

It appears evident that I need to rethink my long-held position that religion is to be defined, not “substantively,” but strictly “functionally,” i.e., as the primary form of culture through which the existential question is explicitly asked and answered and self-understanding and life-praxis are explicitly mediated (cf., e.g., *On Theology*: 109 f.; *Is There Only One True Religion*: 9). Such rethinking clearly seems to be needed, at any rate, if I am also to maintain the answer I have been led to give more recently to the question of the necessary conditions, or “the absolutely minimal metaphysical presuppositions” of “religion” in the strict and proper sense (cf., e.g., Notebooks, 29 September and 2 October 2006).

I have answered this question by arguing that there are two such absolutely minimal presuppositions: (1) necessarily, there are concrete things as well as abstract things; and (2) necessarily, there is a concrete thing that is extraordinary or divine, its difference from all ordinary, nondivine concrete things being, in Søren Kierkegaard’s phrase, “an infinite qualitative difference.” But what does this imply if not that “religion” in the strict and proper sense is to be defined, *not* “functionally,” but “substantively,” as presupposing the extraordinary or divine so understood, i.e., as not merely abstract but also concrete, the while being not merely finitely, quantitatively, but rather infinitely, qualitatively, different from all other concrete things?

The only way, so far as I can see, that one could give any other answer than the one implied would be to argue that it is impossible to define religion strictly functionally *in the sense in which I have claimed so to define it* without defining “the existential question,” and that this requires, in turn, employing such concepts/distinctions as “whole”/ “parts,” “ultimate/immediate setting of human existence,” “the structure of ultimate reality in itself/in its meaning for us”—in short, the entire conceptuality of a proper transcendental metaphysics as well as of the analytic philosophy of religion corresponding thereto. Thus I commonly characterize “the existential question” not only as “the most vital of all our vital questions,” but also as “our question about the meaning of our existence in its ultimate setting as a part, together with others, of the all-encompassing whole of reality.” But this is to argue, in effect, that the “substantive/

functional” distinction is not absolute, but relative, analogous to the distinctions “categorical/transcendental” and “content/structure” in at least some of their uses. If this be allowed, then I can see how one could: (1) define “religion” in its strict and proper sense as I have long defined it; (2) hold that this definition is not substantive but functional; and still (3) maintain that “religion” so defined has the absolutely minimal metaphysical presuppositions that I have argued it has. Otherwise, I can see no way around either abandoning my position that “religion” is to be defined strictly functionally or else giving up my contention that the absolutely minimal metaphysical presuppositions of “religion” so defined are, as I have said, “the necessary applicability of the two disjunctive transcendentals, concrete/abstract and divine/nondivine.”

In any case, I see no way in which, having concluded that “religion” is not to be defined without metaphysical presuppositions, I could continue to say some of the things I’ve said in the past. Consider, for example, the following:

[T]he clarification I have suggested understands ‘religion’ in a functional sense sufficiently formal to include cultural forms or movements that others, assuming a nonfunctional, or substantive, understanding, would speak of as, at most, ‘quasi-religions,’ or possibly ‘religion surrogates.’ Thus Communism, for instance, might be quite properly spoken of as a religion in my sense, provided only that it is taken to be not only a certain understanding of our basic faith but also a whole symbolic structure of beliefs, rites, and social organizations whereby such understanding is expressed and enforced—in short, provided that it is taken to be the primary cultural form through which certain men and women today have come to understand their basic faith (*On Theology*: 109 f.).

Clearly, the *only* provision I stipulate here for speaking of Communism properly as a religion is but one of *two* such provisions that I would need to stipulate if “religion” in the strict and proper sense cannot be defined without the “absolutely minimal metaphysical presuppositions” I have now come to think of as necessary. If I am right in thinking this, Communism, on my own showing, is not a religion, but, at most, a “quasi-religion” or a “religion surrogate.” Generalizing, then, I can only allow that such terms have a use that I mistakenly denied them to have.

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