

What constitutes a religion?

A religion is constituted by an explicit answer to the existential question of the meaning of ultimate reality for us. This means that a religion always involves not only an explicit self-understanding *through* which we understand our existence (*fides qua creditur*), but also the explicit understanding of existence that *is* understood as and when we so understand ourselves (*fides quæ creditur*).

Unless someone so understands her- or himself, however, the religion as such does not exist. On the other hand, it also does not exist unless what is understood by someone who understands her- or himself is *its* understanding of human existence.

In the case of the Christian religion, this explicit understanding of human existence is not made explicit, in the primal instance, verbally, as some law or teaching or wisdom, but nonverbally, in and as a human person, Jesus himself, through whom the meaning of ultimate reality for us is decisively re-presented. Jesus does not simply teach or bear witness to a word through which this meaning becomes explicit; he himself *is* this word, somewhat in the way in which, in our experience generally, persons and what they do or undergo can speak to us nonverbally and demand that we somehow respond to them. But if Jesus thus belongs to the object side of the Christian religion, as distinct from its subject side, the religion does not exist as such unless and until there is a subject side, which is to say, unless and until the understanding of existence that is made explicit nonverbally in and as Jesus himself is also understood through the self-understanding of one or more persons and then somehow expressed through their life-praxis.

In short, the Christian religion as such does not exist unless and until there are Christians—persons who understand themselves as they are given and called to do through Jesus and who then express their self-understanding by somehow bearing witness to his decisive significance by all that they think, say, and do. On the other hand, the Christian religion does exist, or is constituted as such, as soon and as long as there are

Christians who do thus understand themselves and somehow give expression to their self-understanding and the understanding of existence it mediates.

It seems clear that this answer to the original question both confirms and is confirmed by understandings of "the Christ event" (or "the Christian event") as "the coming into being of the church" (Knox); "the institution of the Christian proclamation" (Bultmann); "the believing reception of the fact" (Tillich); or "the primal datum of the church" (Marxsen). According to all these understandings, this event has two essential components: "the person" and "the community" (in Knox's terms); "Christ" and "the word /ministry of reconciliation" (in Bultmann's terms, following Paul in 2 Cor 5:18 ff.); "the fact [*sc.* of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ]" and "believing reception of the fact" (in Tillich's terms); or "Jesus" and "faith," or "Jesus" and "the believer" (in Marxsen's terms). The first component, I should say, is the explicit primal *ontic* source of the event's decisive authority, while the second, expressing as it does the explicit primal *noetic* source of its authority in the faith experience of the first Christians, is the sole primary authority authorized by it.

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