

What is the Christian religious attitude?

The religious attitude in general is the attitude according to which not everything is permitted—or, better, perhaps, not everything is authorized, in the sense of being both entitled and empowered. Why not? Because ultimate reality in its structure in itself implies a certain understanding of our existence as alone authentic, in that it alone is appropriate to ultimate reality and in this sense authorized by it. Thus the question that the religious attitude makes possible is the question as to ultimate reality—not, however, the merely intellectual question about its structure in itself, but the vital, existential question about its meaning for us. Therefore, when we ask this question we ask *at one and the same time* about ultimate reality as authorizing our authentic self-understanding and about our authentic self-understanding as authorized by ultimate reality. As such, however, the religious attitude on the basis of which this question arises basically supposes that ultimate reality undoubtedly has a meaning for us, in that, having the structure in itself that it in fact has, it implicitly authorizes a certain understanding of ourselves as alone authentic. In this sense, the basic supposition of the religious attitude and of the religious question it makes possible involves a basic faith in the ultimate meaning of human life.

Of course, any answer to the religious question, in the sense of an understanding of the meaning of ultimate reality for us—which is to say, of ultimate reality as authorizing a certain self-understanding as authentic or of our authentic self-understanding as authorized by a certain structure of ultimate reality—involves faith in a second, more determinate sense of the term. Significantly, even more “mystical,” or nontheistic, religions involve such a more determinate faith, just as they also involve a basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life. Even in the case of the Vedantist or the Buddhist for whom our authentic life at least appears to consist in the total dissolution of our being-in-the-world in an undifferentiated oneness with Brahman or Nirvana, “for the most part the religious life is walked by faith and not by sight, that is, the believing soul believes with a greater or lesser degree of conviction in a oneness which is not

directly experienced just because the self remains discrete enough as an individual to believe, to doubt, and to yearn" (Merold Westphal: 43).

But this means, then, that the faith that Christianity, or, at any rate, Protestant Christianity, takes to be our only authentic self-understanding is faith in yet a third sense of the term. It is neither basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life nor even the more determinate belief or conviction that this meaning is what it is decisively re-presented to be in normative Christian witness. It is, rather, the obedient trust in and loyalty to strictly ultimate reality as God that is explicitly authorized through the decisive re-presentation of its meaning for us in the event Jesus Christ.

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