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What, exactly, do I understand by "the true religion"?

1. 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.

2. Thus I do not understand "religion," following Paul Tillich and others, simply as "ultimate concern," or, as I would be more likely to put it, "(authentic) self-understanding"; on the contrary, I am concerned to clarify it as the primary "cultural system" (Clifford Geertz), in terms of which we are given to understand ourselves as human beings in an explicit way.

3. "Religion," by its very meaning, always has an objective as well as a subjective reference—analogously to the way in which, on a traditional Christian theological analysis, the term "faith" refers to the "faith which is believed" (*fides quæ creditur*) as well as to the "faith through which is believed" (*fides qua creditur*); accordingly, religion is not only the explicit understanding *through* which our existence is understood, but also the explicit understanding which *is* understood as and when we so understand ourselves.

4. Being in both respects *explicit* understanding, however, religion essentially involves two aspects: not only a self-understanding/understanding of 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 this, that, or the other explicit way.

5. As such, religion never exists in general or simply as such, but always and only as some specific religion or religions, any of which lays claim to decisive existential authority for its particular concepts and symbols because the self-understanding/understanding of existence that they represent is held to be uniquely appropriate to, or authorized by, the very structure of ultimate reality in its meaning for us.

6. But if it thus belongs to any religion to express or imply a claim to decisive existential authority for its particular concepts and symbols, the

reason for this is that every religion at least implicitly claims to be the true religion, i.e., *the* true religion, the formal norm with which all other religion must agree in substance if its claim to be true is valid.

7. By "the true religion," then, I understand one or more specific religions, any of whose claims to be formally true, and hence the norm for determining all other religious or existential truth, is a valid claim, as determined by appropriate procedures for critically validating all claims to existential truth, philosophical and theological as well as religious.

8. Thus the necessary condition for critically validating the claim of this, that, or the other specific religion to be the true religion is verifying its explicit understanding of existence as true and, correspondingly, its explicit self-understanding as authentic.

9. Such verification is always only indirect, in that it proceeds by verifying the necessary implications, moral as well as metaphysical, of the religion's explicit understanding of existence and inferring therefrom that the explicit self-understanding corresponding to this understanding must be authentic even as it itself can only be true.

10. But it is also only indirect, and, in a way, partial, in that it can do no more than this to verify, and thus to critically validate, the particular concepts and symbols that comprise the other essential aspect of any particular religion; to this extent, there is always that about every religion that, being historical and simply given, is arbitrary and beyond critical validation, even in principle, by common human experience and reason.

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