Phenomenology of Religious Experience IV: Religious Experience and Description

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Is There Such a Thing as “Religion”? In Search of the Roots of Spirituality

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Abstract: That there exists something like religion seems self-evident. Anthropologists, we are told, have discovered that all cultures have a religion of some kind. But what is “religion”? If we trace the concept to its origins in *religio*, we see that our current definition of the term is considerably different. The Latin term *religio* has to do with virtue or fulfilling one’s obligations to one’s family and community. It has nothing immediately to do with gods, the supernatural, and the afterlife. In contrast, “religion” – something to do with a kind of belief or faith – took about a millennium to take shape. At stake here is a distinction that continues to grow in importance with the increasing number of “nones,” people who consider themselves “non-religious” but are sometimes willing to label themselves “spiritual.” Such a distinction is only meaningful to the extent there is a difference. My paper begins by establishing the nature and the scope of the question. Then I consider Husserl’s idea of returning to the origin – the *Ursprung*. In effect, Husserl’s quest can be considered an archaeology. Yet an archaeology of religion or even “spirituality” turns out to be impossible. In light of that, I ask: Is there something like primordial religion – something that we could likewise experience today? I suggest that we can find it in Plato, Aristotle, and Kant – an awe or wonder in face of the complexity of the universe. William Cantwell Smith speaks of “the archaic meaning of religio as that awe that men felt in the presence of an uncanny and dreadful power of the unknown.” That awe in religio and philosophy seem to be fundamentally the same. But, if that is the case, then the distinction between “religious” and “spiritual” may not have any real basis.

1 Introduction

In 1893, Chicago hosted the World Columbian Exposition, a massive event lasting six months and drawing 27 million people from across the world. The largest of its many congresses was the “Parliament of World’s Religions,” the first formal instance of interreligious dialogue. Although this event was not taken seriously by scholars at the time, it was the first time that representatives of Eastern religions were able to speak on their own rather than having Western scholars speak on their behalf.¹ Despite that remarkable achievement, the attendees at the congress were overwhelmingly Christian, with Jews coming in second. All of the religions of India were represented by one person, just as one American Muslim represented all of Islam. There were no representatives of any of the indigenous religions of North America or Africa. The group decided that there are exactly seven world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. If you consult current world religions textbooks, you will see that there has been some expansion of the category to include Baha’i, Jainism, Shinto, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. That brings the list to twelve.

¹ Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 270–4.

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Since it is widely recognized that there are approximately 4,300 religions across the world, it is unclear why only these twelve religions are included. What qualifies something as a “world” religion? If the matter is simply one of *size*, then it’s hard to see why Judaism would qualify. There are less than 15 million Jewish people in the world. By contrast, there are about 0.5 billion Hindus, 1.1 billion Buddhists, 1.8 billion Muslims and 2.3 billion Christians.² Perhaps, then, “world” means something like “across the world.” But then it’s hard to see how Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism (and perhaps others on the list) qualify, since they are comparatively localized. As it turns out, there simply is no consensus on what makes something a *world* religion. It seems to be an honorific without an actual definition.

Does the term “religion” fare any better? The very concept of the word “religion” has been fundamentally skewed toward matters of doctrine or belief, which makes our quest particularly difficult. For many philosophers of religion, talking about “faith” and talking about “religion” are equivalent. One of the anonymous readers of this article was kind enough to point out that I should provide more precise definitions of terms such as “religion” and “faith.” Alas, the problem is that, while I may be able to pinpoint what I mean by the term, such precision does not much help with the overall problem of the seemingly universal slippage between “religion” and “faith” in both philosophical and theological contexts. Consider this example from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* in which Charles Taliaferro defines “religion” as:

A religion involves a communal, transmittable body of teachings and prescribed practices about an ultimate, sacred reality or state of being that calls for reverence or awe, a body which guides its practitioners into what it describes as a saving, illuminating or emancipatory relationship to this reality through a personally transformative life of prayer, ritualized meditation, and/or moral practices like repentance and personal regeneration.³

Even with this very basic definition, there are significant questions. To what extent do religions have a “body of teachings”? Many religions are simply not oriented around such things as “teachings” and are instead oriented around practices, which is what Taliaferro goes on to mention. Yet do those practices necessarily relate to “an ultimate, sacred reality”? In a religion in which ancestor worship is central, there may be a sense of ancestors being “sacred” in some sense, though it would be hard to think that they are regarded as “ultimate reality.” Further, does religion always have a “salvific” or “transformative” effect? Again, this is true regarding Christianity, but it is less obviously true regarding many religions. Here we probably need to distinguish between something being “transformative” (for example, following the teachings of Confucius could help shape one’s life) – and “salvific” (which implies that there is something wrong with the human situation or the world at large that needs “saving”). If we say that religions generally shape who we are and provide a guide for living, that seems a relatively safe assumption. Yet the idea that we need religion (or something like religion) to “fix” something in the world is hardly a basic conception of religion.

Admitting that his definition is problematic, Taliaferro then suggests the following:

But rather than devoting more space to definitions at the outset, a pragmatic policy will be adopted: for the purpose of this entry, it will be assumed that those traditions that are widely recognized today as religions are, indeed, religions. It will be assumed, then, that religions include (at least) Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and those traditions that are like them. This way of delimiting a domain is sometimes described as employing a definition by examples (an ostensive definition) or making an appeal to a family resemblance between things. It will also be assumed that Greco-Roman views of gods, rituals, the afterlife, the soul, are broadly “religious” or “religiously significant.” Given the pragmatic, open-ended use of the term “religion” the hope is to avoid beginning our inquiry with a procrustean bed.⁴

In other words, when given the chance to deepen the superficial definition of religion, Taliaferro simply avoids the question.

² Figures taken from the Pew Research Center, “Christians Remain World’s Largest Religious Group, But They Are Declining in Europe,” 5 April 2017.

³ Taliaferro, “Philosophy of Religion,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Religion*. Taliaferro labels this a slightly modified definition of the one for “Religion” in the *Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion*, 24.

⁴ Ibid.

And this problem only becomes worse when we consider a further aspect of our time. Polling in much of the “developed world” suggests that the “nones” – the group of people which has no religious identification – is growing exponentially. Whereas being part of a religious group has been an important part of one’s identity for millennia, many millennials and members of Gen-Z do not identify themselves by way of religion, though they may be willing to identify as “spiritual.” However, as with any distinction, the difference between these two identifiers is only meaningful if we know what is being distinguished. I suspect that many people who self-identify as “spiritual” reject what is often termed “organized religion.” But, even if that is correct, it is not clear that those who reject religion know exactly what it is they are rejecting. And this works the other way around: people who are labelled “religious” by pollsters, historians, anthropologists, or others may not themselves have any clear concept of what it means to be a “religious” person and may not even consider themselves to be religious. Further, in some ultra-conservative forms of Christianity (for example), the term “religious” is itself suspect: a true Christian is not *religious* but *Christian*.

If we trace the concept of religion back to its possible origins, we will come to see that our current definition of the term far from self-evident. In what follows, I will begin by considering Husserl’s idea of returning to the origin – the *Ursprung* – of geometry. In effect, Husserl’s quest can be considered an archaeology of geometry’s formative concepts.⁵ Yet, as we will ultimately see, an archaeology of religion or even “spirituality” turns out to be impossible. Once we see how Husserl’s quest goes wrong, we will turn to the origins of the term *religio*. To conclude, we will pose the question: what *might* have been the *original* way in which *religio* manifested itself?

2 The return-inquiry back to the origin

In his essay “The Origin of Geometry,”⁶ Husserl notes that the historical inquiry into the primal origins of geometry which he attempts would never have occupied Galileo. The essay dates back to the mid-1930s. At that time, Husserl believed that science was in a crisis of meaning. Simply put, that crisis was internal and external. On the one hand, science no longer knew what its subject matter was – what it was *about*; on the other hand, science was increasingly disconnected from everyday life. Whatever we might think of the current state of science, I think we can say that philosophy of religion has a serious problem regarding both its own focus and its connection to everyday life. Thus, Husserl’s attempt to return to the “origin” of geometry is instructive.

Husserl isn’t interested in what he calls the “readymade,” “handed-down” geometry but with its original meaning. He wants to go back to geometry’s primitive roots. In order to do so, Husserl proposes a sort of archaeological excavation with the hope of bringing to the fore precisely the aspects of geometry that are most basic or essential. His quest is for geometry’s “originary meaning” – what it would have meant to those first geometers. His method is what he calls a *Rückfrage* – a “return inquiry.” It is a questioning of the present state of a tradition in order to arrive at its incipient roots, not the specific empirical facts engendering a historical origin but what Husserl assumes must be its *essential* origin – what *must have been the case* for the science of geometry to come into existence.

In recent continental philosophy of religion, there has been considerable interest in what Husserl calls the “Principle of All Principles” laid out in *Ideas I*. That discussion is quite germane to our topic. From early

⁵ While Michel Foucault makes a rigorous distinction between “archaeology” and “genealogy,” such a distinction is not to be found in Husserl.

⁶ In 1939, Eugen Fink released Husserl’s essay in a journal fascicle dedicated to Husserl and appended to it the title “Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie” [The Question of the Origin of Geometry]. See the appendix to Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*.

on, Husserl makes it clear that phenomenology is directed toward allowing phenomena to be manifest “just as they are.” In the *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901), Husserl speaks of a “*pure phenomenology of the experiences of thinking and knowing*” (LI 249). “Pure” here means the “freedom from metaphysical, scientific and psychological presuppositions” (LI 265). In *Ideas I* (1913), that desire is detailed as follows:

*every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally (so to speak, in its ‘personal’ actuality) offered to us in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.*⁷

In other words, nothing is to be artificially “imposed” upon the phenomena; instead, they should simply be allowed to present themselves for what they are and defined on their own terms. Exactly what this is supposed to mean has been the subject of considerable scholarship and I am not interested in a definitive answer here.⁸ Let’s simply state that, to some interpreters, there is a contradiction – or at least something problematic – with this statement. On the one hand, we have the statement “*accepted simply as what it is presented as being*,” which sounds very much like the *Logical Investigations* passage. Such an insistence suggests that there is no interpretive aspect to our perceiving and knowing, nor should there be. On the other hand, Husserl says that the phenomenon appears “*within the limits in which it is presented there*.” But what are these “limits”? The question is whether these limits are part of the phenomenon itself or, instead, part of the intentional act directed at the phenomenon. How we answer this question has profound implications for the very goal of apprehending *die Sachen selbst* [the things themselves].

It is crucial to note that Husserl’s quest *must begin* with the tradition of geometry as it has been passed down, even though this is not his final destination. Empirical history, the body of “historical facts,” is always necessary as a jumping-off point, though Husserl believes that its factuality must be reduced in order to get at its “sense.” He makes an important distinction, one which has significant implications for the whole project of the “The Origin of Geometry.” Empirical, or extrinsic, history is concerned with the actual events which happen in the empirical world. Thus, the empirical history of geometry is composed of specific geometrical acts, the formulation and use in spatiotemporal reality of geometrical idealities. Essential, or intrinsic, history is concerned with the essential aspects of geometry: what must have been the case for geometry to have come into being. It is this that allows us to make sense of facts. Husserl claims that all *merely* factual history remains incomprehensible because, it never thematizes the general ground of meaning, the *a priori* structures proper to it.⁹ Of course, such a claim presumes that there *are* essential or *a priori* structures.

Husserl’s theory of ideal objects provides an account of how knowledge of one generation or civilization can be passed down to another. Our *Lebenswelt* [lifeworld] contains material things, but it also contains ideas. Husserl sees tradition as composed of constituted idealities that have a spiritual [*geistliche*] nature which transcends time and space. Ideality is the thread which allows a seam, albeit fragile, to be sewn between the past and present. In his early works, Husserl sees these idealities as highly beneficial, since they have a kind of permanence unlike material objects. But, in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, Husserl’s worry is that the idealities of science – its conceptual building blocks – are no longer clear. We know *how* to manipulate things technologically, but we don’t have any clear idea of *why* we are doing so. I suspect that one could easily question whether this is a problem with Facebook and Google. But our concern here is with the meaning of “religion:” what is its original and thus *essential* meaning?

Our term “archaeology” goes back to the Greek *arkhaios*, which can mean “ancient” or “prehistoric” but can also mean “typical” or “original.” Archaeologists literally dig through the dirt to discover material artifacts from the past. In their quest, they uncover layers upon layers, perhaps never reaching any place that could count as “the beginning.” But an *archetype* is something different: it is an original that serves as a model for all others of its type. For Aristotle, the *archai* or basic principles are the foundation of science. In

⁷ Husserl, *Ideas*, 44.

⁸ My own attempt to work out this dilemma is found in Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, chapter eight.

⁹ Husserl, “The Origin of Geometry,” 371.

order to classify something *as* something, it needs to be categorized by way of a principle. But this raises a question about our question: in tracing the origin of “religion” are we looking for some kind of archetypal form of all religion that has been practiced by all cultures at all times or we instead looking for how the word “religion” has been used over the years? The search for the former presumes that there is some *essential* form of religion that would *necessarily* be found in all religions.¹⁰ Such a model might well lead us to think that some original culture *first* established a religion and somehow has passed it on to the rest of us.

Yet it is also possible to imagine that there are various phenomena that have – to use a Wittgensteinian formulation – a certain family resemblance about them. They are not “the same,” but they have certain features in common. If that is the case, then we are on a quest that is more like a “genealogy” – tracing back a concept over time *without* assuming that there really is something like an *archê* or first principle. At this point, we cannot say that an archaeology of an *archê* is either possible or impossible. But we can begin by way of a genealogy and see where that gets us.

3 The origin of the concept of “religion”

Before saying anything about “religion,” we need to ask: from whence comes this term? In what follows, I will be thinking of religion’s origin in terms of *religio*. Yet where does *that* term come from? There seem to be two alternative etymologies that differ regarding, one might say, the *how* and the *what*. On the one hand, Cicero suggests (through Balbus the Stoic) that the origin of *religio* is to be found in *relegere*. On such a reading, the religious person is the one who worships with great care and devotion. The irreligious person is one who neglects proper worship. On the other hand, Lactantius thinks that the primary question is one concerning the objectivity or reality of that (or whom) worshipped. Given such a reading, he sees the root as being *relegare*.¹¹

However, William Cantwell Smith suggests (convincingly, I think) that we can see both of these roots in *religio* and there may be no reason to choose one root over the other. *Religio* is that which has to do with virtue or fulfilling one’s obligations to one’s family and community. In such a formula, we have both the *how* and the *what*. Yet note that *religio* has nothing immediately to do with gods, the supernatural, and the afterlife – at least not necessarily. In contrast, the definition that we would ascribe to the word today – something to do with a kind of belief that connects to doctrine of one sort or another – took about a millennium to take shape. A *Rückfrage* regarding the originary meaning of *religio* tells us that it is about being a responsible person and responsibility always presupposes a *someone* to whom one is responsible. Put in Husserlian terms, the essential feature of primordial religiosity is ethical in nature. Levinas is widely known for his claim that ethics is first philosophy, but one could say that ethics is the most basic or essential feature of religion, at least in its original meaning. Consider this example: In one of Terence’s plays (approximately 160 BCE), the word is synonymous with the Latin term *scrupulus* [which has more or less the same meaning as the English term *scrupulous*] – having moral scruples.¹²

But where do these scruples come from? William Cantwell Smith points out that the question comes down to whether we take them to be *internal* or *external*.¹³ In the first instance, the ethical command comes from within: we compel ourselves to do the “right” thing. In the second instance, what compels us is something outside of ourselves. One might immediately think that what compels us from outside would be *God*. But there is no reason to think that is necessarily the case. If we take Levinas, what compels us to treat the Other with respect is simply the Other’s *being there*. It is the sheer presence of the Other that demands

¹⁰ The question I raise here is one addressed, somewhat differently, by Schilbrack in *Philosophy and the Study of Religions* (see chapter 4, “Do Religions Exist?” and chapter 5, “What Isn’t Religion?”). One way in which we differ is that Schilbrack thinks that religion is inherently “salvific” in some sense, whereas I find that account implausible.

¹¹ Kätzler, “Religio,” 2–18.

¹² Terence, *The Woman of Andros*, 940–1.

¹³ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 20.

our respect. Cantwell Smith points us to the phrase “*religio mihi est*.” If I take something to have the status of *religio*, I feel obliged to do something: to keep my oath, to fulfill my obligations to my family, or whatever it is that I think is required of me. That something is required need not have *anything* to do with a supernatural realm or to a higher power, let alone God. For instance, Kant thinks that the categorical imperative is based on *reason*: as a rational being, I am required to follow it. It is a purely *internal* imperative that I impose upon myself.

The difficulty, then, is that the *sacred* need not be a god or a heavenly place. It can simply be an obligation – as in the phrase “my sacred duty.” On such a reading, not doing one’s duty is a “sacrilege.” We tend to associate duties and ceremonies with a transcendent reality. But, when Cicero uses the term *religiones* in the sense of *rules*, he speaks of *both* divine and human rules [*contra omnes divinas atque humanas religiones*].¹⁴ Over time, though, *religio* acquires a range of meanings, from “rule” to “worship practice.” Tertullian, for instance, uses *religio* to refer to “worship” and “rite.”¹⁵ In the Church Fathers in general, the word *religio* has a range of meanings but all of them concern relations to other human beings and/or to God; none of them denote anything like a set of beliefs or doctrines. What Augustine says about “true religion” in his *Retractationes* is quite instructive for how the term was being used in Latin during his time. He defines “*vera religio*” as the true worship of the true God.¹⁶ However, in *The City of God*, Augustine makes clear his dissatisfaction with the term *religio*, which “would seem to indicate more precisely not any worship, but the worship of God.” The problem is simple: *religio* can also

be observed in dealing with human relationships, affinities and ties of every sort. Hence the term does not secure us against ambiguity when used in discussing the worship paid to God. We cannot say confidently that *religio* means only the worship of God, since we should thus clearly be violating usage by abolishing one meaning of the word, namely, the observance of duties in human relationships.¹⁷

Thus, *religio* can refer both to worship of God and to respect shown other human beings. Augustine notes similar problems with the term “*pietas*,” which can mean both worship of God and respect shown to one’s parents.

It should not be hard to see that the most basic meaning of *religio* is respect – for one’s obligations, for one’s parents, or for God. It can be internally or externally motivated. While it would take us too far afield to track down the origin of the Greek *thrêskeia* (which is *not* exactly equivalent to our term “religion”), it is instructive that the English translation of James 1:17 reads as follows: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (NRSV). Even in the New Testament, then, religion is explicitly defined in terms of obligations to others and to perhaps to oneself (it is unclear from the text whether keeping oneself unstained is a duty to oneself, to others, and to God – or else to all three). The idea that *religio* is first and foremost about obligations becomes even clearer when we note that *religio* first comes into English as “religion” to denote those who take monastic vows. Such vows are about one’s allegiance and behavior. In the medieval period, the term *religiones* was commonly used to speak of the various monastic orders, whereas *religio* referred to one. The idea of *religio* as denoting a relationship is likewise evident in Zwingli’s *De vera et falsa religione commentaries* (published in 1525). The distinction of true and false “religion” is based on how human beings relate to God. For Zwingli, false *religio* is trusting in something other than God. It is superstition. True *religio*, in contrast, is trusting in God’s mercy. Even Calvin’s *Institutio Christianae religionis* (1556) – which is commonly assumed to be about doctrine – is about true Christian piety.

However, the term “religion” began changing significantly around 1,500. Sociologically, as long as the Church remained united, it was quite possible to define someone as being a “Christian” on the basis of that person being part of a social group (namely, the Church). One could even meaningfully speak of a country as being “Christian,” since the essential properties of the whole could be meaningfully ascribed to each of

¹⁴ Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.5.34, in *Cicero: The Verrine Orations*.

¹⁵ Barnes, *Tertullian*.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Retractationes* I.13.I.

¹⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, 10:I.

its individuals. Yet, once the western church (i.e., Roman Catholicism) came to be divided, such classification was no longer possible. To be sure, the very idea that one could determine whether someone “counted” as a Christian by way of adherence to doctrine goes back at least as far as Roman times, when Christianity was first persecuted as a deviant religious sect and then became the state religion.¹⁸ It is precisely at this time (325 CE) that the emperor Constantine brought various Christian leaders together in Niceae to produce a document that defined the official doctrines of the Church. Such a creed was definitely intended to define who was in and who was out. One can hardly imagine that all of those Romans and Europeans were thoroughly versed in the Nicene Creed and understood exactly what it was they were supposed to be affirming on each and every line. Indeed, the vast majority of people in medieval Europe were illiterate and mass was said in a language that they did not understand. They had very little idea of exactly what it was that the Church affirmed. Still, they were part of the Church and through the Church came salvation.

However, the Reformation changed all of that. What had been a system of salvation based on being part of an institution turned into a system based on holding to the right set of doctrines. The very term “religion” comes to be defined by the advent of Protestant Christianity and the sub-discipline “philosophy of religion” has been defined primarily along Protestant lines. That has meant considerable emphasis on doctrine. The Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff opens his recent book *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* with the following observation:

In recent decades there has been an extraordinary surge of interest in philosophy of religion within the analytic tradition of philosophy [...]. If someone who knew nothing about religion drew conclusions about the religious mode of life from this literature she would come to the view that, apart from the mystical experiences of a few people, the religious life consists of believing things about God [...]. Between the priorities of analytic philosophers of religion and the priorities of most religious adherents there is a striking discrepancy.¹⁹

Although Wolterstorff uses the phrase “analytic philosophers of religion,” he is really referring specifically to *Christians* working in philosophy. It is common in philosophy of religion to use terms like “religion” and “religious life” to refer to Christianity – as if this were simply obvious. While Christians are by no means unconcerned with questions about the nature of the divine and the justification of their beliefs in God, Wolterstorff is completely right that “the priorities of most religious adherents” are significantly different from those of philosophers.

Of course, it would be a serious mistake to view religious practice as completely *disconnected* from doctrinal concerns – or to reduce this point to “practice” versus “theory.” Aristotle is the first to make a distinction between *praxis* and *theoria*, and it is a useful distinction – at least to some extent. The problem with the distinction, though, is that it could imply that there either is or could be something like a *theoria* divorced from *praxis* or a *praxis* divorced from *theoria*. Aristotle never suggests this and for good reason. *Theoria* is something we *do*, making it ultimately a form of *praxis*. Anthropologists have long argued that religious practices across the world are *not merely* rote, irrational, and meaningless (an assumption that most likely has arisen from Protestant Christians). They are ways of *knowing*.²⁰

4 Where does religious experience come from?

When Husserl talks about the origin of geometry, he uses the term “Erstmaligkeit.” There really isn’t any word in English that quite corresponds – it’s something like “first-timeness.” We speak of the “premiere” of

¹⁸ It is worth noting that one charge against the early Christians was that they were *atheists*. In this case, they were labelled as such *not* because they did not believe in God, but because they did not believe in the “approved” Roman gods. Even the term “atheism,” then, can have an ambiguous meaning. It would be inconceivable for someone today to consider Christians to be “atheists.”

¹⁹ Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically*, 1.

²⁰ I have discussed this aspect at length in Benson, “The Primacy of Liturgy in Christianity.”

a symphony or play and it's something like that. Geometry, like all ideal objects, is inherently historical: that is, idealities have a history, unlike Platonic Ideas. Moreover, their history is such that they could have only come about in certain ways under certain conditions. This explains what Husserl means when he says that "we inquire into that sense in which [geometry] appeared in history for the first time – in which it had to appear, even though we know nothing of the first creators and are not even asking of them."²¹

So what is the "first time" that religion arises? In a highly important sense, we have absolutely no idea. There is no record of such a thing, not least because there was no writing but also because it would have taken a great degree of self-consciousness to know that one was practicing a "religion." Biologists generally agree that the species we call "human" has existed for about 220,000 years. Religious history is usually seen as dating back to the invention of writing, about 3,200 BCE. Stonehenge goes back to 3,100 BCE. The pyramids come along a few hundred years later. The Hindu Vedas go back to somewhere between 1,700 and 1,100 BCE (a very imprecise date). The Torah dates back to somewhere between the sixth and fifth century BCE, as does the earliest Confucian writing, the *Shu Ching*. The Christian scriptures come along in the first century CE. Thus, things that we label "religion" have been around for a long time, even though we have no record of any particular origin or "first time."

But, for the moment, let's just say that we suddenly have access to all events of previous human history, which of those events would we identify as "religious"? What should we look for if we are trying to identify something like "religion" in the past? Given our usual conception of religion, three obvious candidates emerge: (1) worshipping gods, (2) conceptions of the afterlife, and (3) belief in the spiritual or supernatural.

If we take the first, it's clear that "belief in gods" is not found in Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and many other religions throughout the world. Moreover, even if we could make sense of religion being about believing in a God or gods, what those gods are like varies considerably. The ancient Greeks, for example, thought of gods as physical beings who resided on Mount Olympus. In the Hebrew scriptures, God is said to "walk" in the garden with Adam and Eve, the three visitors to Abraham are called both "men" and "angels," and Moses is told that he cannot see God's "face." Although Judaism is today considered one of the three monotheistic religions, ancient Judaism had the same polytheistic framework as other Near Eastern cultures of the time. Yahweh was worshipped as "the regional and national god, whose special domain dealt with war and peace issues," but Israelites also "worshipped gods who performed specific functions, those that were responsible for various special needs: weather, rain, women's fertility, etc."²² The Hebrew Bible depicts the Israelites as worshiping Asherah (II Kings 23). In Psalm 82, Yahweh is said to take his place in the council of gods and speaks to other gods. Thus, the Hebrew Bible is *not* clearly monotheistic. Even within Christianity there is a difficulty in that one can argue that the God depicted by the Christian scriptures is significantly different from the developing Platonic God we find in the Church Fathers, who were heavily influenced by Platonic thought. Even if we could say that religion is primarily about gods, then, it's not clear what kinds of gods we are talking about.

If we take the second, it's likewise clear that many religions do not have a concept of an afterlife: death is seen as the end of life and that's it. Even in Jesus' day, a major group of Jews were the Sadducees, who did not believe in a life after death. At that point in time, there was a vibrant debate in the Jewish community about what happens to us after we die. I think it is a safe generalization that religions provide ways of dealing with death. But that's as far as the similarities go. Some religions prepare us for a life to come; some help us come to terms with the reality that there is no other life. All of them have ways of helping those who are left behind.

If we consider the third criterion, it becomes clear that the vast majority of religions do not make any distinction between the natural and the supernatural. While one might assume that the lack of such a distinction means that the material world is seen as empty and meaningless, the exact opposite is often true. For many cultures, the very material world in which we live is enchanted and is itself supernatural.

²¹ Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, 354.

²² Lang, "Die Jahwe-allein-Bewegung," quoted in Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, 2.

One does not need some other realm for the supernatural, so the distinction ends up being meaningless. Even in Christianity, the idea that there is something like a “supernatural” realm only becomes possible with the advent of modern science – which allowed for a conceptual division between the natural world, guided by the laws of physics, and the supernatural world, which is not subject to such laws. For medieval Christian thinkers, the “supernatural” is not some world distinct from the “natural” world. The present meaning of the word – “some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature” – is distinctly modern.²³ We tend to think that religion concerns that which is “spiritual,” but even in Christianity the idea that there is a spiritual part of our being that is utterly unlike the material part of our being is a relatively late development. The terms for “soul” in the Hebrew Bible are *nefesh* and *ruah*; the terms in the Christian Bible are *spirê* and *pneuma*. These terms mean wind, breath, and air. They are what make us alive. They do not indicate some separate “thing” but simply mean “living being.” There are no uses in either sets of scriptures that denote anything like an “immortal being” in the Platonic sense. It is only after the Babylonian Exile that Platonic overtones creep into the Jewish conception of *nefesh* and *ruah*. Only in Patristic thought – and quite specifically with Origen – does the idea of an immortal soul begin to be read back into these religious texts.

If the word “religion” is difficult to apply in the present, does it fare any better in relation to the past? I don’t think so. Let’s start with this example: “One indicator of the problematic nature of the category ‘religion’ in Chinese history is the absence of any premodern word that unambiguously denotes the category.”²⁴ The author of that quotation then proceeds to consider a variety of ancient Chinese terms and show why they are not exactly the right words for “religion.” Many languages have no word for “religion” and many that do have such a word have borrowed it from another language. The ancient Greek term *thrêkeia* is usually translated into English as “religion,” but the Greeks had no word for religion. Early appearances of the word in Herodotus (fifth century BCE) indicate something like “rituals,” and that meaning persists for centuries. Philo of Alexandria uses it in the first century CE to refer to sacrifices in a temple. In Josephus, it means both worship and rituals occurring in a temple. But he also applies the term to Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, in which case the term means something like obedience to God. In Eusebius’s version of the Edict of Milan (313 CE), it reads as follows: “We grant both to Christians and to everyone free choice to follow the mode of worship that they choose *so that whatever divinity or heavenly thing exists might be enabled to be well-disposed toward us.*”²⁵

Things get more complicated when Photius (ninth century CE) uses *thrêkeia* to refer to such things as Nestorianism, Arianism, Orthodoxy (writing as the Bishop of Constantinople), and those who worship other gods. These seem more like a grouping of sects or something even less clear rather than about different religions.

5 Spirituality as *thaumazien*

Perhaps you’ve noticed that we keep coming up against two basic conceptions that get labelled “religion.” One is the respect and ethical duty to others; the other is the respect and worship of God. Might we point to a common origin of them both, something that we could simply call spirituality? Again, spirituality is another concept that is used in myriad ways, so no definitive definition can be given for it. Still, what Socrates describes sounds something like spirituality. He claims that philosophy begins in *thaumazein* – awe or wonder: “This sense of wonder [*thaumazein*] is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin.”²⁶ It is a pity that the English term “awe” has, through colloquial overuse, lost so much of its

²³ The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. “supernatural.”

²⁴ Adler and Overmyer, “Chinese Religion,” vol. 3, 1580.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Church History*, 10.5, in Schwartz, *Die Kirchengeschichte*, italics added.

²⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d, in *The Collected Dialogues*.

force. For, right before this passage, Theaetetus has just said: “By the gods, Socrates, I am lost in wonder [*thaumazô*] when I think of all these things, and sometimes when I regard them it really makes my head swim.”²⁷

Aristotle says the following:

For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant.²⁸

To anyone who might respond, “well, that’s the source of *philosophy*: but what about *religion*?” the quick response is that, as we have clearly seen, the idea of religion is itself of modern vintage. One of the oldest ways of making sense of the world is philosophy. Given the Tertullian question “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” it might be difficult to think of philosophy as a form of spirituality. Yet, when Plato and Aristotle make these observations about *thaumazein*, philosophy is the genus under which theology is a species. Furthermore, the kind of awe that Plato, Aristotle, and Kant all present sounds remarkably like a sense of “spirituality.” Indeed, Cantwell Smith speaks of “the archaic meaning of *religio* as that awe that men felt in the presence of an uncanny and dreadful power of the unknown.”²⁹ It would be hard to see the awe in *religio* as somehow fundamentally different from that of philosophy. Moreover, if this sort of awe is *not* something like “spirituality,” then it is hard to see what else it could be.

As a way of getting at this sense of awe, consider what we think we know about matter. For the Greeks, matter is by nature inert. It needs *pneuma* to animate it; to be alive is to have the breath of *pneuma*. For Plato, this means that the body needs a soul to be animated. But, in early Christian doctrine, such a view was anathema. Why? Because human beings are fundamentally embodied creatures and they do not need some additional thing to animate them. If Jesus really did “descend into hell” during those three days, it would not have been his soul that did this. It would have been his body. Today we think we are quite enlightened about matter. It’s rather simple; we even have a chart to list the elements. However, if anyone were to ask you what matter is, you have roughly the experience that Augustine describes in terms of time in book ten of the *Confessions*. Similarly, I remember back when I was a nerdy teenager interested in all things electronic. I read a lot of books and learned that electricity works because electrons can move through a wire given the right conditions. What I never read, however, was *why* they did that. To this day, scientists are remarkably unable to answer this question. It makes you wonder.

What does wonder cause us to do? An obvious answer is simply this: ask questions. What sorts of questions are these? Consider the questions of a child: Why is the sky blue? Why do birds fly? Why do people die? Where did the world come from? All of these questions can be given a “scientific” answer but, to a person lost in wonder, such an answer seems really incomplete and unhelpful. Yes, we understand that human beings wear out at some point and so they die, but why are they that way? If you think about it, such a question isn’t really “answered” either by Judaism or by Christianity. The creation and fall narrative – whether read as literal story or as mythical truth – does not answer the question of whether Adam and Eve would have died at some point if they had remained in the garden. We can conclude whatever we like, but that story will not provide definitive information about it. Note that these questions do not even begin to touch on anything “spiritual” or “divine.” The material world around us proves quite mysterious without any talk of ghosts or eternal life.

Kant’s own sense of awe is quite memorable:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. I do not seek or conjecture either of them as if they were

²⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155c, quoted in Desjardins, *The Rational Enterprise*, 189.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I.982b 12–7.

²⁹ Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 23.

veiled obscurities or extravagances beyond the horizon of my vision; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.³⁰

What exactly Kant believed in terms of religion is a subject of dispute. Yet might not one see this as an expression of *spirituality*? These two things *do* inspire awe – without the mention of a divine creator or a moral legislator. Moreover, when Kant is writing these words, he and others of his “enlightened” time would have thought that, by way of human reason and the scientific method, everything will eventually become clear. Even since then (and even before), both believers and skeptics have often thought of God as filling in the gaps of scientific knowledge. But what we know at this point only affirms that the world – that is, just matter, not spirit or anything “complicated” – is already complicated enough. Our current knowledge continues to affirm those complications. Again, though, one does not need black holes or the relativity of time to make one wonder: simply the movement of electrons will do.

Kant’s sense of awe concerns the vastness of the universe, but it also concerns the respect we feel for others. Yet putting it this way sounds a little too intellectual. Pierre Hadot (in such texts as *Philosophy as a Way of Life* and *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*) has argued that ancient philosophers saw what they were doing as a complete way of life. Hadot speaks of philosophers as engaging in “spiritual exercises” [*askêsis*]. More recently, John M. Cooper (in *Pursuits of Wisdom*) has taken up the same thesis and considerably broadened it. Both build what I take to be a convincing case that it was not just ethics and politics that were seen as “practical” for the ancients but that metaphysics, epistemology, logic, and physics were designed to be practical *too*. Consider what Plutarch says about philosophy as something one *does*:

Most people imagine that philosophy consists in delivering discourses from the heights of a chair, and in giving classes based on texts. But what these people utterly miss is the uninterrupted philosophy which we see being practiced every day in a way which is perfectly equal to itself [...]. Socrates did not set up a grandstand for his audience and did not sit upon a professorial chair; he had no fixed timetable for talking and walking with his friends. Rather, he did philosophy sometimes by joking with them, or by drinking or going to war or to the market with them, and finally by going to prison and drinking poison. He was the first to show that at all times and in every place, in everything that happens to us, daily life gives us the opportunity to do philosophy.³¹

The love of *sophia*, then, is not some kind of theoretical love, but a practical one. Apart from our pre-conceptions, there is no reason not to think that philosophy is a *spiritual activity* in which we are constantly engaged.

Note that, if we define either philosophy or theology in terms of ritual and spirituality, there’s no immediate differentiation that can be made between them. Both seek *wisdom*. Not surprisingly, early apologists for the Christian faith defined Christianity as a philosophy. As we have seen, the category “religion” simply didn’t exist at that point. But that leaves one with a question: Exactly what is at stake in these categories? What are they designed to include? What are they designed to exclude? As Foucault reminds us, any coherent discourse needs to have a sense of “who’s in and who’s out.”

6 Conclusion

My suggestion is not necessarily that we must get rid of the concept or word “religion.” Yet what we have seen about the term and its historical development as a concept should give us pause in using it without some reflection on what it really means. Or we could begin to use the term “spirituality” to denote aspects of human existence that are not easily captured by the term “religion.” Moreover, I believe that Smart is right in saying that even the term “religion” covers a very wide variety of things such as ritual, personal experience, myth, ethics, and community. Precisely these things, though, are what the category of “religion” often

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 129 [5:161].

³¹ Plutarch, *Whether a Man Should Engage in Politics When He is Old*, in Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* 38.

misses – at least when used by philosophers. Certainly “philosophy of religion” has given them short shrift, which means that “religious” people often don’t seem themselves reflected in that literature. Some continental philosophers might respond: “yes, but it’s those analytic philosophers who are the problem!” I don’t doubt that analytic philosophy has been remarkably tone-deaf to religious life. However, if we are going to be good phenomenologists, then we will need to be attentive to the presuppositions we bring to the phenomena and, as much as possible, allow the phenomena to show themselves as they are.

All of what I have said, then, is meant as a mere propaedeutic or prolegomena to any future philosophy of religious experience. Once we see that religion has often been itself a suffocating category, we might start once again with the task of asking new questions and opening up new paths of exploration of what basic human spirituality is. I am not talking here about the end of philosophy of religion but its *beginning*. When I was a graduate student and read Husserl writing about feeling like a continual beginner, I simply did not understand what he meant. I was so convinced that such a feeling – which I certainly shared with him at the time – would go away and eventually be replaced by knowledge. To be sure, my ignorance has given way a bit to knowledge; but I still feel like a beginner. What I’ve come to see, though, is that Husserl kept realizing that even his previous efforts to plumb the depths of the phenomena were not sufficient, that things went deeper and stretched out more broadly than he had realized. *That* is what made him such a good phenomenologist. Perhaps we can awaken that sense of being a beginner all over again so that we may return to the phenomenon of spirituality afresh and describe primordial spirituality apart from the interpretive lens of “religion.”

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