

Preamble

Making judgments about the truth or falsity of religion, about its ethical profile, about where and how it is cause and/or effect among global geopolitics, seems more than commonplace today, at least in the West. In this book I seek to examine some of the claims made against religion, and to look with an equally critical eye at defences of its role and significance in our time. My motivations for doing this have gathered pace over recent years, drawing upon a number of considerations:

Huge judgments and generalisations have been made about religion by people who have not spent their lives studying it, who are not religious scholars and who have not had an experience of being religious in anything but a nominal sense. I am thinking of the new atheists Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris, to name but a few. Yet despite their lack of qualifications in these respects, their views have gained great publicity and had a considerable effect over the past decade or so.

Less-well publicised defenders of faith are in turn engaged in apologetics.

Some are, in an academic sense, extremely well-qualified to reach judgments about religion but, like their adversaries, they appear well 'dug in'. Both sides, akin to squabbling politicians at the despatch box, attack and defend thereby polarising debate and perception in the public arena, where they seek our support. What is needed in current discussion and reflection about religion is a more disinterested intent and a keener desire to understand rather than conclude on the part of all those so engaged.

Amid all this, the world is not becoming less religious. Even in parts of the world heavily dominated by a particular religion, contact with and awareness of other religions is growing, alongside the forces of globalisation and digital media. Religious multi-cultures on all scales, up to and including the global, are becoming the norm.

The Western media in its routine coverage often pours scorn upon religion, especially on Islam. News items about Islam for example select and highlight militancy and extremism, however unrepresentative this is of the religion as a whole. This often leads to division and mistrust within and between communities, thereby undermining some of the best community and educational work that has helped build creative and collaborative multi-cultures across the planet. This type of negative journalism does not need censoring, but rather vigorous, well-publicised critique and debate.

There clearly is cause for alarm, but also for analysis, as we consider how sources of militancy, terrorism, misogyny and oppression of the worst kinds are sometimes more and sometimes less reflective of religious faith. I am concerned that in our understanding of these things we get the right culprit(s) because if we don't, not only are we responsible for a gross injustice, but the real culprits will remain at large. Mistaken judgments about religion can do real harm. If, as Christopher Hitchens maintains, 'religion poisons everything', we need to know that. Equally, if it does not, with the potent forms of harm lying elsewhere - for example in extreme forms of nationalism - then we need to be alerted to that too. If we can be accurate about the dangers we can be best prepared for them.

Happily, religion has been and continues to be studied with academic rigour in many quarters', and such study can significantly eschew prejudice, but these points are insufficiently appreciated. There has never been a more

important time to understand religion and to apply this understanding.

In the light of these remarks, my overall approach to understanding and evaluating religion will seek to bring together the various voices of believers, of the victims of religion and of academic experts of various kinds into a form of dialogue that is at once about interrogating both the evidence and the arguments, while also being open-minded to the variety of conclusions that after careful consideration remain available.

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Introduction: How Can We Judge Religion?

Making judgments is part of the routine of life: whether we're thinking about what to buy at the supermarket or how to budget for the month, we can hardly escape making these sorts of judgment. On a wider scale, judgments frame our life. We make choices about a career, a partner, somewhere to live and work, yet despite the magnitude of these decisions, they are often accompanied by a sense that time is pressing. We don't quite manage to weigh up all the pros and cons, we make our decisions on the hoof. The philosopher Martin Heidegger described this life situation or condition as a 'living unto death'. We can't take in all the relevant information all the time and yet we had better get on with it, whatever it is, because both it and we will not wait forever. Yet 'getting it right', making the correct judgments, is all the more important exactly because life is not a dress rehearsal. Life is now and we don't get a second chance.⁴

Many feel so overwhelmed with all of this within their own lives that making judgments about politics or religion is more than their life is worth. Others regard religion as enough of an existential threat to press for

its immediate public appraisal where, as far as they are concerned, it can be condemned for all to see and for all to benefit. If, as many of the new atheists believe, religion is a serious moral hazard, we had better sit up and take note. It might inform who we choose as a partner or friend, how we bring up our children and where we send them to school and the sort of schools we wish to see founded and closed. It will also affect how we view history and the sort of future we want for ourselves and the world.

This book will refer in a number of places to the views of some of the new atheists, since they offer so much by way of critique of religion. However, its focus is religion, not the new atheism which has been discussed at length elsewhere. I shall look most especially at an ethical appraisal of faiths, and while I mention a number of religions, my attention will be directed mainly towards the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as they are practised today. I shall identify some sample perspectives and issues that begin to indicate the scope of what is to be evaluated. An ethical appraisal of Islam will form a case study within our discussion, since it is at the heart of so much on-going dispute and debate. Islam is also important because, according to some estimates, such as the findings of the Pew Research Center, the Muslim population of Western Europe including the UK is projected to grow steadily within the coming decades.³

To achieve all this, three preliminary issues need to be addressed. First, what do we mean by religion? What is it we are making judgments about? Second, because this book focuses on ethical judgments of religion in particular, we need to ask what is an ethical judgment and how it differs from any other sort of judgment. I shall also consider what is the purpose of an ethical judgment. Third, what is the status of an ethical judgment? Is such a judgment valid for all times and places; or are ethical judgments merely applicable to the time and place, culture and religion from which they originate? Towards the end of the chapter I shall suggest further options as to how ethical evaluations of religion can best proceed, that see certain types of dialogue, what I shall call a 'way of dialogue', as being at the heart of the process.

Preliminaries

What is religion?

Judging religion in an ethical or any other sense cannot begin unless we have an understanding of what religion is. This first preliminary consideration, though, presents immediate difficulties. For example, in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence*, the theologian William Cavanaugh argues that we cannot define religion in a way that satisfactorily separates it from secular ideology and practice. On this basis he claims that we cannot therefore consistently distinguish between religious and secular violence. As such, judgments about religion can also at times be considered to be judgments about nationalisms and political ideologies such as Marxism. According to this reasoning, there are many circumstances in which we are unable to say that it is religion that is to be praised or blamed rather than some form of political ideology. To reach these conclusions, Cavanaugh contends that definitions of religion that are *substantive*, focusing on the *substance* of belief or practice, fail. For example, to define religion as, among other things, involving belief in God, excludes most of Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto and Confucianism, which don't generally share this belief. Yet these practices are usually referred to as religions. On the other hand, more inclusive definitions of religion that define it as involving a belief in the transcendent carry the opposite difficulty of including too much. For example, some ethnic nationalisms, with their beliefs in imagined communities; and forms of Marxism with beliefs about historical determinism and a future communist destiny, both hold onto a form of non-empirical truth about the way things are.

If, by contrast, religion is defined *functionally*, in terms of what it does, by reference that is to its role in the lives of people and communities, then its peculiarity in relation to other things begins to fade. For example, if religion is more about *how* people believe than *what* they believe, then it is hard to see why football doesn't count as a religion in some respects. As Bill Shankly, manager of Liverpool FC in the 1970s remarked, 'Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.' In a functionalist sense, football offers communities a sense of belonging, a kinship and an identity, all

brought together through commitments that can reasonably be described as forms of devotion. Yet this doesn't seem right either; football is not generally viewed to be a religion.

The word 'religion' is problematic. Its meaning is an on-going subject of dispute among philosophers and sociologists of religion. For example, some scholars have written their beliefs into their definitions of religion. Nineteenth century philologist and orientalist Max Müller saw religion to be 'a disposition that enables men to apprehend the Infinite under different names and disguises'.⁶ Both non-believers and less liberal forms of believer would reasonably object to Müller's definition as it violates their beliefs by assuming on the one hand the existence of 'the Infinite' and on the other that the Infinite can be variously apprehended. A further difficulty about defining religion is that what 'religion' refers to or denotes can also be a political issue, as when someone defending their faith protests that a terrorist attack was not carried out by members of their religion, 'they're not true believers if they do that, whatever they say'; or when the Chinese communist authorities refuse to accept Taoism or Confucianism as religions; or again as the Indian BJP government refuses to accept Hinduism as a religion, claiming that the concept is a colonial imposition.

Before we despair altogether, though, about being able to understand the word 'religion', it is also clear that people are not constantly at cross purposes in using the word for all that it remains contested, otherwise a meaningful conversation about religion could never take place. And yet, such conversations do take place, all the time.

With this thought in mind an alternative approach to understanding religion is to move away from seeking a precise definition of the term. The philosopher John Hick has offered what has become known as a family resemblances approach to understanding the word 'religion'.⁷ The focus in this approach is on the use of the word 'religion', on what it refers to (its referent) rather than on its meaning or dictionary definition. Hick suggests that if we look at how people use the word 'religion' today, it is part of a dialogue of understanding. For example, religious and non-religious people might at times use the word differently, but usually not so differently that they fail to be able to hold a conversation on the subject. In this way the use

of the word 'religion' can be said to follow an implied set of rules organised around a variety of characteristics that religions may be said to have or to lack, to a lesser or greater extent. Examples of such characteristics include: beliefs and myths about the origin and meaning of the cosmos and humanity, beliefs about destiny including life after death; a system of values and ethics; a set of ritual practices like prayer, meditation, rites of passage, festivals and pilgrimage; institutions and communities that regulate such practices and beliefs, and that refer to forms of authority such as founders, messengers, texts and very often a God, along with a theory and practice of liberation or ultimate salvation (known as a soteriology). Further characteristics include being engaged with ultimate concerns and commitments that trump all other considerations, a system of law and an expressive dimension in art, literature, music and architecture.

Two points should be made about this set of characteristics. They are descriptive, not evaluative. The more we write into the characteristics of religion ethical or cognitive evaluations of it - for example in the way that Müller in his definition implied that there is 'an Infinite' - the more people will be talking at cross-purposes about what they mean. For this reason, it is best to avoid evaluations of religion within definitions of it. Including evaluations in this way begs questions about the appraisal of religion that this book seeks to address. The other important point being made about the characteristics of religion offered is that not all religions will necessarily have any one attribute in common, although quite a lot of these features will be found in most religions. In this way, like a set of family resemblances, we come to use the word 'religion' in a way that is identifiable and accurate without being precisely definable. The list of characteristics includes many substantive features (such as a set of ritual practices) alongside functional ones (such as engagement with ultimate concerns).

This kind of approach to understanding words and phrases like 'religion' and 'political ideology' means that while they are not hermetically sealed in separate boxes, they are still distinguishable to a fair extent. Marxism for example - for all its this-worldly theory of liberation; its sense of destiny unfolding within the historical process; and its civic rituals paying due respect to some of its founders and leaders - still lacks a number of very widespread

substantive characteristics of religion, including belief in an afterlife and belief in a God alongside notions of cosmic meaning and origin. It therefore doesn't qualify as a religion to anything like the same degree as, say, Islam, Christianity or even Buddhism. The same can be said of political ideologies such as nationalism, and even more so as regards supporting a football team, which can be said to lack most of the substantive characteristics of religion, short of a highly interpretative account of them.

Of course, there are blends of politics and religion, as we shall see for example in certain forms of Islamism, but the kind of characteristics that we have identified here will help us, even in such cases, to pick out when and where religious factors are broadly at work, and where other factors are more salient. The substantive features of religion are particularly helpful in distinguishing it from political ideology. In this way, problems of understanding what is being referred to by 'religion' as distinct from other things can be largely overcome.

So, the word 'religion' does have meaning, despite evading a precise definition that fits all instances of its use. We can meaningfully apply it to the phenomena we call Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism for example. Each of these faiths is characterised by the vast majority, if not all, of the features we listed above. I would agree with Cavanaugh that the word as it is often used today stems from the Reformation and the early modern period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when special focus on specific beliefs as distinct from others came to the fore in the Christian West. In this sense, 'religion' is broadly a modern category or lens through which Western scholars in particular have come to see the world. Nevertheless, it is not, for all of this, a fiction. That would raise too many questions about why the word 'religion' and its cognates have come to be used and continue to be used not just in the West but worldwide alongside very similar words in many other languages. 'Religion' is not a fiction in the minds of radical atheists, nor in the minds of believers from a wide variety of traditions, nor in the minds of the general public, nor in the minds of many Religious Studies scholars.⁴ Good judgments, however, begin with specifics, and I have sought to be specific throughout the book by referring to particular religious practices, attitudes and contexts. We shall also see that lines of reasoning

weaken the more they build up from specifics towards generalisations about whole religions and 'religion' as a whole.

What is an ethical judgment and what is its purpose?

A second preliminary issue is to do with the nature of judgments. Judgments can be about facts, for example the date of the battle of Hastings or Jesus's birth. By contrast, judgments can also be about values, including moral values, for example about whether cannibalism or assisted suicide can ever be right. Assessing these two types of judgment involves different procedures. Judgments about, say, historical facts can in principle be confirmed by historical investigation and evidence. Value judgments, including moral judgments, by contrast involve appraisals about 'the good life' or 'the good society' or some other measure for assessing how we know the good. Many critics of religion want to make both types of judgment about it; they want to critique its claims both about what is true and also what is good. We shall be focused on the second issue, but we shall occasionally touch on the first, because to be committed to the good would appear to imply, all other things being equal, being committed to the truth as well.

A further point about judgment is that it can have many purposes. I shall seek to be accurate and fair in my observations and in my selection of institutions, scholars and victims of religion as I discuss the evaluations being made. All the same, I shall want to draw particular attention at times to some of the moral failings of faiths, because religions in various ways and for a variety of reasons see themselves very often as key generators of morality, offering a vision of the good. In this sense I want to track down evidence while also engaging with questions about how religions can morally improve. There is tension between these two objectives within ethical judgment, that of being fair and that of seeking improvement. Still, I believe that for ethical reasons we can't really let go of either goal.

There will be those who ask 'who am I to ethically evaluate religion?' I don't regard myself as having a more privileged position than the reader in this regard. I believe we can all make our contributions and this leads on to the issue of the status or validity of ethical appraisals of faiths. In what respect can we know that we are right in our ethical judgments or what does 'being right' in our judgments mean?