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## *Religion and the Religions*

You could not in your going find the ends of the soul, though  
you travelled the whole way: so deep is its Logos.

**Heraclitus of Ephesus**

What is man that Thou art mindful of him?  
And the son of man that Thou dost care for him?

**Psalms 8**

My great teacher, Joachim Wach, defined religion as a total response of the total being to what is experienced as ultimate reality. "Total response" because in religion, as distinct from scientific inquiry and aesthetic emotion, the whole being is responding and the whole being is involved in the response. Religion as we know it has always expressed itself in doctrinal forms as myth, creed, theology, metaphysics. It has expressed itself in practical forms as rituals, masses, and prayer—communal and individual. It has expressed itself in social forms as brotherhoods, churches, and sects. It is impossible, indeed, to understand any religion except in terms of these three expressions and their interrelations.

But for all that, one cannot reduce religion merely to these expressions and interrelations, for their matrix is the religious reality that is expressed, and what is expressed is not in itself directly expressible. One of the great errors in the approach of many people to religion is to see it as a form of philosophy or metaphysics which is going to prove that God exists or describe his nature and attributes.

This is to reduce God to an object, a part of the universe, to make him subservient to our logic, and in any case has to do with the detached observer rather than the involvement of one's total being. Religion is a way that one walks. Religion is a commitment. Religion is one's basic response *whether* or not one calls oneself religious and *whether* or not one affirms the existence of God. Some of our "labyrinthine ways," whether we are fleeing "the Hound of Heaven" or not, are so far underground that we ourselves are not aware of them when we come up again.

Religion for me, accordingly, is neither an objective philosophy nor a subjective experience. It is a lived reality that is ontologically prior to its expression in creed, ritual, and group. At the same time, it is inseparable from these expressions and cannot be distilled out and objectified. The *religious* at this deepest level might be described as a basic *attitude* or relationship arising in the encounter with the whole reality directly given to one in one's existence. The task of philosophy of religion for me is a conceptual clarification and a metaphorical pointing to the religious reality that is known in the between. This clarification and pointing must take place *without* abstracting from that meeting detached statements about the nature and attributes of God and without doing injustice to the typical and the unique apprehended in the phenomenological study of the history of religions.

In entering into dialogue with the religions, therefore, we are not looking for *the* truth, either in the sense of a Platonic truth—a metaphysical absolute—or in the sense of one religion being true and the rest false, or in the sense of a "perennial philosophy" in which we can say what is the "essence" of all religions and what is only the "accidental," cultural expression. Insofar as we can enter into dialogue with it, each religion will say something to us of its uniqueness and will say something to us about our life—our life as human beings but also as the particular persons that we are. We cannot *become* Mohammed or Lao-tzu or the Buddha or Jesus, but we can meet them and know them in that meeting. We cannot be an ancient Greek, but we can respond with "pity and terror" to the downfall of Oedipus or feel in the depths of our own lives Socrates' drinking the cup of hemlock.

What is common to all great religions is that each in its own way sees the human person as a problem to his or herself. Why is the person a problem to herself? Because of the given of human existence. The awareness of self, of the passage of time, of change, in oneself, others, and the world, of the fact that one is mortal and will die, of the fact that one moves inexorably and irreversibly from youth to age, of possibility and the need for choice, of freedom and the checks on freedom by the limitation of our inner resources and the constraint of

our natural and social environment, of one's dual existence in self-relationship and interpersonal relationship, in inner awareness and outer social role, of one's dual consciousness in waking and sleeping, in languor and intensity—all these in themselves make human existence problematic. Through all of them, there run discontinuities and confusions that force us to seek a reality amidst appearance, a stability amidst flux, an order amidst chaos, a meaning amidst paradoxes and incongruities. What is the self? What is time? What is reality? What is life and death? What is consciousness and what is the essence of the objective world? These questions have been an integral part of all human existence from the earliest times till today.

The Zen Buddhist asks, "When you are dead, and your body is cremated, and the ashes scattered, where are you?" "Then was not nonexistent nor existent," says the Hymn to "Creation" from the Rig-Veda, Hinduism's earliest scriptures, perhaps eighteen centuries before the Christian era. "Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal. . . . Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The gods are later than this world's production. . . . whether he formed it all or did not form it, whose eye controls the world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not." It is not such a long way from this hymn to Alice crying in *Through the Looking Glass* because Tweedledee tells her that she is only a part of the Red King's dream and would go out "like that" if he were to wake up. Alice says, "Why, I wouldn't be crying if I were just a part of his dream!" But Tweedledum says, "Do you think these are real tears?" And she cries anew.

In the chapters that follow I offer the reader not an objective, scholarly survey of these religions with which I deal, but the fruits of my own dialogue—and the roots as well in the form of the particular passages from the scriptures of these religions that I have meditated upon and made my own.

In *A Heart of Wisdom* I approach religion from the standpoint of what I call "touchstones of reality." The metaphor of touchstones of reality implies no prior definition of reality nor any metaphysical absolute. Yet touchstones of reality cannot be reduced to any current form of subjectivism—whether it be that of cultural relativism, psychologism, Freudian psychoanalysis, behaviorism, Sartrean existentialism or linguistic analysis. There is no *touch* independent of contact with *otherness*, an otherness that transcends subjectivity even though it cannot be known without it. The coloration of the *Zeitgeist* that seals us within our cultural subjectivity is not a touchstone of reality but fool's gold. Touchstones of reality must be made true ever again by testing them in each new situation—bringing the life-stance they have produced

into a moment of present reality. Unlike scientific generalizations, touchstones of reality provide valid insights confirmable in some situations but not all. Touchstones of reality are closer to events than insights. They provide no secure purchase above the stream of living. We are left with the problem of when to move in the direction of insight and abstraction and when to move back into the living waters.

The approach of touchstones of reality is nowhere more fruitful than in trying to understand religion.

When during World War II I entered my first Civilian Public Service Camp for conscientious objectors in December 1942, at West Campton, New Hampshire, the director of that camp was a young scholar, Ken Morgan, who was at that time working for the American Friends Service Committee. It was Ken Morgan who gave me a copy of Buber's *I and Thou* to read in 1944, although he confessed that he could make nothing out of it himself, and we renewed our acquaintance years later when I lectured at Colgate University where he had established an institute for world religions.

I like so much the spirit of what Ken Morgan says in his recent book *Reaching for the Moon* about dialogue with religions that I want to set some of it down here prefatory to the chapter on "Religions with Which I have Been in Dialogue":

The most dependable guides along the different religious ways I have observed were the ones who have been moved to follow their path by the wonder, gratitude, awareness, and awe that center their attention outside themselves, guides who are trying to live in closer harmony with what they see is true, is good, is sacred.

Sympathetic study of religions other than one's own helps religious seekers to see the realities of their own path more clearly, to discover new ways for humans to increase the good in their relations with each other and with the natural world, and to gain new understanding of the Sacred.<sup>1</sup>

Some... say that all paths lead to God, or that we are all climbing the same mountain and will meet at the top. Others say theirs is the only Way. But when I explore Asian religious ways I find that often I am only in the foothills, with some bypaths that are dead ends, some valleys shadowed with tangled undergrowth—and that there are also many beckoning paths, often arduous, leading to awesome peaks, some hidden in clouds.

When I reflect on my efforts to understand Asian religious ways I find that I have been looking for followers of religious paths... who are committed to live by what seems to them to be

true, who recognize some given aspects of their world as good and some of the good as sacred. I have searched for people of sensitive awareness who respond to the world with wonder and joyous appreciation for the beauty and diversity they see, with awe for the mysteries not fully grasped, and with compassionate help for the needy and suffering. I have found such persons in each religious group.<sup>2</sup>