

The Nature and Function of Religion

From the 1999 Summer Lecture Series

How My Mind Has Changed

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Spring Lake, Michigan

July 13, 1999

Transcribed from the handwritten document

As I have been brooding over the ways in which my mind has changed over the course of the last three decades, and especially in the decade of the 90s, I am aware that there has been a major shift in my understanding of the nature and function of religion - the subject of this second lecture. When I determined the four themes to be treated in this series, I was thinking in the broadest of categories that constitute my present understanding, this lecture being the broadest, leading then to how I understand the manifestation or revelation of the Sacred, the Holy, the Mystery we call God which has been articulated and expressed in the tradition in creedal formula, liturgical forms, progress, rituals and music, all of which has been institutionalized in ecclesiastical structures.

That is the flow of my thinking as I have attempted to map out how my mind has changed and thereby to express where I find myself as a Christian, as a religious person.

But, as I begin to articulate how I understand the nature and function of religion, I become aware that where I find myself is the consequence of several small steps taken as a consequence of a growing awareness that was emerging on the basis of ongoing study, reflection and experience. And that makes me aware that I might have structured this mind change series quite differently. I might have thought through the specific doctrinal formulations that came into conflict with my ongoing experience of being human and of dealing with others in the ambiguity of their lives, as well as simply living in the world with its social, economic, political and religious realities. I could then have dealt with those small steps, one by one, building the cumulative result into a new framework of understanding of religion and specifically, Christian faith.

Such an approach would take a great deal of reflection, of reconstruction of how a doctrinal claim of the tradition began to be questioned or how some new insight that proved compelling conflicted with a traditional doctrinal formulation. What were the triggers of the smaller changes that eventuated in a wholesale revisioning of the tradition?

Doctrinal systems are just that - systems. We speak thus of systematic theology that gathers biblical data and doctrinal statements into a coherent whole. One will usually begin the re-thinking process with specific questions to the tradition and there is certainly room for some adjustment within a systematic theology, but eventually, if the process of calling in question and reformulation continues, the system itself is broken and a revisioning occurs.

I have chosen, for better or worse, to begin with the big picture – how my mind has changed on the nature and function of religion. But, in setting that revision forth, I will obviously make reference to those significant points of conflict and shifts in understanding that eventuated in my present perspective.

The Nature of Religion

The word religion derives from the Latin: *religio* from *refigare*, “to bind back;” *re* and *tigare*, “to bind, to bind together.” Among the dictionary’s several definitions, I find “a state of mind or way of life expressing love for and trust in God, and one’s will and effort to act according to the will of God ...,” and also, “any object of conscientious regard and pursuit.”

In his classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James acknowledged a certain arbitrariness in the manner in which he would treat religion, defining it for his purposes as “The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” Hendrikus Berkhof in his *Christian Faith*, described religion as “The relationship to the Absolute,” and amidst all the diversity of religious expression and content, Berkhof noted that nearly all religions have three elements: “The element of myth, teaching, or proclamation; a sacred rite or cult; and rules for moral conduct.” He goes on,

The first concerns the manner in which the Absolute opens up, the second man’s immediate response, and the third the consequences of such knowledge and salvation for his everyday life. (p. 8)

Some add a fourth element, Berkhof notes, “That of inner experience, the mystical component of religion.”

William James was not interested in the established institutional forms and observances of the respective world religions, but rather, the immediate experience of the Holy, the Sacred, of God in personal experience. In making this point he describes, in contrast, the ordinary religious believer who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian or Moslem. Of such a person, he writes,

His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. (*Varieties*, p. 24)

Such conventional observance James calls “second-hand religious life.”

That is a critical distinction which becomes obvious when we think about it, but still it is seldom recognized; the great world religions are institutionalized and regularized. There is a teaching, an observance, a way of life and the adherents of the respective religions receive all of this second-hand. It may or may not become the means by which and through which one has a first-hand religious experience. But, it is also obvious that the great religious traditions each had a beginning in some founding, first-hand experience, which then eventuated in the tradition, regularized and routinized.

Where does the religious experience arise, an experience that is universally human? In his study, *Enduring Issues in Religion*, John Lyden writes,

... human experience seems to contain a religious dimension, however we may define that dimension. We cannot ignore the human desire to question our origins and our goals, the meaning and purpose of our existence, the reason for our lives. We strive for something more, even when we are unsure what it is. A mystery pervades our existence - a mystery we can approach through means such as faith, hope and courage. Some have said that no answer can be found to the mystery, for humans have created it and no suprahuman or supranatural answer exists. Perhaps we long for a purpose to our existence, hidden in some other plan of reality and flinch at the idea that there may be no such transcendent purpose. But, even if one chooses to see no purpose, one still acknowledges that the desire to find a purpose is part of human life. For better or worse, we almost instinctively seek meaning, and this is when we enter the religious realm. (p. 12f)

Lyden points to what has been perhaps the critical issue regarding the phenomenon of religion:

Is it the consequence of God, or the Sacred, or the Holy impressing itself upon the human consciousness, or is it a humanly created, humanly generated phenomenon having no counterpoint, no objective reality beyond the human who would then be simply projecting outward from inward consciousness a Being or Reality of its own creation?

This question will need to be faced more in depth in the following lectures when we deal with the idea of revelation or manifestation. I point to it here, however, because this critical issue was raised by the German philosopher/theologian Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) who published in 1841 his *The Essence of Christianity*, in which he claimed religion was the result of human projection of an infinite, transcendent Being on the screen of reality. In an introductory essay to the Harper Torchbook edition (1957), Karl Barth wrote,

He [Feuerbach] only wants the honest confession that the alleged mystery of religion is of man: that man is dreaming when he imagines that a Something Other, objectively confronting him, is that ground, that whence, that necessity and that law; is the source from which his wishes and ideals flow, and is the sea of fulfillment toward which they tend. Man is dreaming instead of recognizing that it is his own being, his desire and duty to live as a man, which he, as a religious man, quite rightly equates with God. (p.xvi)

Barth quotes Feuerbach thus:

In religion man frees himself from the limitations of life; here he throws off what oppresses, impedes, or adversely affects him; God is man's self-awareness, emancipated from all actuality; man feels himself free, happy, blessed only in his religion, because here only does he live in his true genius, here he celebrates his Sunday.

In the opening chapter, "The Essential Nature of Man," Feuerbach writes,

Religion, being identical with the distinctive characteristic of man, is then identical with self-consciousness - with the consciousness which man has of his nature. But religion, expressed generally, is consciousness of the infinite, thus it is and can be nothing else than the consciousness which man has of his own - not finite and limited, but infinite nature. (p. 2)

Under a section entitled "The Essence of Religion Considered Generally," Feuerbach claims without qualification,

Consciousness of God is self-consciousness; knowledge of God is self-knowledge. (p. 12)

And further:

Hence the historical progress of religion consists in this: that what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective, is now recognized as subjective; that is, what was formerly contemplated and worshiped as God is now perceived to be something *human*. (p. 13)

One readily recognizes that these claims will have to be dealt with in the following lecture theme on revelation, scripture and tradition, but I set Feuerbach's claims here in the discussion of the nature and function of religion because we are focusing on this human phenomenon and no one has pointed as clearly or described so acutely the human element in religion as Feuerbach. In his *Does God Exist?* (1978), Hans Küng gave extensive treatment to Feuerbach from whom he traced the whole development of modern atheism through Marx, Freud, and finally the nihilism of Nietzsche. He writes.

Even today - it is scarcely necessary to stress the fact - Feuerbach is anything but passé. From that time onward there has been no form of atheism that did not draw on Feuerbach's arguments. Even today, then, we must ask seriously if Feuerbach's critique of religion is not really justified. (p. 204)

Feuerbach's claim must be taken seriously, but Küng's critique is certainly valid. Even if we grant that there is a good deal of projection in the practice of religion and if we grant that religion is a human phenomenon, that does not establish the non-existence of God. Küng grants the possibility of Feuerbach's contention:

For why should it not be possible for our consciousness, knowledge, aspiration to be oriented to nothing, to a sham and not to a real infinite? Certainly the intention and infinity of our consciousness is still *no proof* of the existence of an infinite reality independent of our consciousness? (p. 205)

However, Küng continues, though this was Feuerbach's claim, he never proved it.

The question must in fact remain open. The only conclusion that logically follows from Feuerbach's argument is that the orientation of human consciousness toward an infinite does not provide any evidence of the existence or non-existence of an infinite reality independent of our consciousness. (p. 206)

I find it fascinating to trace the course of this question from Feuerbach through Karl Barth to the present represented in the work of Gordon Kaufman, recently retired from Harvard.

Barth claimed the roots of Feuerbach can be traced to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who published in 1799 his famous lectures *On Religion- Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. In the Forward to a 1994 edition, Jack Forstman wrote of this work that, in it, Schleiermacher had

...presented an utterly fresh understanding of religion. It was, of course, not without points of contact in the past, but Schleiermacher's presentation stood in bold contrast with the views that were prevalent in that time (dogmatic orthodoxy, speculative neology, enlightened "natural religion," and Pietism). Second, he set forth a view of religion that was in principle free from reliance on authority. Third, he described religion as belonging essentially to the human sphere and thus as essentially limited. Truly religious people are never able to claim that they possess the truth as such, and in its entirety. Fourth, his approach to religion was descriptive and analytical... he tried to "display" what actually constitutes religion. Finally, he tried to show that religion is inevitably social and thus always has a definite form... (p. ix,f)

In the highly educated, highly cultured Berlin society, Schleiermacher was attempting to make the case for the reality and authenticity of religion and religious observance. The “climate of opinion” disallowed appeal to an authoritarian base or dogmatic formulations of the past. His only alternative in that context was to find a new foundation for religion and he found that new foundation in human nature itself in the “feeling of absolute dependence.”

The common element in all howsoever diverse expressions of piety, by which there are conjointly distinguished from all other feelings, or, in other words, the self-identical essence of piety, is this: The consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God.

In attributing religion to the feeling of absolute dependence, Schleiermacher was rooting religious life in the human subject, although he was in no sense denying the reality of God. It was God who created the feeling within the human that pointed him or her to such dependence. In placing the root of religion in the human, however, Barth claimed Schleiermacher transformed theology into anthropology. Küng following Barth raised the question:

Was Feuerbach not right to see his philosophy as the end phase of a Protestant theology that -as he thought- *long before his time had become an anthropology* so that he needed only to understand and appropriate its real intentions? Does not the danger become apparent at this point of a theology in Schleiermacher's style which makes the reality of God dependent on the religious experience and emotional needs of the devout human subject? But is not the danger also evident of a contemporary “political theology” which reduces theology to a “critical theory of history” or of “society”? Is it not clear at this point how close we are to atheism if we do not distinguish between theological and anthropological propositions, if we identify man's interest with God's, if we one-sidedly stress God's nonobjectivity, almost see God as absorbed in our neighbor and the mystery of being, simply as the mystery of love? (p. 214)

Küng quotes Feuerbach as declaring unambiguously,

My atheism [is] merely the unconscious and actual atheism of modern humanity and science, made conscious, untwisted and openly declared. (p. 211)

Karl Barth had respect for Feuerbach, for his passion, his clarity of understanding what he was doing. Barth saw him and his views as the inevitable end to which beginning to talk of God by talking about humanity must lead. Barth's great reversal of 19th century liberalism, which had been fathered by Schleiermacher and had developed throughout the 19th century in Continental theology, especially in Germany, was the total rejection of beginning with the human

subject. Barth begins with God, the “Wholly Other” who encounters the human in the Word, a word of judgment and grace.

I cannot go into this further except to say that Barth’s strong emphasis on God’s revelation - the word that came “vertically from above” and contradicts humanity was the needed proclamation in post-World War I Europe as the demonic National Socialism was on the rise in Germany. Eventually, however, even his younger admirer and colleague, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, criticized Barth’s theology as marked by “the positivism of revelation.”

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