

On Understanding Religious Men and Women

We are entering an exciting period in the history of our global religious self-consciousness. It is no longer a period in which persons study others and offer their findings to audiences back home, to a few hundred participants in one's academic discipline. It is a time that enables one to live alongside friends, to learn about them and with them, their vision for and struggles with life, and to learn from them about how to live life well. The inquiry invites us to look and listen, and not to frame a picture.

WHAT IS BEING ATTEMPTED

When I first shared the words that follow in this chapter, some years ago, I began by saying, "I am honored to be here to speak to you today," indicating both the context—a speaker addressing an audience—and an attitude on the part of the speaker, now the writer. The invitation to speak at Otani University, Kyoto, Japan, took the form, "Speak to us about what you are doing."¹

What am I doing? It seems to me that this is one of the great questions. When asked, "Who are you?" most of us begin to define ourselves by our names and occupations, our jobs, mode of employment. When asked "What are you?" our tendency has been, in the last half-century or so, to turn the search for an answer over to our university colleagues in the natural sciences or social sciences. We sometimes seek, surprisingly, an empirical or, disappointingly, an impersonal reply to this question: I am made of water, bone, flesh, and so forth, or I am a species or a social animal, a Caucasian male or female, an Afro-American, Asian American, a minority, and so forth.

Nevertheless, in the development of the Western religious heritage, one question has loomed large: "What am I?"—providing a personal orientation to the issue raised more indirectly by our questions, "Who are you?" and "What

are you?" "What am I?" is the kind of question that gives one pause to begin the search for fundamental criteria, foundational orientations, in light of which one shapes one's identity. "What am I?" is one of those great questions, and the Western heritage has had a great deal to say in response to it.

Among the answers that have been given to the question, "What am I?" one finds, "I am a Jew," or "I am a Muslim," or "I am a sinner saved by the grace of God," or "I am a child of God." Another response, representing also a major strand in the Western heritage, is, "I am a rational being." Perhaps we have weathered the faddish reply of saying, in response to this question, only "I am an individual." It appears that we in the West are moving into (back to?) a more engaging formulation of "I am a person" in response to the question, "What am I?" We are learning (again?) that one moves from being an individual into becoming a person as one moves from isolation into meaningful relationships.

The assignment put to me, to talk about what I am doing, gave me pause, made me ask, "What *am* I doing?" That, I suggest, is a question that will repay reflection. As is the case with most engaging questions, there can be levels in one's reply. One can reply to the question by noting a particular concurrent action, for example, that one is speaking at a Japanese university to a group of scholars who are Buddhists. But this is hardly the full extent to which one could reply to the question "What am I doing?" Sensing the levels in the responses one might make to this question could well indicate, for example, the development of a child through adolescence into the maturity of adulthood as those responses move from being simple, to becoming complex, more subtle, perhaps to move again to a profound simplicity.

There also might be a dimension in responses to this question that could indicate the sensitivity one might have in attempting to live one's life religiously. There is a story passed around among persons who have chosen to aspire to live life Buddhistically through the Zen medium. You readily recall how a child will play outside, or in his or her room, for hours, playing intently, moving buses, houses, even continents, it seems, with total concentration and creative interest. Mother or father will call to the child: "What are you doing?" The child answers without a moment's delay, "Nothing." This little example suggests a way of living that is consonant with the Buddha's intention: to be engaged with the moment, creatively so, as the moment unfolds, ever with it, right there, and yet, as it were, doing nothing. I have shared this example in a sermon offered in the First Baptist Church of Hamilton, New York,² indicating what it might be like to live as a child of God; just there, right there, ever creatively so, responding freely, lovingly—doing nothing.

There are dimensions suggested when emphases and intonation are given to the question when spoken—

What are you doing?
 What *are* you doing?
 What are *you* doing?
 What are you *doing*?

Not only might this question be asked of the men and women of Otani University, but also of all of us on this globe: What are we doing? But the question has been put to me—and I am grateful for the pause that it has given me and the opportunity to attempt to formulate an initial response.

What am I doing? I am attempting to understand the religious life of men and women, what they hold most dear, what they cherish, choose to live life by because they have found thereby that life has meaning, choose to remember and pass on to their children—and why they have done all of this. More customarily formulated in academic circles, I am attempting to understand *homo religiosus*, religious persons. As a person who is inadequate *in being Christian* but who, nevertheless, aspires to continue living with an awareness of this inadequacy, and as a person who is *a Christian*,³ I have been introduced to a religious dimension in human life that is old, as old as *homo sapiens*, discerning persons, and continually new in its formulations and manifestations, in ancient civilizations, in the great continuing traditions, and in the nonliterate or extracivilizational societies, in the past and today, around the globe.

I seek to understand not only things, but persons; not solely the operations or patterns or constellations of objects or events, but also what those operations or patterns have meant to persons, or wherein no meaning was found in or through them by persons; most fundamentally, I seek to understand what it means to be genuinely human, authentically a person. The historical record leaves no doubt that wise people have lived, thought, and died, have indicated, too, that being born into our species does not, of itself, provide an answer to what human life is, that being born a human being is a biological process, of itself insufficient to provide an answer to what it is to become genuinely human.

THE LIMITATION OF ANY ONE METHOD: THE SOCIOLOGICAL

As is the case when generalizations are made about any group of persons, one can misrepresent the important insights of a few in speaking broadly of the many. The sociological approach to the study of religion, germinating within and expanding beyond a particular scholarly discipline within what is called the social sciences, has been handled deftly, although to limited results, by a few leading sociologists of religion, and some cultural anthropologists, too. But the particular method has been so prevalently applied uncritically by so many writers that lesser lights in the discipline have apparently failed constantly and consistently to evaluate the method itself, tending to accept it as an objectively verified and scientifically established method of procedure rather than as a matter of consensus.

Some social scientists—I, rather, prefer to call them social theorists—have attempted explanations for the process of acquiring meaning in life, for discerning how we ought to live to become genuinely human. We human beings, we are told, have little instinctual equipment to prepare us for living in the uncertain complexities of life. We search for meaning, for a normative pattern of

understanding that will enable us to make sense of the unfolding of our fears, anxieties, and uncertainties. Society, we are told, over the years fashions these normative patterns and introduces us to them as we grow older. Through education, a society leads its members, and, it would follow, therefore, we ourselves are led, to embrace the models for interpreting meaning which a society, in its wisdom, has fashioned for us, models that tend also to perpetuate a society's particular understanding of itself. This is a neat explanation, and one that has been around for about a century or so with recurring modifications and reformulations, but one that, upon analysis, has strands going back to ancient times.

It is easier to say that something called "society" does this than to say that persons do, much easier to move from the complex, variegated, multifaceted reality of persons to a theoretical level and to talk about a formal reified grouping of persons, whether in village or massive civilization, that operates on an abstract level as something called "society," as something perpetuating its norms. It is difficult for me to say that the wise persons who have gone before us in history were, in effect, not very smart, that they took to be the basis of reality, the source of meaning, what in reality was only their inheritance from society, merely the normative patterns society had projected in order to perpetuate itself.

But a social theorist would have little difficulty with my restlessness. I would be told that it is part of the operation of society, in this process of establishing and perpetuating meaning, that it projects this meaning onto what is now called another order of reality in a very subtle way so that it is then, subsequently, discerned as actually being other than, apart from, the ordinary realm of human experience. I would be told that when this projected meaning is reappropriated by a person it is discerned as possessing a distinct quality, as being other, as striking a person from "the other side," as it were, but now endowed with new force and significance.

Yet I am still restless with this. Wise persons have indicated to me, through their writings, and also by what has been written about them, that they are more reflective than they have been judged by some to be, more analytical, more subtle, more self-conscious, even more humane. They have not indicated that they have committed their lives to what society has structured for them, have not oriented their future to a projection of normative meaning put out there somehow by something called society. They do not seem to have been hit, as it were, by a projection from something called the social reality which somehow "came to them" from another, fanciful, order of existence.

At least two inferences can be drawn from a consideration of this general sociological approach to the study of something called "religion." Some social theorists, who have adopted this approach, have studied some of the variegated forms of religious systems in different contexts and various periods around the globe, and have drawn from their comparative studies a theoretical explanation for differences while maintaining that we humans are similar in our conceptual processes and group dynamics. Their work has shed some light on interpreting

the *differences between societies* and the religious systems within those societies. The second inference is more problematic. It suggests, from this mode of analysis frequently uncritically applied, resulting in a theory becoming the norm, that it is, in fact, “the social scientist” who really knows; the religious person really does not, does not know the real, only thinks he or she knows the real, which, for our social theorists, is merely a discernment of a social projection appropriated and perceived as having unusual significance.

My point is this: this particular approach to the study of something called “religion” can be instructive when investigating differences among religious systems in different societies, but it also frequently, if not regularly, involves another discernment of difference, one that leaves me restless. That difference seems to be *the difference between the social theorist and religious persons*. There is great irony in this: the social theorist knows the basis for all of this; the religious person only thinks he or she knows.

Religious traditions have been shaped mightily by the societies of which they have been a part, certainly, and they have contributed weightily to the formation of the cultures that have supported the civilizations in which societies have participated, assuredly. There is a dynamic process involved in this, a dialectic of a religious tradition and the history of societies, of course. One would be obstinate not to see this. Yet, one would be obdurate were one to maintain that the position represented by this particular sociological approach is comprehensive of truth, that this interpretation of religious phenomena is all that is real, even that this approach is the only one that a social scientist or social theorist can endorse as a social scientist or theorist. One wonders whether a person might too readily submit the human mind to a discipline, willing to allow his or her study to be defined not by *what* is being studied, that is, the subject, but by *how* the study is to be conducted, the method. Not infrequently does one meet this, as in the case of a social scientist saying that he or she cannot speak about a subject insofar as that subject might extend beyond his or her particular method of approach. One wonders what happened to the intellectual, what happened to the unlimited scope of inquiry launched by the human mind into a subject. It seems to me that this particular sociological approach to the study of religious persons is culturally specific, is Western, is recent, and, in a comparative context today, is certainly limited, tends to be a whit arrogant, and hence, obviously, is, in itself, inadequate.

I recall the teaching of the Buddha, recorded in the Pali texts, which urges us never to fall into the trap of saying “this alone is true, all else is false.” One wonders whether a person who has seen the point of the creative edge of this advice could maintain an interpretation of religious life that sees it *only* as one dimension of a society’s self-preservation, as really only being based on the only basis of reality available to the inquiring mind, namely, something called society, all else being conjecture at best, open to question, certainly ontologically unreal, probably, or epistemologically false, possibly. There might be an attempt to say that such a remark as this one by the Buddha is merely a social projection put

into the words of a socially sanctioned holy figure. But in attempting to do this, one fails to see the cutting edge of the remark: not to become stuck in any way, or with any method or approach, by saying “This alone is true, all else is false.”

Or let me put it another way. It would seem unlikely that a student of the religious heritage that has come to be called Jōdo Shinshū would have achieved understanding of Shinran were that person to argue that Shinran represents someone so overwhelmed by a sense of personal inadequacy and so at a loss at how to save himself (of course this statement *already* represents a fundamental misunderstanding of Shinran) that he had no recourse but to accept what society had already projected as “other-power.” The same would hold were such student to say that Shinran was a religious genius but one who broke the established order of meaning by reinterpreting previous projections made by something called “society” in such a way that a person ridden with guilt as he was could still find salvation.

LIVING AND LEARNING IN THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS

Nearly a half-century ago, after completing undergraduate studies in history, philosophy, and religion at Baylor University, a Southern Baptist university, and general postgraduate Christian theological studies in The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, I began a concentrated study of the Buddhist tradition at the University of London. It was primarily library work, with some amount of sympathy and historical sensitivity. Four decades ago, while working in a doctoral program at Harvard University, I arrived in Sri Lanka, that ancient country and idyllic setting where Dharma has been long remembered by persons because they have been long nurtured by Dharma as the Buddha rediscovered it and shared it by speaking it and by living it. I then began to rely on friends in Sri Lanka who helped me, who worked with me, who taught me, who gave of their time, energy, and care. I lived with dear Buddhist friends, and continue so to do today, who, in their friendship and caring, introduced me, however falteringly on my part, to that quality of life to which they, too, aspired, and led me to discern their faith—not Buddhism, mind you; faith is much more fundamental than a reified concept called “Buddhism.” I began to learn of the faith of Buddhist men and women, the way they placed their hearts and minds on Dharma, Dharma that enabled Gautama to become enlightened when he realized it, Dharma which supports these friends, our Sri Lankan Buddhist brothers and sisters, as they move through the experiences of human life.

I was writing a PhD thesis at the time entitled “Dhamma: Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist Interpretations—A Study of a Religious Concept.”⁷⁴ I lived in Sri Lanka for three years during that time and have since returned frequently, even on three occasions bringing groups of Colgate undergraduate students to learn there with me. I continue to learn about Dharma, how lives have been changed by coming in touch with it, how hopes have been buttressed

by hearing it, how wrongs have been righted by responding to it, how life is lived with dignity, grace, and beauty by being supported by it. I have learned that the heritage of Sinhala Buddhists, which they have come more recently to call the Theravāda, and some Buddhists today continue mistakenly to call “Hīnayāna” (although in the early formative stage of the Mahāyāna the use of the term *hīnayāna* I consider a *creative* mistake), is rooted in a calm certainty that growth in one’s life can be ever new and consistently, constructively, creative in the context of uncertainties, in the face of doubt and the unknown, precisely because Dharma abides and it supports the one living it—*dhāretī ti dhammo*, freely, but adequately, translated, “It is called ‘Dhamma’ because ‘it holds, supports,’” the old texts tell us, and, I will add, empirical evidence makes manifest.

These persons in Sri Lanka have taken refuge in the Buddha, what he represents as a glorious exemplar for our lives, with the hope that they, too, might realize Dharma that served as the foundation for that quality of his life. They have taken refuge in Dharma, in the Salvific Truth that abides, is there/here, realizing that it is entirely capable of supporting the heart and mind that is placed on it, that we can take it up and hold in mind and in heart, that we can give expression to it readily in living freely, abundantly, come what may, and that it leads on, without fail, to the occasion when reality is known and truth realized, and completed is what was to have been completed, and done is what was to have been done (P: *katam karaniyam*). We let our words stop there because *no* projections of any kind are adequate, neither those of society nor mine. We move into silence, comfortably, without fear and trembling, because Dharma abides.

These people of Sri Lanka also take refuge in the Saṅgha, by no means the local order of monks—fellows known in most cases since their childhood days. The robes are honored, of course, not because the monastic institution “denies this world,” as some might put it, but because the robes symbolically represent a mode of life other than this life that we are living, a mode of life that puts this life into a broader context than the ordinary limits set on it, a mode of life that enables us to see *this* life precisely as it is—*ordinary*. The monastic institution constantly reminds us that this life is not the only life for living, is not all that there is to living, either. Refuge is taken in the Saṅgha, not in the monks but in those who have gone far in the soteriological process, those countless worthies of the past who also have demonstrated qualities of life that are worthy of emulation, who have shown us the way of Dharma-living, who have set the examples for Dharma-realization.⁵

Now, it has been my pleasant opportunity to have studied in Japan.⁶ I am not here attempting to understand the historical institution that has come to be called Jōdo Shinshū. I can do that, perhaps, with more reading and language study in libraries in the United States. I am seeking to understand *why I have been at home here* among Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist men and women.

I am not planning to understand fully *shinjin* (true, honest, sincere heart/mind) or *shinjitsu shingyō* (true and real pure heart/mind) or the number of

related concepts or expressions. I have learned enough during this period of study in Japan to say that I am at ease with the thought of going to my grave without ever fully achieving an understanding of *shinjin*. I will keep working on these notions, realizing that this particular struggle is both immensely rewarding and, to use Christian theological terms in response to what I have learned from friends here, this struggle is divine. I am forming tentative conclusions about *shinjin*, one of which I will briefly mention here while holding a more thorough inquiry for our chapter 5.

I am only just beginning to grapple with this issue. It appears that *shinjin* is not best translated into English as “faith.” Christian theological categories do not seem to have a word to match *shinjin*. From a Christian theological perspective, if one were to seek for a dimension in the religious experience of Jōdo Shinshū men and women that represents a quality in the religious orientation of persons to life, about which one could speak in a general context utilizing the English term *faith*, one might turn to what I might tentatively translate as “refuge,” to *kimyō* (taking refuge) or *kie* (to turn around, to turn toward), with their implications of responding to a summons to return home, to turn around (with something of the sense of the New Testament Greek verb *metanoēō* [μετανοέω] and noun *metanoia* [μετάνοια]) and to return to the source in which to place one’s commitment of one’s life. But one moves carefully in this consideration, being fully aware that a notion of self-power, ego-agency (*jiriki*), might be lurking in the subliminal psychic operation involved in this refuge seeking, this turning and responding.

I am not suggesting that there is something like a movement from *kimyō* to *shinjin*, as one might mistakenly indicate by drawing a line on a chart, from “A to B,” as it were. I sense that *shinjin* is present in *kimyō*, but also that there might be a slight difference. It appears that in *kimyō* one is self-consciously aware that one is doing the action, that one is doing, *while receiving*, *kimyō*, that one is returning home in response to Amida’s gentle but authoritative summons. In *kimyō* one is aware that one is giving expression to *kimyō*, has responded, is responding, but in *shinjin* one is not aware that one has or possesses *shinjin*. *Shinjin*, rather, permeates one’s heart and mind and *possesses* one.

There might be something more basic, more fundamental, involved in all of this that might be suggestive of what Christians tend to mean when they speak of faith. Perhaps what I mean by faith is much more readily at hand than the subtleties found in the dialectic structure of “deep” *shinjin* (*jinsheinjin*). There appears to be a moment in one’s religious life when one really *hears* (*mon: ki[ku]*)—not just “listens to” (*chō*)—really hears the *sūtras*, really hears a sermon, really hears the well-spoken and timely word. There is a moment in a person’s life when one tends to lean in the direction of making a response, leans to respond, as it were, moves with an inclination into responding, and makes a response.

At this moment, in this movement of really hearing and in responding, perhaps initially responding only in deeply authentic receiving, perhaps, also initially, with commitment, is the dimension of human religious experience that

represents the dawn of faith, as it appears that Christians have been enabled to discern it. In a sense, then, in the act of really *hearing*, *kimyō* is taking place. An engaged consideration of whether or not *shinjin* has arisen is rather a question of faith, arising *from* faith, a question *for* faith; it does not entail whether or not we have faith, it is not a question about faith. Faith is already present. And so it is with *kimyō*. Let me turn the point succinctly: *shinjin* is important for us not because we have *shinjin*, it seems, but because we have faith.

LOOKING FORWARD INTO OUR COMMON FUTURE

Of more than passing note, however, is recognizing that a man from Texas, more recently of New York, a Southern Baptist having served on the diaconate of an American Baptist church, an ordained minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a student of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition who has also turned his attention also to Jōdo Shinshū, is speaking about attempts to understand the religious life of men and women before a group of Buddhist scholars at a well-known Japanese Buddhist university. Could this have happened before the latter half of the twentieth century? I do not think so.

Although you have heard frequent references to history and to the past, mention of tradition and heritage, I do not want to leave you with the thought that I am looking backward, looking into the past. I see my task as looking forward, toward the future. I fear that too many of our Buddhist young men and women are being trained to become scholars of the past with little concern, based on disciplined scholarly interest, for the present or the future. In the Buddhist case, it is important to study the past, of course; I would be the last to deny this. However, I think it is inadequate to have experts on the early formation of the monastic discipline (*vinaya*) who do not have also a scholarly grasp on the function of that discipline in the lives of Buddhists today, or to have Japanese Buddhist experts on something called early folk religion in India who do not have also a disciplined intellectual interest in the intricacies of Japanese religious life. And the examples could continue. It is very important to have an understanding of the history of the Buddhist tradition, even of the early period of the tradition in India, indeed, of its movement through Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, certainly. But there are Buddhists living *today* in South and Southeast Asia who share with Japanese Buddhists the quest for enlightenment. What do Buddhists in contemporary Japan know of them?

Similarly, if I were asked how doctoral students in the area of the comparative study of religion should select a subject for study, I would suggest that they choose the most engaging dimension of a religious heritage that is currently unfolding and is still developing in a major cultural complex and civilization today. That would assure that these doctoral students will look to the past, of course, but also to the future where they would also stand alongside intelligent, insightful, reflective friends, participating in the religious tradition being studied,

who would instruct them when they are on the right track, take issue with them when they go astray, point the doctoral students both in the direction of their inquiry and in the direction of life as it is to be lived religiously.

I am looking to the future, to greater understanding of us as persons aspiring to live religiously. I think there is purpose in what I am doing.

We mentioned a little story about a mother or father calling out to a child intent at play, "What are you doing?" and the child's quick and spontaneous reply, "Nothing." Will I find myself sometime in the future replying to the question, "What am I doing?" or "What are you doing?" by saying "Nothing"? I do not know. Perhaps you will allow me to wait to respond to that question, to hold it for the future when that question will be asked with finality and perhaps I might be summoned. Perhaps at that time I might know completely what I am doing. Perhaps then I might reply.