

What is it to be "religious"?

Whatever else it may be, to be "religious" is, first of all, to have a basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life. Thanks to this faith, which, arguably, is constitutive of human existence as such, we all believe: (1) that human existence is constituted somehow, so that *not* everything is permitted and there is an authentic and true, because realistic, way to understand ourselves and others as parts of the all-encompassing whole; (2) that to understand ourselves in this way and to lead our lives accordingly is both really possible and, like everything else, unconditionally significant; and (3) that the structure of ultimate reality in itself is such as to determine its meaning for us, which is to say, to determine that human existence is so constituted that not everything is permitted and there is an authentic and true, because, realistic, way to understand ourselves and all others in relation to the whole; and that this self-understanding and the life-praxis expressing it are both really possible and, like everything else, of unconditional significance.

This means that our basic faith involves (1) a *basic supposition* that life is ultimately meaningful; (2) a *basic question* as to how, exactly, we are to understand the meaning of ultimate reality for us so as to understand it authentically and truly, as it really is; and (3) an *open commitment* to obey—which is to say, to understand ourselves authentically and truly, because realistically, in accordance with—whatever we are then given to understand explicitly of the meaning of ultimate reality for us and to lead our lives accordingly. (The three italicized terms are William A. Christian's in *Meaning and Truth in Religion*.) Taken together with a basic interest in pursuing the basic religious question, these three factors are constitutive both of religious inquiry and of theological inquiry, strictly and properly so-called—the first being the inquiry constituted at the primary level of living understandingly, of self-understanding and life-praxis; the second being the same inquiry at the secondary level of living understandingly, of critical reflection and proper theory.

But if all this is *necessary* to be "religious," is it *sufficient*?

Given a definition of "religion" as the primary form of culture, or "cultural system" (Clifford Geertz), i.e., the concepts/symbols, in which the basic religious question is not only asked but also somehow answered, and the open religious commitment somehow achieves closure accordingly, the answer can only be negative. One can be "religious," according to the standard set by this definition, if, and only if, one understands oneself and others in the all-encompassing whole of reality in some determinate way, and in the concepts/symbols of some particular cultural system. But if the standard for answering the question is not some such definition of "religion," but rather whether, on the basis of a certain basic interest, together with a certain basic supposition, one asks a certain basic question and lives by a certain open commitment—namely, those just clarified above—then, of course, the answer can very well be affirmative.

And there is at least one important reason to allow for this possibility. Specific answers to the basic religious question, like specific answers to all of the other basic questions that human beings ask and try to answer, are always only more or less adequate; and under certain life-conditions, anyone interested in pursuing the religious question honestly and with integrity may have no alternative but to give up the particular answer that she or he has theretofore given to it, along with the corresponding determinate commitment. In that event, she or he would no longer be "religious" in the sense of understanding her- or himself in a certain religious way and by means of its particular concepts/symbols. But does this mean that she or he would have given up being "religious" altogether? Not necessarily. Provided that she or he was still interested in pursuing the basic religious question, and thus still made the same open religious commitment, she or he would still be significantly different from everyone else not so interested and committed; and it is entirely reasonable to mark this difference by calling her or him "religious."

This is reasonable for the very good reason that religious answers, like answers to basic questions of other logical types, are the kind of answers *they* are

only because they presuppose asking a certain kind of basic question, and a basic interest in pursuing it, together with making the basic supposition and the open commitment necessarily involved in doing so. And what all religious answers thus necessarily presuppose is itself "religious" in the sense of belonging to any such answer as what distinguishes it as the logical *kind* of answer it is—as precisely a "religious" kind of answer. This may also be put by saying that, although particular answers to the basic religious question may be different from one another—in substance as well as in form—the basic religious question, together with all that is necessarily involved in actually pursuing it, is also a logically different kind of question from the other basic questions that we as human beings typically ask and seek to answer.

For this reason, we may well conclude that what it is to be "religious" is not easy to say, if only because of the systematic ambiguity of using the term, in suitably different circumstances, to designate both giving an answer to a certain basic human question and simply asking that question itself as of a certain logical kind. It follows that to be "religious" may be not only to answer the basic religious question in a certain way and to lead one's life accordingly, but even to be seriously interested in asking the question and trying to find the answer to it.