

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCHUBERT M. OGDEN*

Q. How do you define "religion"?

A. I define "religion" as the primary form of culture through which we as human beings explicitly ask and answer the most vital of our vital questions, viz., the existential question about the ultimate meaning of our existence as such—or, if you will, about the meaning of our existence in its ultimate setting as but a part, together with all other persons and things as also merely parts, of the encompassing whole of reality as such. Because this existential question, like any other question, is logically possible only if we suppose certain things to be so; and because, in this case, our basic supposition is grounded in our *basic faith* as human beings that our existence as such is somehow ultimately meaningful, or somehow has meaning even in its ultimate context as part of the whole—for these reasons, I also define "religion" as the primary form of culture in which we human beings explicitly ask and answer the question of faith. This means, then, that, in my view, the existential question, or the question of faith, is not *whether* our existence is ultimately meaningful, since we already suppose that it is even in asking our question, but rather *how*, or *in what way*, it is meaningful—or, better still, *how or in what* ~~what~~ sense we are to understand the ultimate meaning that we always already believe it to have. Note well, however, that "religion," as I define it, is neither simply our basic faith or our existential question nor any of the logically possible answers to it, but rather the primary form of culture—or, in Clifford Geertz's term, the "cultural system," i.e., system of concepts and symbols—through which we ask and answer our existential question *in an explicit way*. Thus my definition of "religion" is closer to the definitions typically offered by cultural anthropologists like Geertz and other social scientific students of religion than it is to those given by many other Christian theologians—such as, to mention a well-known example, Paul Tillich's definition of "religion" as "ultimate concern." (8)

Q. Do you think we would be religious if we were never going to die?

A. Yes, I think we—or human beings generally—would be religious even if we—or they—were never going to die. In any event, the religiously relevant thing is not that we're sooner or later going to die—since this is true, so far as we know, of any other living being—but that, being human beings, we are not only living, but also *understanding* beings, and therefore are, or become, *aware* that we're going to die. Beyond any question, to my mind, our understanding that we shall die is of the greatest relevance to understanding why human beings generally have been and still are religious beings. In

*Answers to questions prepared in advance of an interview with Alfred Benney for the American Scholars Video Project on 19 August 2000.

understanding our own mortality, we find ourselves in one of the so-called *boundary situations* of human existence, whose effect is to challenge our basic faith in the ultimate meaning of our existence as such, thereby provoking the existential question, or the question of faith, that it is the business of religion as such to ask and answer in an explicit way. How, I ask, can my life be ultimately meaningful, as I deeply believe it to be, if I'm going to die—and if this is to be the fate not only of every other human being, but also of all other living beings? Clearly, religion as we actually find it in the various specific religions provides the primary currency—the primary concepts and symbols—in which we explicitly ask and answer this question. (Of course, theology and philosophy, also, provide terms in which to ask and answer this and any other form of the existential question. But, unlike religion, they are not primary, but rather secondary, forms of human culture.) Even so, understanding that we're going to die is not the only "boundary situation" in which we characteristically find ourselves simply because we exist as human, and therefore understanding, beings. We also understand, for example, that we're ever exposed to the workings of chance and fate; that we're also bound to suffer; that we're always dependent—in Blanche Dubois's words in *Streetcar Named Desire*, on the kindness of strangers; and that, in the final analysis, we each stand alone, each having to live and die, *and* believe, for ourselves—and at our own risk. And these, too, are all reasons why, even if we somehow failed to understand our own mortality, we would still be provoked to ask the existential question, and thus be in a position to understand any and all of the religions that are simply so many ways of explicitly asking and answering this question at the primary level of human culture.

Q. How should a student approach the study of religion—in order, for example, to "get something out" of an introductory course?

A. My advice to anyone who would undertake the study of religion is, first of all, to ask her- or himself what the vital question is to which religions represent themselves as explicitly offering the answer; and then, secondly, to discover whether this same vital question is, or, at any rate, ought to be, one of her or his own vital questions as a human being. To understand religion, just as to understand any other form of human praxis and culture, is always, in the first place, to analyze the vital question to which it is addressed—and then, in the second place, to relate it to one's own vital questions, or what should be one's vital questions, if one is to lead an authentically human life. Only then, on the basis of this primary analysis of the question, can one proceed to the always secondary task of interpreting the answer that this or that specific religion gives to its question as well as to one's own existential question as a human being. Moreover, these two tasks of analyzing the question and interpreting the answer are both necessarily presupposed by the further—ordinarily, quite essential—task of critically appropriating the religion one has analyzed and interpreted, in the sense of making its answer

to the question one's own, either positively or negatively, either by accepting it as also one's own answer to the question or by rejecting it in favor of some other answer that one deems more adequate. In any case, the way that one as a student should approach one's study of religion is to enter into *a genuine dialogue* with it, by discovering its vital question in relation to one's own, and then, on that basis, interpreting and critically appropriating its answer to this question.

Q. What reasons do you find important for studying religion?

A. The most important reasons for studying religion, in my judgment, all have to do with coming to one's own critically reflective self-understanding as a human being. In general, the cultural tradition by which our lives and praxis as individuals are so fatefully shaped, for good and for ill, has to be critically appropriated by us at the secondary level of critical reflection if we are to become mature, fully responsible human beings, and if we are not simply to perpetuate things in our tradition that are not worthy of being further handed on. If we are at all critically reflective and are exposed to the rich diversity of our own and the other great cultural traditions—including the religious traditions—by which human individuals and societies have all been formed, we will find ourselves needing to understand these traditions so as to make them our own—again, positively or negatively, in a critically reflective way. Only by taking the steps necessary to satisfy this need, and thus only by entering into genuine, critically reflective dialogue with the religious component of our own and all other cultural traditions, can we become the authentic human beings we have it in us to become. But this is just what it means to *study* religion in the strict and proper sense of the word.

Q. How would you respond to a student who says, "There is so much evil in the world, God cannot exist"?

A. I would respond by saying that the suppressed assumptions of the student's statement are, in part, so problematic that one has good reason to reject it. The so-called problem of evil, of which the student's statement is a truncated formulation, is really, logically, a trilemma, generated by three assertions so understood that, while any two of them can be affirmed consistently with one another, the addition in any case of the third immediately yields a self-contradiction—viz.,

- (1) God is omnibeneficent or unsurpassably good.
- (2) God is omnipotent or unsurpassably powerful.
- (3) Evil of some kind and to some extent is real or exists.

Clearly, the student's statement assumes all three of these lemmas, since otherwise her or his inference would not logically follow. But more important still, it also assumes a particular understanding of the God who, because of the evil that there is in the world, putatively cannot exist. More

exactly, it assumes a certain understanding of this God's *omnipotence* or unsurpassable power—namely, that God's being omnipotent entails not simply that God has all the power that anyone could conceivably have, consistently with there perforce being others who also have some power, however minimal, but rather that God has all the power there is. I reply, however, that any such concept of God's omnipotence is incoherent and merely verbal, "power" expressing, by the very meaning of the word, a *social concept*, and therefore always implying a *division of power*, even between God's unsurpassable power and the other surpassable powers over which God's power is exercised. But if this reply is sound, and the correct understanding of God's omnipotence is the alternative understanding just suggested, then the existence and extent of evil in the world need be in no way incompatible with God's existing as omnipotent *in this sense*—i.e., as possessing and exercising, not all the power there is, but all the power that anyone could conceivably possess and exercise, consistently with there being others also having some, albeit surpassable, power. On this counterunderstanding, God's existence and the existence of evil of whatever kind and extent are not as such incompatible, since such evil as there is may be reasonably ascribed to some among the many surpassable powers rather than to the unsurpassable—and unsurpassably good!—power of God.

Q. Can you "prove" that there is a "supreme being"?

A. Given what the word "proof" is usually supposed to mean, I should not wish to claim that I can "prove" the existence of a "supreme being." In my view, any valid argument to this effect must be like any other valid deductive argument in always being logically reversible—by which I mean that, if the truth of its conclusion validly follows from the truth of its premises, the falsity of one of more of its premises must equally validly follow from the falsity of its conclusion. Therefore, however valid an argument may be, anyone disposed to deny the conclusion that a "supreme being" exists is always free to do so, provided, at any rate, that she or he can give good and sufficient reasons for also denying at least one of the premises from which that conclusion may be validly inferred. By the same token, the most that any valid argument that a "supreme being" exists can legitimately claim to do is so to connect that conclusion with certain premises from which it validly follows as to make clear the price that one must be willing to pay to responsibly deny it—namely, the price of also denying the truth of one or more of the premises. This is why any argument that a "supreme being" exists properly functions as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, in that it seeks to show that it is more absurd to deny the premises of the argument than to affirm its conclusion—or that it is less absurd to accept the conclusion of the argument than to reject either of its premises. But, as I say, I have no interest in calling any such argument a "proof," even though I quite firmly believe that good and sufficient reasons, and thus valid deductive arguments, can be given for affirming the existence of a "supreme being" (rightly understood!)

and that, if this were ever to prove not to be the case, we should have the best of reasons for doubting the truth of this affirmation.

Q. How do you respond to the claim that all religions are the same, in that they just emphasize different things and use different words and symbols?

A. I do not think that all religions are the same, in that they just emphasize different things and use different words and symbols. In fact, for a long time now, I've been struck by the wisdom as well as the truth of Geertz's statement that "what all sacred symbols assert is that the good for man is to live realistically; where they differ is in the vision of reality they construct." Consequently, I think religions are not only in some ways really the same, but also in some ways really different—and that it is as important to take account of their real differences as to appreciate their real similarities. But I am just as concerned as Geertz is to insist that, notwithstanding their real differences *materially*—in the visions of reality they construct, or, as I would say, in their understandings of existence—all religions are nevertheless also the same *formally*—and that not only, as Geertz says, in their common assertion that the good for human beings is to live realistically, in accordance with reality rather than at cross purposes with it, but also in all that this assertion necessarily implies with respect to the existential question, or the question of faith, to which each religion is addressed, and so also to the basic supposition of this question in our basic faith in the ultimate meaning of our lives as human beings. All religions, I'm confident, provide the "cultural systems," the concepts and symbols, through which this most vital of our vital questions can be explicitly asked and answered—more or less adequately. Therefore, there is a perfectly valid point to the statement, which I myself find all the more striking whenever I try—as I've been very deliberately trying now for over a generation—to enter into genuine *interreligious* dialogue, and thus to reflect on the differences as well as the similarities of some of the great "world," or, as I prefer to call them, "axial," religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism. As really different *materially* as these religions still seem to me to be in certain respects, their formal similarity has become ever more obvious and—even more to the point—such real material differences between them as I cannot simply deny have again and again turned out to be extremely subtle and by no means easy to formulate.

Q. Who are you? Where did you go to school? Who/what has influenced your professional activity? What is most important to you as a scholar?

A. I think of myself as a human being whose basic faith in the ultimate meaning of my existence is most adequately expressed by what I understand to be the Christian faith. Add to this, then, that I am also a reflective person, profoundly convinced—with Socrates—that the unexamined life is not

worth living and that all cultural tradition, including religious tradition, and, in my case, the specifically Christian tradition, not only deserves but also needs to be critically appropriated, and I should say, summarily, that I am a human being who, having made (and again and again remade!) the decision to believe and live as a Christian, has also accepted the vocation to be a Christian theologian—and that not merely as a lay theologian, but professionally and academically. This means, of course, that I have also, perforce, pursued the calling of the student of religion, or, more exactly, the religious student, although, in my case, such pursuit, exactly like my pursuit of yet other callings to be a philosopher and a historian as well as a social scientist, is entirely in function of my primary and calling-inclusive calling to be a Christian theologian, i.e., one whose task it is to critically analyze and interpret the Christian witness of faith and to critically validate the claims to validity that bearing this witness itself makes or implies. So what is most important to me as a scholar is what must be most important, in my view, to any Christian theologian: a critical appropriation of the Christian religious tradition offered as a service toward the ever more adequate bearing of the witness of faith that this tradition is authorized to hand on. Not suprisingly, then, I first went to a church-related liberal arts college to which I'm sensible of owing my basic formation as a critically reflective human being—Ohio Wesleyan University. Then after a year of graduate study in philosophy at Johns Hopkins University, I went to a graduate theological school, albeit a school that has always been an integral part of a great research university. Finally, I completed formal studies at the highest graduate level in that same theological school—the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

Q. What is of greatest concern to you in your work?

A. Of greatest concern to me in my work is so conducting what I myself do as a Christian theologian as to contribute as much as possible toward advancing the work of doing Christian theology generally—and that to the end, finally, of serving the witness of the Christian community in the way in which the critical reflection of theology is in a position to serve it. Because this is my greatest concern, however, I'm also greatly concerned with so understanding and practicing Christian theology that the properly dialectical relationship between bearing Christian witness, on the one hand, and doing Christian theology, on the other, is clearly seen and upheld rather than missed or obscured, as it commonly is in both church and academy. This means that I am as concerned that the service of Christian theology to Christian witness be *indirect* as that it be *real*. Accordingly, I am a steadfast opponent of all attempts to subject theological inquiry and teaching to any instance beyond themselves, including especially the magisterium or teaching office of the church. As much as the church's teaching office, in my view, quite properly disciplines all bearing of Christian witness, lay and professional and the indirect witness of Christian teaching as well as the direct witness of Christian proclamation, it has neither the responsibility nor

the right to discipline any doing of theology, lest the proper service of theology cease to be the indirect service that—as a form of critical reflection—it is alone calculated to perform. At the same time, I am an equally steadfast opponent of all attempts to deny the distinctive character of Christian theology as, in its own way, or at its own reflective level, real service of the church and its witness. Therefore, I have also resisted all proposals simply to identify theology with religious studies or to conduct graduate theological education, especially at the highest level, as though it could be something other than precisely such service of the church or that a theologian could ever be anyone other than the *servum servorum Dei* that she or he is called to be.