

VARIED MEANINGS of 'RELIGION'

University of Omaha Alumni 4/18/60

Rabbi Sidney H Brooks
Temple Israel
Omaha NE 68132

Invited by virtue or my class in Comp. Rel.
Will pose now questions rather than answer
In ~~xxx~~ class I learned: variety of
religions, emotional response to the
contradictory elements in same rel.

Some, I hope, went away with appreciation
for these facts.

But many: confused, some: resented the
complexity in religion which we are willing
to accept in other fields but not in
religion.

The dogmatic, absolutism, creedal certainty
and authoritarianism of traditional religion
leads inevitably to a view of religion
that admits of no diversity.

Two forms: 1 a religion which flatly states
it has all the answers and is
the one true universal church

2. The kind of liberalism which
begs the question by saying:
after all, all religions are
basically the same, all have
similar ethics or "we're all
going to the same place."

Tonite I want to convince you, if I can,
that this isn't so; nothing further from
the truth. Word "religion" describes an
infinite variety of formal and informal
philosophies and ideas; it is used and mis-
used to mean many different and contra-
dictory views of life, its purposes and
goals.

by dissonance

Let me just give you some suggestion of what I mean in various categories of meaning attached to the word "religion".

First let us talk about ACADEMIC meanings

No end to academic definitions of rel.

Most commonly: identified with deity

or deities outside powers

True of most religions of which we think.

Near Eastern or "revealed".

Still: term "rel" has been applied to

Taoism, Jainism, Buddhism,

Positivism, Humanism, Ethical Culture

in which deity is denied or ignored.

Sometimes: even to Communism.

Even if we admit rel refers only to theistic forms: variety of beliefs about deity.

Range from capricious and humanly vulnerable gods of mythology to the God of justice of Amos or the God of love of Hosea or the God of the universe of II Isaiah.

God for the Hindu is a great world spirit abstract and beyond personal relationships. For the Christian. God became MAN exhibiting a concern for personal redemption quite unequalled elsewhere.

God is talked about in some religions as "totally other". In some: like our Bible frequently anthropomorphized. Opposite to these a Maimonides deemed it heretical to say anything specific about God at all.

Besides God-concept other diversities:

Catholicism & Orthodox Judaism --ritualistic

Quakers: almost devoid of ritual

Catholicism & Anglican : hierarchy

Judaism: no hierarchy

Religions of ~~riches~~ celibacy & fertility
much folklore and some with n
some: emphasize joy: others sadness

Some emphasize faith healing. Others:
devoted to scientific medical research.

In some ways: religion fostered knowledge
In others : hampered knowledge.

And this: Religion for centuries antagonized
science. Religion fostered art
But there is no conflict between
science and art!

Many examples of religion expressed thru
large public gatherings. But some religion
prefers seclusion.

There is inwardness and extroversion. And what
is the common denominator between the mystic
in any of a dozen religions and the modern
cleric who out of religious conviction
mediates a steel strike?

Some religions like most Christian sects
have well defined creeds. Others like Judaism
or many eastern religions have none.

Even the ethical codes displays marvelous
variety: Dancing, card playing, intoxicants,
riding in automobiles and the wearing of
buttons have been prohibited by many rel's.

Some champion celibacy and others condemned it
Some preach absolute opposition to war and
some religions have sanctified war.

Most religions believe that the distinction
between right and wrong are absolute.
But the prophet Isaiah and the Sermon on the
Mount glimpse ethical relativity.

Both mutualism and rivalism find their exponents in religions.

Where rel. talks ~~about~~ about benevolence, patience, forgiveness, love, non-retaliation reverence for human personality: mutualism. But rel. also: punishment, excommunication, damnation, regimentation : rivalistic.

Both the American Friends Service Committee and the Spanish Inquisition fall within the area of religious expression.

Religious representatives have ostracized, harassed and tortured. They have also sacrificed for peace, relieved the distressed, comforted and encouraged.

This recital could be lengthened quite a bit. But as I talk I'm sure many of you are reacting with value judgements of your own. You reject and accept the alternatives in religion as I talk about them. This leads me to the second category of meanings in the term religion. i.e.

the EMOTIONAL.

A common principles; many things we can accept intellectually but not emotionally Same true of religion. We will react to the word largely in terms of our emotional experience: For some "religion" means suffering and abuse and obscuractism. For ~~to~~ others : comfort, enlightenment, the highest and best hopes of men.

Even within a single faith: emotional responses can color the word religion with vastly different shades of meaning.

Had the theology about is not the

Emotional reaction shown in -5-
curious ways.

I am often criticized for failing to visit in a hospital. But I've also been turned back from a hospital room for fear of disturbing the patient.

Many things which have nothing to do with the academic definition of religion have been "religionized" only because emotional preference has been so strong: use of the organ in a Jewish Reform Temple, pacificism, cradle roll and memorial prayers. Indeed every practice adopted by someone, sometime.

Opposite also true. Many things because of emotional preference, feelings and conviction taken away from religion which were once dominant in religions: medicine,
education
arts
polgymay

Some may object to my use of the word emotional. Let's say then that what is "important" to the individual becomes religionized.

So today in any religion, yours or mine, we choose emphases that help us dramatize and express what we think is important.

Ritual vs. ethical action.
This world vs. the next.
comfort now vs. salvation later.
Institutions vs. private ethical code.

This brings me to another category, minor to be sure, but a particular class of meanings associated currently with religion.

POLITICAL meanings:

East -west conflict. Communism atheistic.
ERGO: democracy: RELIGIOUS.

Even at cost of compromising our separation of church and state we seek the label "religion".

Pledge to flag "under God".

On bills and coins: "In God we Trust"

Talk about religion in political speeches.

Increased affiliation for reasons of identify, not inherent value and conviction.

Mr. K. recently said that there was much in X with which he would agree but if someone smites him on the cheek he would not turn the other but would knock his head off.

Many would agree. But Mr. K said it and ergo we resent it. Just as religion is not one category neither is X or any other religion. Elements we chose in each.

Finally: Practical meanings of religion.

~~Each element in it~~
Can religion save us? *Answer depends on the meaning we attach to rel*
What in religion? Obscurantism, superiority, mysticism, rejection of science. NO.

request for either rels.
Human worth, social justice, equality, peace, values of our possessions yes.

Above all: the kind of religion that *will do most good* asks proper questions rather than offering final and absolute answers.