
Some Thoughts about Santayana's "Natural and Ultimate Religion"

What I miss most in Santayana's explanation of religion is a sufficiently clear distinction between simply living life and living it understandingly. Subhuman animals simply live their lives and therefore may well be said to be engaged in living, or committed to the enterprise of living, without their previous consent. But human animals, once they become such, live their lives *understandingly*, and this means that they have to understand themselves and *lead* their lives accordingly. If they are engaged in living, or committed to the enterprise of living, this is, in the final analysis, only *with* their previous consent.

Thus, in my view, in contrast to Santayana's, it is not really "the *animal* soul" that appeals to heaven for help; it is the *human* soul, or in his own term, "*the spirit*." By the same token, it is not really "the enterprise of life" itself and simply as such that is "utterly irreligious," and so "precisely that from which a veritable religion would come to redeem us"; what is utterly irreligious and what a veritable religion would come to redeem us from is a certain way of (*mis-*) understanding ourselves and leading our lives—that way, namely, in which we each understand ourselves and lead our life as though it itself were, or were somehow essential to, the final end for which we do so.

15 July 1998; rev. 10 February 2010

* * * * *

1. I should say that an "ultimate religion" is ultimate precisely because it locates *the* human problem in our own *misunderstanding* of the human problem.

2. If, in the case of Buddhism, this problem is the problem of "ignorance" and "suffering," in the case of Christianity, it is the problem of "sin" and "death" (where "death" is taken in a transcendental, rather than a merely categorial,

sense, as "eternal death," analogously to the way in which Buddhism takes "suffering").

n.d.; rev. 10 February 2010

* * * * *

1. If, as I hold, an "ultimate religion" is distinct from a "natural religion" because it locates the human malady in human beings' self-*mis*understanding, the decisive revelation constitutive of an ultimate religion presupposes this universally human self-misunderstanding and offers itself as the remedy for it—explicitly calling all to whom it addresses itself (in principle, every human being) both to accept and make use of it as a remedy for themselves and then to throw in with the mission of administering it as a remedy for others to make use of as well.

2. If, in the case of Buddhism, *the* human malady is diagnosed as "ignorance" and "suffering," the remedy prescribed for it is "knowledge" (or "enlightenment") and "nirvana" as the cessation of suffering. In the case of Christianity, on the other hand, the human malady is diagnosed as "sin" and "(eternal) death," and the prescribed remedy is "righteousness" (or "forgiveness") and "(eternal) life."

3. In both cases, the characteristic terms for the malady and also for the remedy may be categorial, but they have a transcendental meaning

n.d.; rev. 10 February 2010