected. For example, the word *god* cannot be just any first principle. The *Deus sive natura* of Spinoza and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as Pascal saw so well, are not the same thing. Nor can salvation mean both nirvana and heaven. Therefore if we wish to use the word religion, we must define it particularly. We may wish to discuss Mohammedanism or we may wish to discuss Christianity. In this sense there are religions, even though there is no religion. True it may be difficult to define Christianity or Mohammedanism, but it is not impossible. We may have to alter the colloquial meaning somewhat in the interest of precision, but the technical definition will not be so far from the common meaning as to be absurd. At any rate, we need clear-cut concepts to avoid confusion.

When a term like *god* is stretched to include every first principle anybody has ever thought of, and any fetish, spirit, and superstition, though these are not first principles, the term means

nothing. As Hegel insisted, every determination is a negation. Or as Aristotle argued, a term must not only mean something, it must also mean not-something. After centuries of philosophic discussion it ought not to be necessary to defend the indispensability of unequivocal language. But such is the chaos and discussions in religion. And such is the antipathy toward taking a particular point of view that the disastrous results of vague generalities call for emphasis. Let us therefore try to avoid confusion by being explicit. Most words in the dictionary have three, four, or even five somewhat different meanings. But if any word had a thousand meanings, or better, if any one word could stand for every other word in the dictionary, nobody could tell what it meant. If a word means everything, it means nothing. To have no definite or limited meaning is to have no meaning at all.

Well, I guess we have come up in philosophy now to the year 400 B.C. I'm referring to Socrates, of course, who insisted that a person should know what he talks about. That is, you have to define your terms or else you don't know what you're talking about. Of course I admit that this somewhat limits one's conversational ability. But at any rate, it makes things clear.

From here on, the discussion will proceed from the viewpoint of Christianity. The term Christianity is far more definite than the term religion. Christianity has certain doctrines about a personal God, Christ the redeemer, heaven and hell that cannot be confused with Communism. Or with Mohammedanism or Spinozism. But if definiteness of intellectual content is a virtue, why should one stop with just a little? Even the word Christianity is used colloquially in various senses. And one is forced to admit that professing Christians themselves often have inadequate ideas of what Christianity is. Surely the images, medals, beads, and other paraphernalia of Romanism is, or are, not the same religion as iconoclastic puritanism.

It is essential therefore to define Christianity more exactly by a specific doctrinal system. Romanism is not what is meant. By Christianity we shall mean, to use common names, what is called Calvinism. Or to be more specific, the definition of Christianity shall be the articles of the Westminster Confession. With such a definite basis, it will no longer be necessary to spin dizzily in a whirlpool of equivocal disputation. Now we can know what we are talking about. And I might say, I'm not ashamed of it, if I use the word Christianity I usually mean the Westminster Confession. That's my definition of Christianity. I'm well aware that people don't accept that definition, but that's what I mean by the word. And it is within the general usage of the words, so it is not absolutely absurd. Yes?

Audience: Can you classify John Wesley as a Christian?

I'm not asking who is a Christian, I'm asking what is Christianity. Now whether John Wesley was a Christian or not, I have no idea.

Audience: Then you don't have to, in other words, you don't have to be an adherent to Christianity to be a Christian.

No, people are saved by the ignorance sometimes. At least by very little knowledge. No, I'm not asking who is a Christian, I'm asking what is the definition of Christianity. And I'm quite sure John Wesley had not much of an idea as to what Christianity was. You can tell that to some other people who might not like...

*[Audience laughter]*

After all, John Wesley would say the same thing about Calvinists, wouldn't he?

Audience: Well, I don't know if he'd state it quite that forcefully.

He did say some things rather forcefully.

Audience: Like he did talked to, he did say that to watch out, I don't remember who it was now, one who believes in predestination, your God is my devil.

Yes, something like that. I must say one thing in favor of John Wesley. It's the only commendatory thing I can possible think of.

*[Audience laughter]*

He is the one person who unambiguously defined the phrase "author of sin." Now, you will find you don't want God to be the author of sin. You'll find this in many religious writings. And you will hardly ever find that phrase defined. Now I suppose maybe some people define it. But the only person I have yet found to define it has been John Wesley. And he defined it God is the author of sin means that God's sins and God alone sins, nobody else does. What he said, God's sins and God alone sins. That is the only definition of "author of sin" that I've been able to find in any book at all that I've read. Now if you can find some other person who has defined it, I wish you'd let me know. I haven't read all the books in the library. And I may have missed some that I have read. Missed it in some that I've read. So if you find any other definition somewhere, please tell me.

Audience: What do you think of that definition?

Oh I think that is as good as, it is the only one there's been. It's the best we have.

Audience: It's also the worst.

No, I don't think it is the worst. I think it is very good. I think it is very good, the trouble is that most people don't know what they're talking about when they use the phrase. And naturally, if you don't know what you're talking about, well then no telling what you say.

Audience: Well, ok now. But you make a distinction between God is the ultimate cause of sin and God is the immediate author of sin, don't you?

What do you mean by "author of sin?"

Audience: ??? Page 239 of the book you are reading from, you say "While God is the ultimate cause of sin, he is not the immediate author of sin. There is a distinction between primary and secondary causation."

Yes, and I think I went on, was it in this book to say that I am the author of this book and God isn't.

Audience: Right.

Well, that's another meaning of the word author, isn't it?

Audience: Yeah.

Yeah. But, apparently people use that phrase, either without having any notion of what it means or having different notions. As I said before, I have not come across a definition of that phrase any except in John Wesley. I can't find it in Charles Hodge.

Audience: You're the only person of Calvinist views I've read that has made an attempt to define ???

Beg your pardon?

Audience: I said, you're the only person I've read who has made an attempt to define the problem ??? Everyone else has tended to ignore the problem or come up with some sort of ambiguous phraseology ???

What problem are you talking about?

Audience: The problem of evil. The problem of sin.

Well.

Audience: In other words you seem to make a consistent, you at least make a consistent definition saying God is the cause of sin and evil whereas so many Calvinists say no that's not true at all.

Well, they're not Calvinists. The Scripture says that God creates sin. So why not say so.

Since the cause of confusion in the philosophy of religion has been empty and meaningless terminology, the hope now is that this avoidance of ambiguity will contribute to the solution of several problems. The main subjects, the relation of reason and faith, inspiration and revelation, the basis of morality will be considered in the following chapters. An attempt will be made to show that because of the basic doctrinal position, it is possible to arrive at definite and consistent conclusions. There is no hypocritical claim that the argument is without presuppositions. On the contrary, only because the Westminster Confession is consciously adopted can progress be expected. But before the main questions are put, certain minor points prove to be satisfactory examples of the procedure and may be used to conclude this introduction.

So the next couple pages, there is only a couple pages left, are certain example of how this method works. First of all, a definitive Christian standpoint can furnish the solution to the paradox of the present chapter. How can there be religions, yet no religion? If there is no common quality, emotional or intellectual, why are these phenomena uniformly classed together and called religion? Why are there also doubtful cases which sometimes seem to be religious and at other times seem to be merely philosophy or maybe politics. Of course, one can simply appeal to the ignorance and stupidity of the populace and their lack of clear thought. But there is something more. The Christian answer begins with God's creating Adam in his own image and there you get the refutation, the Christian refutation of empiricism. God didn't create Adam with a blank mind, he created Adam in his own image. So let's get rid of empiricism and experience right away. But I'll go on.

The Christian answer begins with God's creating Adam in his own image and giving him a special revelation. Here was the beginning of religion. With the fall, however, and the resultant depravity, man became estranged from God and distorted both the revelation and their reaction to it. As generations came and went, these distortions diverged in many directions giving rise to all forms of idolatry, animal worship, fetishism, and witchcraft. Not to mention the more blatant rebellion of atheism. Thus there was no possibility of any intellectual content remaining the same in all these developments. The religions of today, therefore, are descendants of the one original religion. And because of this common origin they are colloquially called religion. If the divergence is not so great as to obscure this origin, people do not scruple to call the phenomena religions. Thus Islam is always called a religion because of its inheritance from Judaism. When the divergence becomes greater, hesitation and perplexity set in. This is seen where people wonder whether Buddhism is a religion or merely a philosophy. And if it becomes extreme, people will usually be quite sure that it is not religion. But logical classification fails. Because the divergences have occurred through no logical principle. Unhibited inspiration has ridden off in all directions at once. Therefore, the only comprehensive result of attempting to define religion is now the vaguest of meaningless statements.

Now I think one of you did ask this question a few minutes ago, did you? And this is my answer to the usage of religion, the word religion in the English language.

Now, a second example of the confusion engendered by vague notions has already been seen in the discussion of conversion. But take another example. Strickland, in *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, page 113-115, Strickland remarks that psychology should not attempt to say what must be, but in keeping with scientific ideals, should simply try to find out what is. Applying this principle to conversion experiences, Strickland will not prescribe any necessary or essential elements without which conversion cannot occur. But rather he will collect data from accounts of conversion and make whatever generalizations this data permit. As was explained before, this is equivalent to hunting a snark because one knows what a snark is. Therefore, Strickland continues by pointing out that the cases he has collected do not always exhibit sorrow for sin. This he says is evident from accounts both of Christian experiences and modern Hindu experiences. In this line of argument, Strickland assumes that the Hindu experiences are cases of conversion. But what is the definition of conversion?

Acknowledgement of the Westminster Confession as one's presupposition provides a definition and a solution to the problem. On this basis, and the next lines are not precise verbatim quotation from the Westminster Confession but it is the wording that was used in several places, on this basis conversion is a sinner's initial turning to the mercy of God in Christ upon an apprehension of sin as contrary to the righteous law of God. Although this is not a verbatim quotation from the confession, it is a fairly close approximation of the Puritan or Calvinistic meaning. And if this is what is meant by conversion, it is clear that the Hindu experiences cannot be called experiences of conversion. If it is only slightly less clear that many experiences called Christian by careless thinkers are not conversions and may not be Christian at all.

I suppose that some of you have read Louis Berkhof's systematic theology, haven't you? Well do you recall in his chapter on Faith that he specifies a half a dozen meanings of faith? Or varieties of faith. And one of these varieties of faith he calls temporary faith. But when you read on you find that it is not temporary at all, it lasts all your life. He says here are people who all their lives have something that they think is faith but isn't faith at all. And he calls it temporary faith even though it lasts your whole life. And Charles Hodge does the same thing. I can quote a little bit from Charles Hodge. The interesting phrase is "nothing is more common than." Now that indicates that this is something that happens very very frequently. "Nothing is more common than" and now the rest I can't give it verbatim, but anyhow "nothing is more common than" a man is appreciative of the preaching of the gospel and he attends church regularly and he thinks he believes everything and he does all the things that Christians do for the whole private life but nevertheless he isn't a Christian at all. He says that is, nothing is more common than that. Well, I guess we need a definition of faith or something. How do you distinguish between saving faith and temporary faith?

If you will wait a year, as I have already done, my treatise on Faith and Saving Faith will be printed. But, oh boy, Craig is the slowest person on earth. He would have please Zeno the Eleatic with his exhibition of no motion.

*[Audience laughter]*

The confused state of mind of secular psychologists, who mix together all sorts of experience, which at best have only the most superficial similarity, renders their investigations almost completely useless. One might as well announce as a great discovery that coxcombs, the light from the planet mars, and the Communists, are all red. If psychologists are not supposed to legislate, nevertheless Christianity should.

A third and final example of misapprehension resulting from poorly defined terms, also arising in connection with the phenomenon of conversion, is the sense of sin. To return for the last time to Pratt, we note that he hardly disguises his antipathy toward Bunyan's experience. The objection he expresses is that Bunyan suffered under a sense of sin without particularizing one or a few definite sins. In fact I think the only definite sin that Bunyan mentioned was that when he was a boy he got out at night and rang the church bells for the fun of it, you know, disturbed the neighborhood. And he showed so much remorse and humility and repentance at this terrible sin of ringing the church bells at night. But outside of that one sin, I don't know that you will find him confession any others. So Pratt is essentially correct. He expresses a general sense of sin without particularizing one or a few definite sins. Pratt gives the impression that Bunyan would be more understandable if he had shown sorrow for some obvious act of wrongdoing. Had he committed murder or theft, had he maligned or injured his next-door neighbor then he would have had something to be sorry for and his depression might have been somewhat justified. But says Pratt, in disparagement, Bunyan suffered merely from a sense of sin rather than from any definite acts. The reason why Pratt passes from simply psychological description to open condemnation is not hard to see. He has tacitly defined sin as an overt and voluntary act. Possibly restricting it to fairly serious acts. And he shows no understanding of the view of sin as any falling short of God's standards. In his non-Christian view, peccadillos possible, and certainly inherited involuntary character are not regarded as sin. Thus Pratt, with his presuppositions, can neither appreciate nor even understand the Christian doctrine of human depravity. He is trying to apply a secular notion of sin to the Christian experience of Bunyan, and the result is no more relevant than it is impartial.

Time and time again this is what happens. In the following chapters with respect to several important problems, it will be seen at great length how the ambiguous and misplaced terms of the comparative method either produce insoluble difficulties and paradoxes, lead to obvious absurdities, or come illogically to conclusions inimicable to Christianity. The non-Christian arguments regularly assume the point in dispute before they start. The questions are so framed as to exclude the Christian answer from the beginning. Examining this procedure to see how it works, we shall also see how unambiguous Christian concepts combine into a consistent system.