

## *De Religione*

"Unlike science, art, morality, and politics, religion cannot be adequately accounted for simply as one more form of life among several others. For all the obvious specificity of its beliefs, rites, and social organizations, it presents itself as having to do with the ultimate basis of our entire existence and therefore as fundamental to, not merely coordinate with, all the other cultural fields. In other words, religion in general is the primary and most direct reflection of the basic existential faith that constitutes human existence. Although its doctrines, for instance, have their origin in a quite particular occasion of insight or 'special revelation,' they are invariably put forward as having a general application and, in the case of the great world religions, as being universally valid. This is why Whitehead observes that 'the doctrines of rational religion aim at being that metaphysics which can be derived from the supernormal experiences of mankind in its moments of finest insight.' . ." (*On Theology*: 79).

"[R]eligion in its various expressions is the primary and most direct reflection of the basic existential faith by which we all live simply as human beings. As such, it never exists in general, any more than art or science does, but always exists as *a* religion which has its origin in some particular occasion of insight or special revelation. Correlative with such revelation as the response through which it is received is a particular form of faith, which in turn provides the foundation for a whole structure of beliefs, rites, and social organizations. In many cases (although, admittedly, this is a variable which happens to be especially pronounced in Christianity), this religious structure is eventually subjected to reflective understanding, whereupon a theology of the religion appears on the scene. Naturally, since even the most direct and spontaneous religious expression is itself the product of understanding, it is already to some degree reflective and to that extent theology. But theology strictly so-called is the more sustained, deliberate, and therefore specialized reflection whereby the primary expression of religion is subjected to critical analysis and interpretation" (84 f.).

"'[F]aith' and 'religion' are not simply equivalent. In the relatively strict sense . . . , religion is not identical with our basic existential faith in the

worth of life but is to be distinguished from it as its primary explicit expression in meaningful symbols—specifically, in beliefs, rites, and forms of social organization that together provide a particular answer to the question of the ultimate meaning of our life, or . . . the question of faith. Accordingly, . . . Paul Tillich's famous statement that religion is the substance of culture, while culture is the form of religion has to be reformulated so that it is *faith* which is the substance of culture, while religion is the particular cultural form in which this substance is first of all made explicit. . . .

"So understood, religion is one form of culture among others and yet, for all that, unique. Since it is the primary explication of the basic faith implicitly presupposed by all the other cultural forms, it is in its own way basic to the whole of human existence, and hence is more than merely coordinate in importance with these other forms. . . .

"This understanding seems to have the merit of taking the term 'religion' more in the sense in which it is ordinarily understood both by common sense and by the historical, scientific, and philosophical understanding of religion, as over against the use that has become characteristic of apologetic theologians bent on making a case for the Christian or some other religion in a secularized world. At the same time, the [suggested] clarification understands 'religion' in a functional sense sufficiently formal to include cultural forms or movements that others, assuming a nonfunctional, or substantive, understanding, would speak of as, at most, 'quasi-religions,' or, possibly, 'religion surrogates.' Thus Communism, for instance, might be quite properly spoken of as a religion in [this] sense, provided only that it is taken to be not only a certain understanding of our basic faith but also a whole symbolic structure of beliefs, rites, and social organizations whereby such understanding is expressed and enforced—in short, provided that it is taken to be the primary cultural form through which certain men and women today have come to understand their basic human faith" (109 f.).

"[R]eligion never exists in general, any more than any other form of culture does, but always only as *a* religion, which has its origin and principle in some particular occasion of insight, be it 'hierophany' or 'revelation.' Correlative with this originating insight, then, is a particular form of faith, or understanding of existence, which in turn provides the foundation for a

whole symbolic structure of beliefs, rites, and social organizations. How this structure is elaborated and how differentiated it becomes from other forms of culture are, again, open to wide historical variations, as is the extent to which the claims it expresses and implies may eventually be subjected to the higher level of reflection that is properly called 'theology' in the generic sense of this word. In any event, the only thing directly accessible to us when we speak of 'religion' is some particular religion or religions, some particular way or ways of conceiving and symbolizing ourselves and our world in relation to the mystery encompassing our existence" (110).

"Whatever else a religion is or involves, it crucially is or involves conceptualizing and symbolizing a comprehensive understanding of human existence that claims to be true. To be sure, a religion is not the same as a metaphysics that pursues the question of the ultimate whole of reality in itself in abstraction from the question of the meaning of this reality for us. On the contrary, religious concepts and symbols are rightly said to be 'existential' precisely because they express claims about the whole of reality only by opening up our own possibilities of self-understanding in relation to it. Thus such concepts and symbols typically function not only indicatively, to express assertions, but also expressively, to convey feelings and convictions, and imperatively, to enjoin others to certain beliefs or actions. But as important as it is to recognize their existential function, to ignore that religious concepts and symbols also function metaphysically to assert or imply that certain things are ultimately the case is to make it impossible to explain how they could meet the need they clearly exist to meet" (110 f.).

"[A]n essential property of ultimate reality, as of any referent of 'God' so understood as to be a fit concept and symbol thereof, is ubiquity or omnipresence. This means, among other things, that the ultimate reality to which 'God' rightly refers is and must be present in all of our spontaneous experience, so that, in whatever we think and say about anything at all, we are and must be thinking and speaking about just this ultimate reality, even if only implicitly. Consequently, not only religion, but every other form of human culture, necessarily involves at least an implicit reference to God or to the ultimate, and hence belongs to the data of theological reflection, in the

sense of the thinking and speaking whose meaning and truth theology exists to determine.

"Even so, religion is unique because it is the only primary form of culture in which this necessary reference to God or the ultimate also becomes explicit, in concepts and symbols whose direct reference is God, or the ultimate reality that 'God' itself functions to conceive and symbolize. Thus if all forms of culture, and hence all thinking and speaking, are data of theological reflection, its privileged data for determining the meaning of what is thought and said about the ultimate are the thought and speech distinctive of religion.

"Furthermore, it is characteristic of religion generically, and hence of every specific religion, to claim tacitly or openly to bear the decisive revelation of the God, or the decisive re-presentation of the ultimate reality, that is ubiquitous or omnipresent in all our spontaneous experience and more or less truthfully explicated in every other specific religion. In other words, the decisive authority that each religion claims for its own thinking and speaking over against all other specific religions derives from its claim to make fully explicit just that truth about God or the ultimate that is and must be told at least implicitly by all that we think or say as well as explicitly told by any religion precisely insofar as it is true" (125 f.)

"Fundamental to all that we can . . . conceptualize and symbolize is the reality of our own existence simply as such, as an existence together with others within the mysterious whole whence we all come and whither we all go. In other words, our endowment with understanding enables us to re-present our own existence with others in the world under the gift and demand of God—'God' being one of the principal ways by which human beings have conceptualized and symbolized the primal source and final end of their own existence as well as of everything else. It is just this 'capacity for God,' indeed, that underlies the particular cultural form of religion for which 'God' is the constitutive concept and symbol, or any of the other nontheistic types of religion as well.

"As the variety of types of religion attests, we human beings are naturally religious only in something like the same way in which we are naturally speakers of languages and thus users of concepts and symbols. Although it is the very nature of being human to speak some particular

language, no particular language is itself natural, in the sense that, being human, we all naturally speak it. Similarly, although it is our very nature as human to be religious in some way or other (in the sense of [thinking and] speaking about our existence with others in the world in relation to encompassing mystery, and of asking about the ultimate meaning of our existence, given the identity of this ultimate mystery), there is no particular religion that as such is the natural religion of all human beings. On the contrary, all particular religions are historical rather than natural, in that they are emergents in the course of the historical development of human individuals and communities.

"The existence of all the particular religions makes the question of *the* religion an urgent human question. Faced as we are not only with the existential question of the ultimate meaning of our existence but also with the various answers to this question re-presented by the several religions—it being the very nature of a religion to re-present some answer to this question—we are inevitably led to ask for the decisive re-presentation which, were it to be given, would enable us and anyone else to decide truthfully between the conflicting claims and counterclaims of all the particular religions, each of which, by its very nature, claims to be thus decisive" (*Faith and Freedom*: 93 ff.).

"By 'religion' I understand the primary form of culture in terms of which we human beings explicitly ask and answer the existential question of the meaning of ultimate reality for us. . . .

"Underlying this question as its 'basic supposition' is the faith that there is . . . an authentic self-understanding—that the ultimate reality of one's own existence together with others in the whole is such that some way of understanding oneself is uniquely appropriate, or authorized, and that one both can and should understand oneself accordingly. . . . I speak of this faith as 'basic faith (or confidence) in the meaning of life,' and on my analysis it is a necessary condition of the possibility of all our self-understanding and [life-] praxis. . . . Literally everything that we think, say, or do, insofar, at least, as it makes or implies a claim to validity, necessarily presupposes that ultimate reality is such as to authorize some understanding of ourselves as authentic and that, conversely, some understanding of our existence is authentic because it is authorized by ultimate reality. But if this presupposition enables

us to ask the existential question, it in no way suffices to answer it, any more than the basic supposition of science that the world has some kind of order suffices to tell us how the world as we experience it is in fact ordered. How we are to understand ourselves if we are to do so authentically remains an open question even with the confidence that there is and must be an answer to it.

"If my analysis is correct, we must be asking and answering this question at least implicitly in all our self-understanding and [life-]praxis and thus in anything that we think or say or do. Assuming, then, that by 'culture' is properly meant the concepts and symbols in terms of which we understand our existence and act to maintain and transform ourselves together with others, we may say that all forms of culture, including religion, must at least implicitly ask and answer the existential question. The distinctive thing about religion, however, is that it is the primary form of culture in which this question is also asked and answered explicitly, in concepts and symbols whose express function is to mediate authentic self-understanding.

"I stress that religion is the *primary* form of culture in which this is done, because it is clearly not the only form in which we explicitly ask and answer the question of our existence. Aside from the secondary form of culture that I should distinguish as theology, in the generic sense of critical reflection on the validity claims of some specific religion, the existential question is also explicitly asked and answered by philosophy. But philosophy, too, is clearly a secondary form of culture, in that it presupposes all of the primary forms, including religion, as the data of its reflection. Thus, while its ultimate objective may indeed be authentic self-understanding, it is like theology in asking and answering the existential question only indirectly, by critically reflecting on the claims to validity expressed or implied by all the forms of culture, secular as well as religious. . . .

"My contention, however, is that this is all that is required to distinguish religion not only from theology but also from philosophy. Unlike substantive definitions of religion in terms of some particular way of conceptualizing and symbolizing ultimate reality, the understanding offered here is strictly functional and, therefore, much broader and more inclusive. Thus, whether or not a particular 'cultural system' allows for thinking and speaking of human existence in terms of 'God' or 'Emptiness,' 'the One' or 'the true Self,' it is properly understood as a religion, provided only that it is the primary form of culture through which persons living in some social

group are given to explicitly ask and answer the existential question. . . . This means that even so-called secular understandings of existence that satisfy the same condition may be forthrightly designated 'religions,' rather than categorized as 'ideologies' or merely as 'religion surrogates' or 'quasi-religions.' . . . It further implies . . . that the number of at least potential candidates for the title 'true religion' is considerably larger than might well be supposed, assuming some narrower, substantive understanding of 'religion.'

"On the other hand, the functional understanding of religion that I am trying to clarify is not nearly so broad as are understandings of it as simply a basic human attitude. . . . I have not defined religion simply as 'self-understanding.' On the contrary, I am concerned to clarify it as the primary form of culture, or, in Clifford Geertz's sense, the 'cultural system,' in terms of which human beings are given to understand themselves in an explicit way. Thus, in my view, the term 'religion' by its very meaning always has an objective as well as a subjective reference—analogously to the way in which, on a traditional theological analysis, the term 'faith' refers to the 'faith which is believed' (*fides quae creditur*) as well as to the 'faith through which (it) is believed' (*fides qua creditur*). . . . Accordingly, religion is not only the explicit understanding *through* which our existence is understood; it is also the explicit understanding which *is* understood as and when we so understand ourselves. Being in both respects explicit understanding, however, religion essentially involves not only an understanding of our existence, but also, and just as essentially, the particular concepts and symbols through which the question of our existence can alone be asked and answered in an explicit way.

"Yet another implication of this understanding of religion is that it never exists in general or simply as such, but always and only as some specific religion or religions. Like all other forms of culture, secondary and primary alike, religion is thoroughly historical and, therefore, is 'natural' only in the sense that, while it is evidently the nature of human beings to be religious in one way or another, none of these ways may fairly claim to be the natural way of being religious. On the contrary, all religions show themselves to be historical emergents enjoying *de facto* authority only within some limited social and cultural group. This is particularly obvious in the case of the so-called axial religions, each of which traces its origin to a historical founder, or to some special moment of insight or revelation occurring at a particular time and place. But even in the case of 'primitive,' or preaxial, religions, there is as

little reason to think them natural as to suppose this of the language or of any other components of the cultures of which they are integral parts.

"Nevertheless, it is a defining characteristic of religion generically, and hence of every specific religion, preaxial as well as axial, to lay claim to decisive authority. Precisely as the primary form of a culture in which the question of our existence is explicitly asked and answered, a religion claims to be the authorized representation of the answer to this question. Here, again, the axial religions exhibit this characteristic of a religion with particular clarity, since they make this claim explicitly over against the preaxial ways of being religious of which they are the more or less radical criticism. But even in these preaxial ways themselves, there is at least an implicit claim to *de jure* existential authority. Because the self-understanding they represent is uniquely appropriate to, or authorized by, the very structure of ultimate reality, their own representations of it explicitly in concepts and symbols have decisive authority for the understanding of human existence.

"To recognize this is to be in position to understand the other more specific term . . . 'true religion.' If it belongs to any religion to express or imply a claim to decisive existential authority, the reason for this is that every religion at least implicitly claims to be the true religion. To see just what this further claim implies, however, requires introducing a distinction between two sense in which a religion may be said to be true. . . .

"[A] religion may be said . . . to be *formally* true provided that its representation of the meaning of human existence is that with which all others must agree in order themselves to be true religions. On the other hand, it may be said to be *substantially* true provided that it exhibits just such agreement with whatever religion is correctly said to be the formally true religion.

"Making use of this distinction, we may say that the claim to be true that is characteristic of a specific religion is the claim to be formally, and not merely substantially, true. In other words, it belongs to a religion to claim to be *the* true religion and hence the formal norm by which all other true religion, if any, has to be determined. . . .

"What exactly does this claim imply? What truth is it of which a religion as such claims to be the formal norm? From what has already been said, it should be clear that the truth in question is existential truth, or truth



about the meaning of ultimate reality for us" (*Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?:* 5-14).

"[The] need for a deeper and more adequate understanding of one's faith is clearly the more or less urgent need to which all religions are so many attempts to respond. They exist not only to provide the terms in which the question of existence can be explicitly asked and answered, but also somehow to solve the basic problem of making sense of one's faith and of the facts of life as we live it, which drive one beyond all superficial answers to the question. Therefore, the truth of which each religion claims to be the formal norm is the truth that solves this basic problem and so answers to the urgent need.

"There are important differences, of course, in the ways in which specific religions represent this truth. They typically focus the problem on different situations and facts of life, and they vary considerably in both the scope and the depth of their proposed solutions. One such difference is sufficiently great, in fact, to require the distinction already introduced between the axial and the preaxial religions. Characteristic of the axial religions is their focusing of the existential problem, not on any of the boundary situations of individual and social existence, but on a fundamental flaw in each individual person. At the root of the human predicament is an inauthentic understanding of our own existence, a thoroughgoing self-misunderstanding, that pervades the whole of our ordinary life in society and culture. Indeed, even religion as it ordinarily exists serves more to further this misunderstanding than to overcome it. Accordingly, the only solution to our problem is a correspondingly radical transformation of our own individual existence; and the truth of which the axial religions each claim to be the formal norm is the truth that authorizes the transition to such a transformed self-understanding. But great as the difference certainly is between the axial and the preaxial religions, there is no mistaking their fundamental similarity. Both are responses to the same basic problem, and the truth they represent, insofar as they do so, is the same existential truth" (15 f.).

""[T]he existential question to which any religion claims to represent the answer is the question of the meaning of ultimate reality for us. This means, first of all, that the reality about which it asks is the ultimate reality of

our own existence in relation to others and the whole. . . . But if this reality is what the existential question asks about, the second thing to note is how it does this—namely, by asking about this reality, not in its structure in itself, but in its meaning for us. This implies that in asking about ultimate reality, the existential question asks, at one and the same time, about our authentic self-understanding, about the understanding of ourselves in relation to others and the whole that is appropriate to, or authorized by, this ultimate reality itself" (16 f.).

"[A]ny sound philosophical analysis confirms that it belongs to the very nature of a religion to make or imply the claim to be formally true. It thus claims to be the formal norm not only for all other true religion, but also for any other existential truth whatever, including that of philosophy. Even if one allows, then, that a philosophy, also, makes or implies the claim to tell the truth about human existence, and hence to be formally normative for determining the truth of specific religions, one can not simply ignore their claim to be formally true. On the contrary, one must allow that the truth in any philosophy not only has to confirm that in any religion, but also has to be confirmed by it. So, pending the inquiry necessary to validate both of their claims to truth, one cannot look simply to some philosophy to provide one's norm, but must assume, rather, that any specific religion is as much the source of normative judgment as its object, while any particular philosophy is as much the object of such judgment as its source. . ." (71 f.).

"Not uncommonly, theology in [the] generic sense is taken to mean a secondary form of praxis and culture consisting in more or less critical reflection on a particular religion. . . . I take it to be more accurate to say that 'theology' in the generic sense means critical reflection on, or the proper theory of, the self-understanding and life-praxis explicitly mediated by a religion.

"It follows that 'theology' in the specific sense of 'Christian theology' means critical reflection on the self-understanding and life-praxis explicitly mediated by the Christian religion. As such, theology very definitely includes critical reflection on the Christian religion, insofar as religious praxis is among the several forms of praxis that the Christian religion mediates. But it also includes critical reflection on everything else that human beings may

think, say, and do insofar as it too is explicitly mediated by the Christian religion" (*Doing Theology Today*: 38 f.).

"All of us are familiar with definitions of religion, often favored by apologetic theologians, as simply a basic human attitude. Thus Paul Tillich, for one, liked to say that 'religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.' On the other hand, historians of religion and the different social scientists who study it are more apt to define it as a particular form of culture—what Clifford Geertz calls a 'cultural system'—through whose concepts and symbols human beings are given to understand their existence in its ultimate setting in an explicit way. My view is that Tillich's definition departs too far—and needlessly—from ordinary usage and that 'religion' is better defined, along the lines of the second way of defining it, as the primary form of culture through which our existential question about the ultimate meaning of our lives is explicitly asked and answered.

"Of course, 'religion' in the singular is an abstraction and all that we ever experience concretely is a plurality of particular cultural systems that may be more or less usefully considered together as 'religions.' Consequently, all that can be meant by equally abstract talk about 'the religious life' is the way of understanding oneself and leading one's life that is explicitly mediated by the concepts and symbols of this, that, or the other particular religion.

"The religious life in this generic sense is always an explicitly authorized life. This is the case because it belongs to religion as such, and thus to each particular religion, to lay claim to decisive authority. Precisely as the primary form of culture through which the question of our existence is explicitly asked and answered, a religion claims to be the authorized representation of the answer to this question. Because from its standpoint the self-understanding it represents is uniquely appropriate to, or authorized by, the very structure of ultimate reality [in its meaning for us], its own representations of this understanding have decisive authority for the understanding of human existence. In other words, a religion expresses or implies a claim to decisive existential authority because it at least implicitly claims to be the true religion, in the sense that it claims to be the formal norm for judging all other religious—indeed, all other existential—truth.

"To live the religious life, then, in the sense of a life explicitly authorized by a particular religion is to make or imply a distinctive double

claim for what one thinks, says, and does in so living: not only that it is appropriate to what this religion takes to be the explicit primal source of authority, but also that it is credible to any woman or man as representing the truth about her or his own existence as a human being. This claim, however, is like all other claims to validity made or implied by one's life-praxis in that it is one thing to make or imply it, something else again to do so validly. Furthermore, in the circumstances in which one typically makes or implies it, it is likely to be more or less problematic because others are making exactly the same claim for more or less different ways of living. Consequently, to live the religious life at all is to anticipate having somehow to support the claim that one makes or implies in doing so. In many cases, no doubt, one can sufficiently support it by appealing immediately to accepted norms of appropriateness and credibility. But whenever such an immediate appeal is, for whatever reasons, insufficient, one's only recourse, if one is to validate one's claim, is to move from the primary level of one's religious life to the secondary level of critical reflection on it. Only by asking in a more or less deliberate, methodical, and reasoned way whether what one thinks, says, and does is really credible as well as <sup>[really]</sup> appropriate can one make good on one's claim.

"In this way, living the religious life requires that one also become a theologian—and a philosopher as well. This assumes, of course, the generic sense of 'theology,' in which it means the particular form of critical reflection constituted by asking about the meaning as well as the validity of some particular way of living religiously. Thus a theologian in this generic sense asks critically what it really means to live in this particular way and whether the distinctive claim to appropriateness and credibility that is made or implied in living so is really valid" ("Philosophy and the Religious Life": 28 f.

"[F]or us to live the religious life today, in our situation, requires that we also participate in completely open and unrestricted dialogue with all the other ways of living humanly, secular as well as religious; and to this end we must become, more urgently than ever before, not only theologians but also—and precisely in order to be theologians—philosophers. Only so are we competent, finally, to critically validate the claim that we make or imply for the credibility of our particular way of living" (30).