

Religion and Religiosity—divine or human? Is there such a thing as a wrong religion?

Fr. Lecturer Cosmin Tudor Ciocan

Department of Theology

“Ovidius” University of Constanta, Romania

E-mail: cosmin.ciocan@univ-ovidius.ro

ABSTRACT: The era of finding “the real” religious answer by fighting against all other pre-existing religious phenomenon and by ongoing splitage of Christianity—as well as in any other religion—has to become more peaceful and be replaced with the inner search rather than the outer research. This is the main point of not having all religious manifestations compared and dissected in the quest of finding peculiar aspects that might serve as *proofs* against its designation as “the divine commandment” given directly by God specifically for “certain,” elected people. My point in asking if “there is such thing as a wrong religion” is but to underline the human aspect in building any kind of religiosity, anyone can follow or not, regardless idealist target of its proposal and moreover the divine ownership suggested by its leadership. In this regard, the single factor of research over the religious phenomenon should be the inner relief, comfort, and peace, without external fights, accusations, and slander.

KEY WORDS: religiosity, sacredness, anthropological theory, religious pluralism, religious manifestations, human worship

1. Introduction

While writing a book about the religious phenomenon and manifestations I was proposing myself not to try to answer at any of theological questions, usually related to religions, like *Is there a God? Is the cosmos created? Is evil compatible with an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good creator? Can we experience God? How can we tell whether religious experiences are reliable? Could we survive death? What is the relationship between religions?* In return I do my best to put together clues for a final conclusion on the main question, *Is the religion more human or more divine?* This article is thou a breviary of this upcoming book and a bridge I would like to build over the multisplited sea of Christianity that was partly the outcome of the events whose 500 years we celebrate this year.

2. What is Religion?

Religion is a fundamental element of man's consciousness that marks the history of culture and civilization since their origins, for *homo faber* was also *homo ludens*, *sapiens* and *religiosus* (<http://ahd1113.activehost.com/pdf/60553.pdf>). In other words, the religion has appeared along with man because "at the most archaic levels of culture, living as a human being is in itself a religious act"¹ (Mircea Eliade – *La Nostalgie des Origines*).

In the gnoseological understanding, religion is a particular way of perceiving the existence in its relation with divinity, an existential component that is always present in the soul of man. In the "Divinae Institutiones," the Latin writer Lactantius proposes as an etymology for the term *religion*, the verb *religion* (*to bind, to unite*) in the sense of union with God. Although there is a great historical and geographical diversity of religious manifestations, the

common feature is conferred by the sacredness, the aspiration to the perfection of man, a value vector opposed to the profane, which signifies the degradation of the human being (<http://www.scientia.ro/forum/index.php?topic=3314.0>).

To get a viable starting points for any useful anthropological theory of religion it is inevitable to take into account at least four of the contributions of the men who dominate our thought to the point of parochializing it – Durkheim's discussion of the nature of the sacred, Weber's *Verstehenden* methodology, Freud's parallel between personal rituals and collective ones, and Malinowski's exploration of the distinction between religion and common sense (Geertz 2001, 88).

Religion is a characteristic of the human species, stretching from antiquity to the present, from simple societies to the most complex, from the unlearned to the educated, from the weak to the powerful, from the young to the old, from the peripheral to the centers of power. Yet religion is notoriously difficult to define. Some scholars would argue that no definition can be adequate since religion as expressed throughout the world and throughout human history is simply too diverse and complex to be neatly captured in a short definition that identifies a common condition. Indeed, most of the common assumptions about religion fail when we try to apply them to all traditions we normally think of as religious. (Robinson and Rodrigues 2014, 12).

Encompassing all given definitions, „**Religion** is (1) a system of symbols which (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 2001, 90).

3. Religiosity, a Humanly Manifestation

Certainly, starting from the general features existing in the “classical” phenomena of what we call *religion* and implicitly *religiosity*, these terms have also begun to be used outside the perimeter circumscribed to a certain point only by the religious manifestations that were reported to excel to the creative/pioneering divinity of the world. Later for our times these terms have escaped the narrow, strict area and became the intimate relationship and bonding anyone can have with something or someone, as close as in the religious meaning.

By the moment religiosity (the state of being superficially religious, Latin *religiōsitās*) receives a subsidiary definition in human social use due to its profound attachment and responsible dedication, devotion and marked by an accentuated spirit of sacrifice for the divine, it is impossible to make a new definition, which also circumscribes this new segment of *religiosity*, understood this time as „the exaggerated embodiment of certain aspects of religious activity” (<http://www.gotquestions.org/religiosity.html>). Thus, religiosity is characterized by „excessive involvement in religious or spiritual activities” (Koenig 2012, 8). *Religiosity* usually entails extreme zeal outside of and beyond the norms of one’s faith in something, and this *something* is no longer necessarily a deity or a supreme being. It is sufficient that the object, field, project, etc. to which this secondary meaning now relates, develops a passion large enough to give the impression of addiction to this object. In the event of a situation of this kind in which a person is passionately related to something to devote his entire existence to inexhaustible incursions on the object to which we refer to. So it is sufficient now that there is an excessive involvement in a certain activity so that it can be considered *the religiosity* of the person in question, *the reason for it to be*.

This case is something like saying „my work has become my religion, my defining identity.” We do meet this acceptance of the word *religiosity* to a number of notorious personalities from various fields (e.g. Dan Graham: *Rock My Religion*). The Bolivian painter Cedric Chambers said that „I create Art as an act of spirituality in its’ purest form. The act of painting is a repetitive task which helps me enter a state of mind. It provides me with a greater sense of purpose, a distraction from the mundane tasks of life. It allows me to feel like *I’m devoted to something larger than myself*. Everything I do; can be justified for the act of painting. Everything I say; is for the act of painting. It was never my goal, to do anything but paint. When I feel lost and confused, I can always resort back to painting. Achieving something in painting is like a life journey and endless goal that I’ll never ever reach. I’m a line approaching zero towards infinity. Painting is my Religion” (<http://www.cedricchambers.com/painting-is-my-religion/>). Unhesitatingly one of the most famous associations of religion with the passion for a non-religious activity is that of Albert Einstein who, challenged to declare his “religion”, came up with this argumentation: „My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God” (Calaprice 2011, 325).

The same analogy has been used even for those social systems that have influenced the population in a state of *worship* and unconditional obedience, or those who have succeeded in coagulating the crowd in a state we were accustomed to seeing so far only in connection with religious manifestations. “The strength of the communist system of the East is that it has some of the characters of a religion and inspires the emotions of religion. Unless the force of peace, based on law, gathers behind it the force and zeal of worship, it can hardly

hope to succeed... There must be added power of emotion that is a basic ingredient of religion" (see interview by Swing "Einstein on the Atomic Bomb").

Besides, a shallow analysis of the religious phenomenon drives some thinkers to believe that the contemplation of nature has brought forth the birth of the religious sentiment in the first place and that, back then, *religion* was not marked by dogmas and gods *made* in the image of man. (It is very difficult to elucidate this [cosmic religious] feeling to anyone who is entirely without it... The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image; so that there can be no church whose central teachings are based on it... In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it. Calaprice 2011, 329). There is certainly such a contemplative stage in the face of the greatness of creation; it is similarly, admiring, to all religions, and it was not only a stage in the history of humanity overcome by the imaginative evolution of man and preceded by animistic, pantheistic or deistic fantasies. Because each religion has a contemplative content (and not only a stage in its formation), the explanation needs to be reconsidered. "Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature, and you will find that... there remains something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent, I am, in point of fact, religious" (Calaprice 2011, 324).

The explanation given by the religion to its contemplative component over nature always relates to the One who stands behind creation. An appropriate reporting to creation makes us recognize the creation as *a way of advancing to God*, the sentiments awakened in this contemplation have no adorable content to nature in itself, but only admiration, respect, joy. Even in the animistic forms of religion,

man was insufficiently satisfied with the relationship he tries forced with parts of nature, and then he felt the need to incorporate the parts of Nature – hitherto disparate worshiped (pantheism) with the whole Nature as an organic system. However, that did not satisfy either the need for interaction and he had to look higher, more globally, going step by step to the One who was behind all those seen, sensitized and perceived until then disparaged. With the discovery of the Motif, of the Logos of Creation, everything has made sense, and the contemplation has got the point.

Surely *gods* must be present in religion, one might think. No, for some religions deny either the existence of gods or their relevance. Surely an afterlife existence must be substantial in religion. No, for some religions either deny an afterlife or do not divide present and future existence in this way. Perhaps a moral code of some kind captures a common element in religion. No, for in some societies morality is primarily dealt with by philosophers rather than priests, by the academy rather than the temple, and among some peoples codes of behavior provide social order and create stable societies without appeal to religious motives or motifs.

4. Is there such a *wrong* religion?

The point of having such a topic in a celebration of 500 years of Reformation aims precisely to this question, *Is there such a wrong religion?* In other words, should we still proceed in fighting against “old, traditional” religions or denying the “new, emerged” ones? In my attempt to building bridges and became the extended voice of my colleagues from Santa Barbara, CA, where I have started reimagining the multicolored landscape of religion, one day I have open the subject to certain colleagues of mine just so, to see the

reaction and cause a brainstorming that maybe, who knows, comes up with a new idea.

So I asked this fellow colleague how he sees the following situation: let's pretend that one day he returns home from the church and tells his family and relatives that God has shown him to make a covenant with Him, and that his humanly part to this covenant would be to dent up his face 100 times after a certain pattern, but not only him, but also all those in the family and all others along. For this gesture, all would receive the blessing of God and never lack anything.

The reaction of my colleague, who did not know where I wanted to get with this, was a very normal one in front of such an issue: astonishment and strong rejection of the idea. In fine, after I even asked him to assume he really would come with such confidence to his acquaintances, he admitted that anyone who would have listened to him would not only have rejected his proposal but also would bend on his mental integrity. To accomplish this task by others would not have been even the issue.

Well, 4,000 years ago (about 2150-2000 BC), a man named Avram did so, telling the people that God proposed to make this incrustation in his flesh as a testimony of the blessing given to him and His descendants for centuries. Same thing went for Noe, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, Martin Luther, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith and all other religious movements' pioneers at their times and society.

The situation seemed to be „altogether different” for my colleague who understood that *the circumcision* act was to become comparable to any other gesture of self-mutilation and that this gesture, which became ritualistic for two of the greatest world religions, is here speculatively disputed. „We cannot compare the ritual act of circumcision that does not mutilate anyone – and now I have realized that my colleague was not familiar with the medical procedure of circumcision or he was just very religious subjective –

with the face in laying that is unrelated to any religious act.” Then I have corrected these two misunderstandings by informing him about the circumcision procedures *Brit milah* and *Brit Peri’ah*, and also that the incrustation on the face and the abdomen are also religious rituals, „commanded” by God to the Voodoo religion, that Hindu followers are, „Commanded” to pierce body skin with needles and hooks (up to several hundred), that walking through fire and many other forms of religious rituals exist throughout the world, in every religion differently, and that all are viewed in religion as a test of One’s faith.

In these circumstances, after what objective criteria can we say what is the primacy of a certain ritual, or that only one of these is „commanded” by God and the others not? Are they really *commanded* by God, or are they merely human proposals of gratitude or offerings dedicated to divinity? What implications would each of these possible answers given to the question have, and what problems would raise the theology resulting from these answers?

Instead of Conclusions

You know that, when people got disappointed of their Church (or better, of the leadership of their religious community), they usually redraw from religious life for good. I find that very odd because it is like when someone has been waiting and preparing for a long time a desirable meal and just because someone at the table says something wrong or unpleasant, the host restrains himself having that long-awaited-food any longer. It is certainly a human reaction since it occurs so often, but still, it is a huge mistake and, moreover, a huge misled reaction, against a different element of religious life as a whole system. That is why I had to appoint here, from the beginning, which I am not writing this in order to stand against somebody or

some religious movement and start a new desirable one – these ongoing re-starting religious movements are not at my preference. It is a response for those who leave their religious responses [whatever that may be] and behavior just because someone at the table said or did something inappropriate, that he was not expected to. In the representation I gave for religiosity as a humanly factor and manifestation, such desire of renouncing the religious creed is definitely wrong and abnormal and it should be replaced at the most with changing the creed with a new, proper one, not followed by a religious denomination pilgrimage in an attempt of finding the “real deal”, the “only revealed and commanded” religion for it will get disappointed and life-spending endeavor.

References

- Calaprice, Alice. (ed.) 2011. *The ultimate Quotable Einstein*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 2001. *The interpretation of Cultures*. NY: Basic Books.
- Koenig, Harold G. 2012. “Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications.” *ISRN Psychiatry*: 8. Article ID 278730, doi:10.5402/2012/278730.
- Robinson, Thomas A., and Hillary P. Rodrigues. 2014. *World religions. A guide to the essentials*. Grand Rapids, MI (USA): Baker Academic, EBook edition.
- Kinsley, David. “Women’s Studies in the History of Religions”. Accessed May 03, 2017. <http://ahd1113.activehost.com/pdf/60553.pdf>.
- “Homo religiosus”. Accessed May 05, 2017. <http://www.scientia.ro/forum/index.php?topic=3314.0>.
- GotQuestions.org. “What is religiosity?” Accessed June 28, 2017. <http://www.gotquestions.org/religiosity.html>.
- „Einstein on the Atomic Bomb”. 1947. Interview recorded by Raymond Swing, Part 2. *Atlantic Monthly*.
- Chambers, Cedric. “Painting is my Religion”. Accessed May 01, 2017. <http://www.cedricchambers.com/painting-is-my-religion/>.