

## WHAT IS RELIGION?

BY FLETCHER HARPER SWIFT

WHAT is religion? To assert, as has been frequently done, that religion is life, is not to define it. With equal accuracy and truth might it be asserted that labor, grief or education is life, yet, no one would consider such assertions definitions. Many attempts have been made to define religion in terms of its historical, anthropological or philological origin. Some of these definitions have become classic, few are adequate. Cicero, nearly a hundred years before Christ (77 B. C.), wrote: *Qui omnia quae ad cultum deorum pertinerent diligenter retractarent tamquam relegerent, religiosi ex relegendo dicti sunt.* (Men were called religious, from *relegere*, because they reconsidered carefully, and as it were, went over in thought all that appertained to the worship of the gods.)<sup>1</sup> A perhaps more general view, and one accepted by Lactantius, Servius, and St. Augustine, traces the origin to *religere* (to bind) and considers that the essence of the underlying idea is that of "an obligation by which man is bound to an invisible God."<sup>2</sup>

The complexity of religion as it appears today amid a multiplicity of rites, ceremonies, creeds and beliefs, has led many in their efforts to define it, to go to an earlier and simpler stage. What was religion at its birth. If this can be determined, it would seem reasonable to hope to explain its fundamental character, meaning and significance. Is religion an instinct imbedded alike in the physical and spiritual nature of man, or is it the offspring of ignorance and fear. Is the race nature eternally, incurably inoculated with religion, or is religion an appendage useful, even necessary, in earlier stages but something to be sluffed off in a later stage when philosophy sum-

<sup>1</sup>*De Deorum Natura*, II, 28.

<sup>2</sup>Liddon, Henry Parry. *Some Elements of Religion*, Lecture I, 19 and footnotes 2 and 3.

moned by the race in its hour of dire need, as Joseph by Pharaoh, has interpreted the fearbearing vision, and science has shown how the tricks of nature may be forestalled.

Philologist, historian, philosopher, anthropologist, and theologian, each in turn has undertaken to approach a definition of religion by solving the mystery of its origin. Hegel found this origin in magic; Herbert Spencer in the worship of the dead; Crawley in instinct: anthropologists in animism.

Definitions of religion have been ever more numerous than the hypotheses concerning its origin; Max Muller in his *Natural Religion* writes: "Religion consists in the perception of the infinite under such manifestations as are able to influence the moral character of man."<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Newman, 1870, in his *Grammar of Assent*, defined religion as "the knowledge of God, of His will, and of our duties toward Him."<sup>4</sup> This definition fails to include religious emotions and acts which are perhaps ever more fundamental in religion than knowledge. On similar grounds of inadequacy must be rejected Matthew Arnold's definition that "religion. . . . is ethics heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the premise implied in this definition that religion is an outgrowth of ethics is insupportable from every standpoint.

No one has done more to furnish the material for the basis of a broad definition of religion than the anthropologists. The two definitions formulated by Tylor and Frazer attracted wide attention and have been much discussed. However, Tylor's definition of religion as "the belief in spiritual beings,"<sup>6</sup> ignores the fundamental element in primitive religion, namely, ritual, and Frazer's definition of religion as "A propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to men which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life,"<sup>7</sup> tho superior to Tylor's in that it recognizes the essential element in religion, namely worship, nevertheless is defective in its assumption that the powers worshipped are always regarded as personal and as superior to man.

<sup>3</sup>Muller, Max *Natural Religion*, 1899. p. 188.

<sup>4</sup>Newman, J. H. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, p. 378.

<sup>5</sup>Arnold, Matthew, *Literature and Dogma, An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>6</sup>Tylor, E. B., *Primitive Culture*, Vol. I, p. 424.

<sup>7</sup>Frazer, J. G., *The Golden Bough*, 1911, 3rd edition, Vol. I, p. 222.

Whoever would attempt to answer today the question: "What is religion," must view religion as a continuous element in human experience. His conception of religion and his definition must be broad enough to include religion in its earliest and most primitive as well as in its latest and highest forms of expression; the paroxysms of the devil-dancer are as much his concern as the fastings of the Christian saint. Such a conception must include not merely rites, sacrifices, but thoughts, emotions and deeds.

What is it that distinguishes a religious emotion, thought, or act from one which is not religious. What makes the washing of hands or of feet, marking an earthen jar with a cross, religious acts or merely hygienic or artistic acts. Is not the test in each and every case a subjective one, namely, whether or not there enters into the emotion, thought, or act, some element or recognition of a power worshipped or regarded as sacred. Moreover, is not the extent to which any such emotion, thought, or act is religious, determined by the degree to which this element of worshipful recognition enters into it or dominates it. On what other ground was it that, when the pious monk, who, before he forsook the world, had been a professional dancer, stole secretly into the sanctuary and danced before the shrine of the Virgin, the act which, at one time, had been a profane act was accepted and rewarded as a religious act. In like manner, (and many sermons have been preached on this theme) any act, no matter how sacred, ceases to be religious the moment the attitude of those performing it ceases to embody this religious element: more than this, it may become impious. Saint Paul declared that whoever partook of the Lord's supper, the holiest of all sacraments, in a state unacceptable to God, became thereby "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

In its most advanced as well as in its most primitive form of expression, it is the subjective or inner attitude and state of the individual or group which determines whether any feeling, thought, or act is, becomes, continues, or ceases to be religious. An aesthete hangs on his study wall a cross and keeps a lamp burning beneath it day and night. If he does this simply to display the cross as a work of art or as a memento of a trip to Rome, his act has no religious value, and in truth, it may shock his deeply religious friend. On the other hand, if his motive is religious, the act is religious also.

<sup>8</sup>I Corinthians, xi. 27.

Marett, who approaches the subject from this point of view, writes: "We define then, the religious object as the sacred, and the corresponding religious attitude as consisting in such manifestation of feeling, thought, and action in regard to the sacred as is held to conduce to the welfare of the community or to that of individuals considered as members of the community." With these facts in mind, religion may perhaps be defined more briefly as consisting of any and all responses whatsoever, believed to be beneficial, made by an individual or a group in recognition of a power or powers worshipped.