

---

It is commonly thought that religion can be defined only substantively because it necessarily presupposes the reality of “a supreme being.” All in all, I have tended to reject any such thought as, at best, a first approximation—and, at worst, misleading. But I’m beginning to wonder whether there may not be more to it than that.

Suppose for the sake of argument that the religious question is more or less correctly analyzed as “the existential question” in something like the sense in which I have ordinarily spoken about it, i.e., as the question about “the meaning of our existence in its ultimate setting as a part, together with others, of the all-encompassing whole of reality.” Suppose further that there are good reasons for using the term “ultimate reality” to include the threefold reality of myself-others-and-the-whole, and that it is this reality that is meant by speaking of “our existence in its ultimate setting as a part, together with others, of the all-encompassing whole.” Question: Is this “ultimate reality” abstract or concrete? Parts of it—self and others—are obviously concrete. But what about “the whole” itself? Is it merely abstract, or is it also, in its way, concrete—even, indeed, *the* concrete, the *eminently, unsurpassably*, because *all-inclusively*, concrete? The more I think about it, the clearer it seems to me that the whole is indeed concrete, because, in asking, as we do, about its meaning for us, as encompassing our own concrete existence together with all other such existences, we presuppose it to be something concrete. In any case, it seems arguable to me that this is how religion, which is to say, all religions, think about the whole in answering the existential question about its meaning for us. Just as, in general, it is precisely the concrete that has meaning for us, and about whose meaning for us we are in some way concerned, so it is with the all-encompassing whole, whose meaning for us the religions as such exist to re-present. And this is the truth underlying the statement, as inadequate as it may be, that religion is to be defined as necessarily presupposing “a supreme being.”

The problem, of course, is that the concept, “a supreme being,” is inherently unstable, “a being” not being obviously coherent with “supreme.”

15 August 2007