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Synonyms:

My view of the nature and
value of Religion

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The Nature and Validity of Religion :: According to M. John B. Shanon.

The present author is one who is in no wise capable of writing even "a" philosophy of Religion. His ideas are as yet much too green. His thinking upon the question not systemized. He has been much too pre-occupied since he began the life of a student to think out fully any question so momentous as the nature and validity of religion. Many ideas present themselves a flood of them he hopes, due to original thought. For a few years yet any systematic treatment of this problem of him would be impossible, no matter he could give would contain even his own complete stock of ideas.

However upon the matter in question he has some views and some prejudices. He is quite certain about things he does not wish to include in any outline of the nature of Religion. He is equally certain of certain elements he wishes to include. At times these latter will not fit the picture very well. Perhaps this is the reason why he is incapable of synthesizing his ideas. If he did as yet, he would omit elements he considers important. So we present a group of ideas, more or less disorganized, most of which are lifted from thinkers that have gone before. The most prominent ideas probably being from those thinkers with whom he has most lately communed.

The author does not intend to present a definition of Religion which will include all that religion has ever been or hopes ever to be and at the same time exclude all that religion is not. What he presents, even in definition is his own view of what true religion is. The definition of what, from the beginning, man have conceived religion to be, will be left to a more comprehensive study of the question. And as has been warned, the author holds no longer that the definition, even so limited, will be complete.

Perhaps it would be best to first show away some things the author considers are nonsense. The first is that religion is a set of dogmatic rules. Any equating of religion with liberalistic dogmatism is out of the question. The author believes no less in truth, because he is dubious concerning man's ability to comprehend it in its fulness. In fact he believes that such a position would lead with no uncertain haste to the complete discrediting of any belief in truth. Thus Religion is not a

collection of absolute pronouncements on belief and behavior, such things are the destruction of Religion.

Further the author does not believe that an absolute revelation concerning Religion comes in any unique way. There is no special formula. The revelation unto man of his religion did not come at any one time, or in any miraculous fashion. It is not confined to the culture of any one people. It did not come in what might be called in any un-natural way. That is not to say that the elements of religion are basically natural - meaning physical and material. What the author wishes to denounce is any attempt to "enhance" religion by associating it with magic. Religion is not worthy of man's attention because it accompanied by disturbances in the universe. This view of religion under discussion tends to make religion only worthy, not in the matter of significance but in the matter of position. The idea that the values of religion are wholly other, with reference to their position, is an abomination of desolation. This author holds that Religion is for life. That revelation is discerned while men live. The supernatural is discerned in nature and in social experience. In their ordinary capacities men find God. The history of religion has been a long development of man's ability to discern truth as he lived with his fellow man and in his natural environment. God is in and has always been in human relationships, either as man lived with man or as he related himself to ideas and institutions.

With this as a preliminary the author presents his definition of the nature of Religion. Religion is the belief in the reality of values other than material. Truly enough, these values are wholly other. That is to say they can in no way be obtained by elevating physical values. They are of a different category, they have a different significance. They belong to a different sphere of reference. Belief in the objective reality of such values is religion. This life is considered to have meaning. It is measured by qualitative considerations as well as quantitative. There is more to it than its duration. Values, other than material and quantitative are its true sphere.

This is not to say that these values are to be kept apart from all connection to the material world. The values are wholly other than material in reference to kind. But they are to be seen and experienced only as they have a material content. The physical material life is not to be rejected it is to be redeemed.

This is the nature of Religion in a general way. The question for Religion seemed to decide is what are the highest values. Here, as has been suggested, religion cannot be dogmatic or absolute. By so doing it would defeat its purpose. For religion the only thing absolute is its intention: - the direction in which it is going. It must be ever seeking the truth as it clings to what truth it has. However for high Religion these values may be classified into the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Religion holds that these values are eternally real.

Here is the significant point. These are Human values. To believe that they are real means to believe that they exist for men. Thus the basis of religion is a belief in the nature of man. Religion is based on a belief that man is more than an animal. He is not just an animal super-complicated but a being of a different sort. He has not only self consciousness and individuality, but somehow with reference to the meaning of his world he has the dignity of being an end in himself. Consistent religion holds that this is true for all men.

Thus man is believed free. He is not entirely subject to the stress of his environment but can make decision and take action for himself. He is capable of rational thought. He is capable of appreciating and finding significance in the harmony of line and color or of silence and sound. He is capable of friendship, of holding ideals which demand his loyalty in spite of all the claims of his physical environment. Man has a life that contains more than selfish animal desires. He is more than a physical being. When at his highest he lives and moves and has his being in the realm of the reason, of aesthetics and of morality. All of this means that each individual man is capable of purposeful living.

No dignity is ever attributed to anything without adding automatically a responsibility. As man is capable of these values, he must seek them, if that is his true nature he becomes himself as he partakes of these values. If Religion is the belief in the validity of the values of goodness, beauty and truth as values for men it demands action according to their dictates. Religion is a practical belief. As it holds that these values are real for men it holds that man's greatest satisfaction is in governing himself according to them. If man is an end in himself, that is all the more reason for his governing himself. Self control is the practical manifestation of Religion.

One thing further, as the author has apparently already assumed: - any belief concerning the nature and worth of man includes a view of the nature of the universe. Hence Religion must be founded as humanism is not. It must give

cosmic significance to personality values. All must courageously hold that the universe is friendly to man's life. That its highest reality is person-like. This religion interprets the world and its essential meaning in terms of the highest it knows. This is its nature: - ideal and practical, other worlds yet even more truly of this world because it seeks to redeem it.

In attempting to establish the validity of his position the author will, to an even greater extent, be found to be depending on the ideas of other men whose thinking he has not altogether assimilated as yet. However he is convinced that any unprejudiced approach will find that his claims of religion are valid. He presents this latter half of his paper, content, not with his arguments or their presentation, but in the knowledge that his subject can stand for itself.

It must be remembered that to establish the validity of anything, too much reliance must not be placed on the pure reason. Intellect is not a sufficient guide in discerning reality. In this consideration the author does not wish to identify himself with the Thomistic position of the validity of reason up to a point and then the need for revelation. That is not the decision he wishes to make. He does wish to limit the intellect however. It cannot make judgments as to existence. Its response is analytical. It so does it deal with abstraction. The finer the analysis the more limited is the scope. In judging reality the human mind uses all its faculties. Every part of its being which in any way contacts the environment is put into use. Man's whole sensitivity to impressions must come into play if man is to judge rightly of real existence. This is not to discredit the faculty of reason. It is just to state that by itself it is not adequate. It still remains an indispensable part of man's whole sensitivity to the real world. It has a critical function. Without this truth could be separated with the most fleeting feelings. Judgments concerning reality must use man's whole consciousness, his sensitivity and all his critical faculties. A judgment of truth does not come about of a convincing argument even as a hearty laugh does not follow a definition of humour. Such judgments come when a person, given a situation and a man's behavior in that situation, considering all the circumstances and the character of the man, is forced to say "This is a man of God."

Thus although the problem of freedom and necessity baffles the finest intellects, men, in the way they live, are constantly demonstrating that they believe man to be free. If action is an indication of faith, all men believe they are free. When behaving thus, they can live, without contradiction. That is enough proof for practical life. The intellectual problem is left to the philosophers.

It would seem that the validity of the values we have mentioned would be harder to deny than confirm. As has been said these values are not refined physical values. They are not superfluous or super-complex matter. They are something new. They are physical values superadded not simply elevated. When the aesthetic realm music has reached a stage where it is more than a series of vibrations. We have musical schools and traditions and classifications all of which are dealing with a realm of significance which is non material. We have whole series of musical compositions whose relations in the series are accepted and have influenced each other down through history but whose relations are not within the realm of material significance. Still in the realm of aesthetics let us look at pictorial and sculptural art. How can we see countless examples of where beauty has superadded the mere physical. We need not, if it is done well, we have the basic physical reactions completely superadded by the appreciation of the hyper physical beauty. The same is true in the realm of thought and morals. Here we have ideas and ideologies building up worlds for themselves using countless schemes of reference, none of which can through any stretch of the imagination be given a physical basis.

However the position has been taken that the basic idea in Religion is its idea of the nature of man. If the validity of the dignity and worth of man can be established, Religion itself is verified.

The basic difference between man and animals is the way in which he faces his environment. He is able to stay outside its completely rigid influence. He can stand away from it long enough to ~~thrive~~ ^{thrive} ~~about~~ it. He can analyze it. Piece it down into its elements and piece it together into what for him, is a system. The chief thing is a being capable of rational thought. Further, man is able to change his environment. He makes machines with which he can aid his limited physical faculties. These faculties of sight, motion, hearing are all marvellously enhanced by man's ingenuity. With these tools he brings about vast changes in his environment. Again, like no animal, man is able to ridicule his environment. He has a sense of humour. In spite of discomforts man can laugh in the face of adversity. And most basic man is able to say to his varied environment, "No" This thing is sacred, it is not for me to transgress. This is the undeniably nature of man. He is free from his environment. He is an individual partially in control of his own destiny. Hencein is his dignity. The possibility for good and the possibility for evil.

No one can study man's action without seeing that he is motivated by biological activity. Man's activity cannot be explained in any mechanical way. He does not behave like a machine. When he sets out to do something he is not sent off on an endless tangent of some intermission. When there comes the activity is strengthened not slackened. Man's action is biological not mechanical. His life exhibits purposeful activity on all occasions.

Impossible as it is to attribute even selfish motives to man without giving him individuality and freedom, it is only wishful thinking which accuses man of only selfish motives. Look to the history of man. His story is one of countless individuals who in spite of physical pain have held to their principles. History is very full of instances of men and women who have done great things, risked social ostracism and even persecution because of belief in ideals. Let any unprejudiced individual look at his own motives for a days behavior. Not many of them will be found to be selfish. Most of them he acted because it was the thing to do. Thus man is motivated. They are constantly rising above their physical selves.

All further proof is needed for the worth and dignity of man, let the sceptic look to history again, for man's accomplishments. There are his accomplishments in gaining control of his physical environment. There are his accomplishments in the realms of music and learning and social organization. There is the evil he has been able to concoct and execute. All of this points to a being of some dignity and worth. In man we have a being which can begin as a tiny cell, somehow fertilized and grow into something which can write a symphony or weigh a nebula. Certainly man can behave and has behaved as though he were a being a little lower than the angels.

Perhaps the most effective argument for any sceptic is to start him living. Let him somewhere where he can see and experience human relationships at first hand. Look at life as it is around you, as it is portrayed in the world's literature. Experience friendship and all the varied kinds of man's fellowship with men. See countless people loyal to their ideals, changing on day after day. Discover in the most unexpected places that men act out of a sense of responsibility. That there are innumerable people who do whose noble deeds will never be recorded. Such a dealing with life will convince any sceptic of the nobility of man. Life may be good, bad, and hard, but it is ours.

The general procedure is to admit all that has been said and then dismiss it all as a pernicious illusion. No one has any right to do that.

If man believes that these values are true, that they are real and true as if he was assuming their validity, life will become more satisfactory. Such behavior will result in a stronger society, life will be abundant and progress possible. If faith which results in successful satisfactory living is illusion. Then there is no test which humans can give for reality. This is the evidence for the validity of Religion. The only kind of evidence for any validity if it is admitted that knowledge is possible at all. Our Religious values are established.