

Robert Crotty

The Christian Survivor

How Roman Christianity Defeated Its
Early Competitors

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Introduction

There have been a number of books, written in the past few decades, that have aroused a new interest in the history of early Christianity. Some have dealt with the origins of Christianity (with Christianity usually defined as a Jewish sect), the biographies of main characters and the historical reliability (or unreliability) of the Christian writings. Further, interest has focussed on the spread of Christianity from Jesus to its establishment first in Palestine and then to its entry into Asia Minor, Greece and finally Rome. In many ways, this sort of book followed the trajectory presented in the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume appended to the Gospel of Luke, although both parts were probably not written by the same author. Acts traces the outward movement of Christianity from Jerusalem to Judaea to Samaria and then to the ‘ends of the earth’, by which was meant Rome and its Empire.

Certainly, when in the fourth century CE the renowned Church historian Eusebius wrote his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, this was the outline he followed. For him, Church history moved seamlessly from Jesus via the Twelve Apostles outwards to Rome and then rose to its highpoint during the reign of Eusebius’ master and sponsor, Constantine the Great, the fourth century CE Emperor. Most ‘Early Church Histories’, even up the present time, follow this template adding references and explanation together with archaeological and geographical details.

Some of these books on early Christianity have limited their scope to the first generation of Jesus and his followers. This is typical of the literary genre called the ‘Third Search for the Historical Jesus’. Highly reputable scholars have attempted to do what earlier counterparts had failed to do and to produce an historically acceptable Jesus of Nazareth. This historical construction, ambitiously including actual words spoken by Jesus, would then, purportedly, explain the complexities of gospel teachings. From this historical Jesus, the spread of Christianity could be gauged in a logical manner. However, the latter description of a spread would depend on the historical identification of Jesus.

Semi-popular texts have flourished on the outskirts of the Third Search for the Historical Jesus. These texts were not all written by biblical experts, and some made elementary mistakes. They tended to bring the debate on the historical Jesus down to a simple formula: Is it easier to believe the orthodox version of Christianity

(‘Jesus was both human and divine, worked miracles, healed people, walked on water, changed water into wine, was crucified, came out of the tomb and ascended into heaven’) or a version along the following lines proposed by some of the Third Searchers (‘Jesus was a man of royal Davidic lineage, married Mary Magdalene, had children, was crucified but managed to escape from death, retreated to France with his family (or the family emigrated without him) and the secret of the royal bloodline continues in the line of French royalty even today’). Many readers opted for version two. It was more believable, and there was the intriguing trace of a conspiracy theory that added mystery.

But it has to be said that it is not so easy to interpret the gospel stories with the confidence exhibited by some of these Jesus Research scholars so that they can thereby extract history from the gospels. We will see that the gospels were never intended to be historical statements and the methods of these scholars are often not well founded. We can outline three central points in this discussion of a Jesus-Tradition.

First of all, after the death of Jesus, what did exist was a Jesus-Tradition. This Jesus-Tradition would have only gradually reached any sort of regular shape; it would have been expanded, corrected and amended over time after the death of Jesus. This would have taken decades. It would seem that the earliest followers of Jesus incorporated only pivotal Jesus events, elaborated as the years passed, in their first formulations of the Jesus-Tradition: his Last Meal, his death by crucifixion, his Visions to disciples after his death. Further details would have been supplied to fill out the sparse catalogue of events particularly by reflection on the Hebrew Scriptures’ prophecies and thought-patterns (e.g. the Virgin Birth, the details of the crucifixion taken from the Psalms and Isaiah).¹ The belief that the Jesus events had been foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures was a very early presumption and the basis for this methodology.

Second, there would have been input into the narratives of the Jesus events by comparing those events with much later communities and their troubles. It was presumed that the events of Jesus were a paradigm for what would follow for his disciples. This produced the memory of Jesus sayings: some remembered with all the faults of memory, some constructed on the idea of ‘what Jesus might have said, had he been confronted with this situation’. At some stage, there would have been

¹The collection or canon of Hebrew Scriptures contains, in its present layout, three major sections.

1. The first section is usually called the *Torah* (its Hebrew title, usually translated as ‘Law’) or the Pentateuch (which means ‘five scrolls’ or a ‘five-part book’ in Greek). These five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
2. The second section of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Nevi'im* or Prophets, includes the following books: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and The Twelve Prophets. Not all of these would pass muster for what we commonly understand as ‘prophetic’ books.
3. The third section of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Kethuvim* or Writings, includes the following books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

the gathering of such sayings of Jesus (such as the early Greek text of sayings attributed to the apostle Thomas, various collections of parables and teaching metaphors) and the collection of ‘events’ such as miracle stories, cures, exorcisms.

These sayings and events would have developed within a catechetical and kerygmatic life situation of the early Jesus-movements, where there was a need to instruct both newcomers and more mature members. Some of these collections may have been oral, perhaps diligently remembered by memory strategies, and some written.

Third, the sayings and events of the Jesus-Tradition began to take on a more fixed form, both in oral tradition and in writing. Such amorphous compendia of traditions, oral and written, constituted a more identifiable Jesus-Tradition, and we can identify certain elements in it:

- A pool of Jesus sayings, formed from a number of separate collections
- The sayings in the Greek Gospel of Thomas
- Birth stories of Jesus
- Collections of Jesus’ miracle stories
- Passion, death and burial Stories of Jesus
- Visions of Jesus after his death; empty tomb stories would have been later appended.

Not all of these would have existed side by side in any one place or time. Not all of them would have had the same format. They would have been a large and growing tradition about Jesus’ sayings and narratives concerning the events of his life, which would have tended to move further and further away from what we would call history or *ipsissima verba*.

The contention underlying this book is that Christianity was founded not on historical evidence or eyewitness reports but on these loosely arranged traditions, making up as they did the Jesus-Tradition in separate but related collections. Accordingly, different groups received, interpreted and manipulated different collections after the time of Jesus’ death. They had been stimulated by the traditions about the events of his life and, to a varying extent, by the stories of his death and resurrection as well as the sayings related to him, to formulate written statements which defined their attitude to him.

We can name these separate groups as Jesus-movements. There were a number that flourished, as we will see, in Palestine. But this book is more interested in the Roman Jesus-movement. At a much earlier date than other Jesus-movement groups, it detached itself from Judaism and, by the end of the first century CE, it saw itself as ‘Christian’, separate from Judaism and acknowledged as separate by other Jews and by the Roman authorities.

Roman Christianity, due to extraordinary historical changes in the Mediterranean world, was able to compete with Greek, Asia Minor and even Palestinian Jesus-movement groups, and it would have enormous influence on earlier extant forms of the Jesus-movement. By the fourth century CE, Roman Christianity had become the one survivor and thereby the victor, the dominant variant of all

Jesus-movement groups. It superimposed itself over all the other Jesus-movements. Its Jesus-Tradition was the official Christian Jesus-Tradition.

Most Christian groups in the world at the present moment are Roman Christian in their thought and practice. Their teachings do have some differences, but they are variants on Roman Christianity; there are differences in Christian ritual, but they are variants of the ritual deriving from the community established in Rome in the first century CE. Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Reformed Churches and Pentecostal Churches (including outliers such as Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses) are linked in following the main direction of the Roman Church after it was established by the time of Constantine. When people today refer to the 'original' Christian teaching and practice, they are referring to the Roman Jesus-Tradition.

This book will endeavour to chart the emergence of Christianity as it was formed, first of all, by a conglomeration of Jesus-movement groups and a sect of Judaism. Then, it will look at its Palestinian forms, its Asia Minor and Greek forms and finally the Roman Christian variant. At that point, this book will record what happened when history reversed direction West to East. The Roman Empire became the world leader and Roman Christianity, having originally derived from the East, returned to the East and overran the Palestinian and other forms. Only Roman Christianity was left standing.

What value does this enterprise have? For a long time, the inhabitants of Planet Earth saw themselves as the centre of the universe. Then, Copernicus and Galileo showed that this was not the case. The Earth was a lowly planet revolving around the Sun in a solar system, and in more recent times and more recently, it has become common knowledge that the solar system is only one of perhaps billions of similar galaxies. For a long time, the human inhabitants of Earth saw themselves as the high point of life on the Planet Earth. The lower forms of life—microscopic, plant, animal—existed to service human life. Charles Darwin demonstrated that this was not the case. Human life had taken the same evolutionary trail as all other forms of living things on Earth. The journey was defined by evolution, the change in the heritable traits of biological populations over successive generations due to natural selection. It was more accident than design that brought humans to dominate the planet.

Having advanced beyond the idea that the Earth is the centre of the universe and that humans are the appointed species to dominate the world, we find that, for a long time, Christians have presumed that their religion, and usually their own variant of Christianity, is the one, true faith. This book will explain that the 'Christianity' that we have today has not been the sole contender for the title of 'Christian religion'. There are many Christianities of which one has survived; beyond Christianity, there are many other valid religions.

In short, the Earth is not the centre of the entire universe, humankind is not the sacrosanct pinnacle of living beings, and Christianity is not the definitive and final form of religion.

Notes

The text for Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* can be found in:

Henderson, J. (1932), *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press: Cambridge and London.

Further information on the Search for an Historical Jesus is provided in Chap. 3.

The text used in this book will be normally the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). However, on occasions, the NRSV has been edited to highlight any significant words by using upper case and, in a few instances, by amending the translation where it is felt that the translation of the Greek has been betrayed. What are considered expansions (additions, corrections, explanations) to the original text have been indicated by the use of italics. Wherever a literary structure is indicated within the text by means of headings, letters and numbers or layout, this is done to allow the reader to see the text in the way in which the author/editor intended.

Chapter 1

What Really Is Religion?

We have already introduced the notion of religion. We have claimed, without offering proof as yet, that Christianity should not be viewed as the exclusive religion among humans. In order to put some order into this discussion of religion in general and Roman Christianity in particular, we must be sure that we are speaking about the same thing when we mention ‘religion’.

What follows are some ideas about religion in general. They will apply in this book particularly to Judaism, Christianity and Roman Religion.

Students of early Christianity, often committed themselves to Christianity, naturally begin their discourse with Jesus the Nazarene, his life and sayings. Their principal sources are the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.¹ We have four official gospel accounts that would, on the surface, purport to give these students a biography of Jesus. The firmly established biography has then been used to shore up teachings and practice in Christian churches. There have been growing doubts, for a long time, as to whether that was the purpose of gospels. There is a serious need, and

¹The ‘authors’ of the Christian gospels were only identified long after the writings had been circulated. There is very little evidence to identify any one of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John as authors of the gospels apportioned to them. That identification was done only a century or two after their writing. In fact, as we will see, there is every reason to believe that many hands were at work in the writing of any of the gospels.

For convenience, we will follow the convention of speaking of the gospels as ‘Matthew’, ‘Mark’, ‘Luke’ and ‘John’, without at all intending to identify these four names as the names of the authors.

there has been for a long time a serious need, to find how the documents of the Christian Scriptures should be interpreted and what methodology should be used.²

But it is dangerous to begin a study at this mid-point. We must first clarify what is meant by the term ‘religion’ before applying ourselves to religious phenomena. We will begin an explanation with the human genome and human culture.

1.1 Culture

Unlike other animals, who are born with ready-made instincts, the human genome has innate propensities only. Broadly, the propensities are directed to ensuring that the human finds meaning and direction in the social and natural environment. But the propensities are not detailed. For example, any human (who is not brain-damaged) has the propensity to communicate by language (this is incorporated in the human genome by a specially developed part of the brain which relates to the peculiarly formed larynx and the human ability to create a large range of sounds). However, the propensity needs to be activated in more detail. Humans have the propensity to communicate, they need to be surrounded by a constructed language to speak English or whatever. This is effected by the genome coming into contact with human culture.

I understand culture to mean the total shared way of life of any given *Homo sapiens* group; substantially, culture is composed of that group’s modes of thinking, acting, feeling, valuing. Culture is both apprehended internally and expressed externally by a system of symbols.

Culture is a human fiction. It is not something static; it develops and adapts, just as the human group, within which it has its being, develops and adapts to a changing physical environment. The development and adaptation of a culture and the development and adaptation of its attendant human group are not separate issues. Without human beings there could be no culture; development and adaptation of culture and humans must happen synchronically.

The very notion of being human requires being programmed by culture. While other animal species, to a large extent, have their behavioural patterns predetermined by their genetic code or genome, the behaviour of human beings is regulated genetically to a far lesser extent. Humans are born with mostly blind propensities only.

²The Christian Scriptures had been gathered into a definitive and official collection, a canon, only by the end of the fourth century CE, twenty-seven books in all. These were composed of the following: the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the Acts of the Apostles, also attributed (mistakenly) to Luke; fourteen letters of Paul, although there was always doubt about his authorship of at least one of them (the Letter to the Hebrews) and today there is widespread agreement that only seven of the Letters were composed by Paul, while six are not from his hand; the Catholic letters, so-called because they were wrongly presumed to be not addressed to particular communities but to the universal (in Latin, *catholica*) Church—the letter of James, two letters of Peter, three letters of John, one letter of Jude; finally, the book of Revelation.

Why is there a need for culture? Humans must put a construction on those events in which they are involved and they do so by means of this very system of fictional symbols, a culture. They need to construct order; culture enables them to achieve order. What other animals achieve through genetically developed instinct, humans largely achieve—more extensively, with more variety and more efficiently—through culture. Culture gives direction and meaning to the human genome and its propensities.

Does this vital human culture exist in reality or only in the human mind? It would seem that there is a tendency for humans to situate culture ‘out there’, in what they would define as reality. It is natural, accordingly, for people to consider that their own particular culture is the ‘true’ culture, that their way of living is really real; it comes as a shock to realise that there are other humans of the same species who regard their own, different cultures equally as valid. There are many cultures, many cultural choices for humans. In short, cultures exist primarily in the mind.

1.2 Cultural Relativism

Hence, looking across the contemporary world we can review such different cultures as Chinese, Japanese, European, Aboriginal Australian—even granted that there are many variants within each of them. Looking back in time, we can reconstruct from texts and artefacts ancient Greek culture, ancient Mesopotamian culture, ancient Celtic culture. Are they comparable?

In the past, common, universal characteristics have been confidently identified as existing in all cultural systems. For instance, in the 1970s the well-known anthropologist Melville Spiro was able to identify ‘invariant dispositions and orientations’ which stemmed, he claimed, from ‘pan-human biological and cultural constants’ (1978: 330–360). He cited abhorrence of incest, rejection of murder and gregariousness as examples of these universal cultural traits. On the basis of ‘invariant dispositions and orientations’ he was able to postulate ‘a universal human nature’ as a base underlying all human cultures.

There are other scholars who hold that any such perception of a universal human nature is illusory. Every culture, the anthropologists maintain, is unique, formed within the parameters of the life experience and ecological habitat of a particular group and variously shaped by non-recurrent historical events. Each element of a culture can only be judged by what it contributes to the totality of that culture. A particular form of government (which is a cultural artefact), such as ancient Greek democracy, cannot meaningfully be compared to a similar form of democracy in another culture, such as Western democracy; each cultural element only has meaning within the total culture of its own group. Such complete cultural relativism has, of course, its own philosophical difficulties.

A variant, more moderate relativism has been proposed and deserves attention. The case could be put that while the behaviour patterns of animals are for the most part genetically determined and the genetic code orders their activity within a

narrow range of variation, human beings are genetically endowed with very general response propensities. These are not the cultural universals proposed above by Spiro and others as described above; they are propensities that allow humans to learn and to adapt within broad ranges of activity.

These would be similar to the list of ‘innate modules of the human mind’ identified by Pinker which he also calls ‘families of instincts’. Pinker writes specifically about language:

Language is a complex, specialized skill, which develops in the child spontaneously, without conscious effort or formal instruction, is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently. For these reasons some cognitive scientists have described language as a psychological faculty, a mental organ, a neural system, and a computational module. But I prefer the admittedly quaint term “instinct.” It conveys the idea that people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs. (1994: 18)

Perhaps this principle of culture controlling the actual language spoken, not the propensity to speak itself, can be applied to the whole of human development: the propensity is determined and controlled by biology; how this propensity will be activated and manifest itself will normally depend upon the culture into which the individual has been socialised.

However, a human being with propensities *simpliciter* would be an incomplete animal, uncontrollable; it is culture that completes the human being by activating these propensities in a number of quite specific ways.

Following this line of thought, culture would be ‘learned’ in a way analogous to language.

“Culture” refers to the process whereby particular kinds of learning contagiously spread from person to person in a group and minds become coordinated into shared patterns, just as “a language” or “a dialect” refers to the process whereby the different speakers in a group acquire highly similar mental grammars. (Pinker 1994: 411)

There is a fear that any form of relativism, including the moderate form I have described above, will constrain the observer to accept blindly everything proposed in an alien culture. ‘Everything’, opponents claim, might entail cannibalism, infanticide or female genital mutilation. Yet, what has been described is not determinism. Just as an individual is free to depart from the ‘rules’ of language and invent neologisms or even speak nonsense, so too the individual retains freedom and can depart from the ‘rules’ of culture, learned by ‘contagion’, more generally and so behave, think and value in a variant or even a nonsensical way.

In other words, moderate relativism does not require its followers to be uncritical of their own culture or even of alien cultures. However, in the case of alien cultures, care must be taken. For a critique of an alien culture to be valid, a cultural proposition must be evaluated within its own cultural framework and context, just as it would be critiqued spontaneously by its adherents within their own cultural parameters. When critiquing an alien culture, the canons of evidence and

epistemology proper to that particular cultural discourse need to be respected (Hanson 1979).

For example, the practice of female genital mutilation cannot be accepted or rejected on any absolutist grounds. It cannot be critiqued from the vantage point of a European culture. It can only be validly critiqued from within the total cultural context of the society in which it is practised. Multiculturalism would raise the question: can female genital mutilation, admittedly acceptable in a North African culture, be allowed in a Western space?

1.3 The Need for Order

What does culture, understood in the way proposed, offer to the human being? The human individual has a need for order. To make sense of the universe, self and others, the individual within the group requires a direction, a purpose, a sense of meaning. Genetics does not give meaning; it gives almost blind propensities. All cultural activity takes place in the context of the construction of a cultural 'world' of meanings. These constructed worlds, shaped according to perhaps significantly different configurations of values, power relationships and knowledge, achieve viability because they are supported by a group which, by its general acceptance, gives plausibility to such constructed worlds. The supportive group commits itself to its 'world' and defines its own roles and identities vis-à-vis it.

Culture, every culture, offers this advantage to its adherents. In order to find meaning and direction, individuals and groups must accept and then adapt themselves to this cultural heritage of a constructed world. When the group has achieved meaning and direction, it acts to retain its cultural heritage (so often seen as 'real' and 'out there') with the same tenacity as an individual displays in maintaining personal, physical life. Hence there is always an element of adherence and continuity in culture, together with a capacity to adapt and change.

It is the universal need for order (the most tenacious of all general propensities) together with other human propensities that give rise to the impression of so-called cultural traits or universals. However, the general propensities of the human group are activated and directed in different ways by a particular culture. Because of these two factors, propensities and diverse activation, there will be both similarity and diversity when any two human cultures are compared.

1.4 Culture Meets Genetics

We find that *Homo sapiens* is composed in the first place of the human genome, its physical charter made up of innate propensities. This genome then comes blindly and helplessly into the cultural environment, a culture that can change, be adapted,

be duplicated. What is the end result? There is an actuation between the genome and the culture which is intended to provide order in a real setting.

Sociality and ethics are values primarily constructed by the brain. Within a particular society living in a particular natural environment the human person learns ways of being social and ethical. They learn them by imitation, by developing habits of behaviour that reflect the common ways, by rationalisation or conscience. The human innately realises that natural catastrophes and scarcity of resources are not the only vulnerable dangers for the social structure. There is also social instability, conflict between members of the group and deliberate cheating by the few to the detriment of the others.

For order to be within the group there is the necessity to move from the general propensity to specific expressions. This requires some sort of actuation between genome and culture.

1.5 Culture and Religion

How can what has been said earlier about culture be applied to religion? Religiosity has been recognised recently as one of the transcultural human universals, an important, perhaps unique, propensity.³ However, *Homo sapiens* has moved through revolutionary changes.

The cognitive revolution began what we call history. It was an account of how *Homo sapiens*, with its innate brain wirings, came to develop into the superior species on Earth. But this revolution was succeeded by another about 12,000 BP, equally important—the Agricultural Revolution.

We are able to chart the Agricultural Revolution in the Middle East, China, Central America. It was not universal. It was marked mainly by the domestication of animals and crops for the service of *Homo sapiens*. The transfer of knowledge about what could be domesticated and how they could be domesticated led to increased food supply. It also led to population explosion and the establishment of strict class structures.

For the Agricultural Revolution to work, it required owners, and workers who were controlled by the former. How could this be justified? Discriminatory laws were introduced that limited the activity of both groups, but mainly the workers. The discriminatory laws then in turn led to poverty as a culture and lack of education beyond the work task assigned to them. All of this could be encapsulated in a mythical account of how society came to be in this shape. Humans had long told mythical stories which involved mysterious beings, places, times. These were now used to justify what was happening in the ordering of society.

Late in the Agricultural Revolution, about 3500–3000 BCE, the Sumerians first invented a system for storing and processing information outside of their brains.

³See Antweiler (2007), Brown (1991).

Writing was invented, both literary and mathematical. The Sumerian invention would soon be followed by Egypt. Written symbols could ensure that what was handed on by oral tradition could be recorded in a more substantial form for reference. As a reference point, writing could be used to stabilise large populations. Of great importance, it was the beginning of cities and empires consisting of *Homo sapiens*.

To maintain these social structures, intricate mythologies and accompanying rituals attempted to control fertility. The early gods, as parts of mythologies, were fertility gods. Sometimes they needed to be propitiated and rituals did just that. Hence, there was a need for sacrifice, the offering of vegetation, animals and even humans to the realm of the gods. Tribal gods and local gods would be subsumed in a pantheon, an unequal collection of gods.

It would seem that hominins conducted their lives up to the Agricultural Revolution without what we would call the trappings of conventional religion: no gods, no temples, no priests. However, within the more organised societies that marked the development of the Agricultural Revolution there was a need to establish compliance for behaviour that was deemed ethical and for knowledge of the mysterious. Elders and shamans were able to specify rationalisations and ensure that they were maintained. The same function could be attributed to an invisible god or gods, although gods were an optional addition.

More, it is being recognised that religiosity has biological roots which have facilitated its emergence and its persistence; there are deeply embedded neurocognitive mechanisms which would seem to predetermine religiosity; in short, religiosity can be defined as an evolutionary adaptation. Its constituent elements and its practice are biologically functional.

In order to explicate these claims further, human religiosity can be said to be made up of a special form of cognition, spirituality, group bonding, personal identity and communication within a group. We will take the constituents one by one. A rudimentary religious cognition, the developing propensity, is common to all young humans prior to the age of five. They attribute omniscience to their elders; they gradually understand that the set of knowledge they possess is not the same as that in the minds of others; they think teleologically; they think dualistically and are able to attribute mental states to dead humans and animal pets. Religious cognition is a natural and inevitable result of the cognitive mechanisms of the human brain.

This cognitive mechanism gives rise to spirituality, a mental state appropriated by religion, that involves contact with gods and other unseen realities and is characterised by states of mysticism, ecstatic utterance, trance state and so on. The shaman in tribal religions, the saint, the prophet or the ritual specialist in more organised religions, simply provide a conduit for this spirituality and thereby wards off fear and stress in human contingencies experienced by the wider community.

The allied beliefs and ritual performances of a religious culture bond the group and nurture altruism in the society. The religious person is able to feel a unity with the universe and with being itself, and thereby loses any constant perspective on selfhood. Religious adherents work towards common goals and can eschew self-interest.

Postured in this way, the individual finds a profound sense of personal identity. Religious persons have found order; they find social identity but also distinguish between 'us' and 'them'.

The religious culture provides and requires communication, the development of signals that will distinguish their in-group and the out-group, the insider and the outsider. They have an adaptive response whereby they produce signals indicating that they will not exploit group solidarity for their own ends: they recognise the values of the in-group as against the out-group. These are the signals of ritual, taboo and practice of ethical values. The values of the group are altruistic and are threatened constantly by short term human self-interest. This is overcome by social control within the religious community. Social control demands the value of altruism, the maintenance of values without immediate gain. Gods, spirits, ancestors sanction false behaviour and threaten punishment and this control is internalised by adherents. A religious propensity will bring about conformity with values because of the social control. Religiosity thereby requires conformity with specific norms, with group values.

Religion, seen as religious culture, must be appreciated in its vital role of attaining a unique form of order, what Geertz (1973) called 'the general order of existence' and Berger and Luckman (1971) called more simply 'reality'. I will be referring to 'ultimate order' and 'ultimacy', but intending to say much as they did. This religious culture then comes into contact with individual genomes with their propensities towards ultimate order.

What we have been discussing earlier could be called 'secular culture' which provides its adherents with everyday order; human beings depend on their secular symbol systems for everyday viability. Secular culture allows human beings to find order amid a chaos of common human experience, to explain historical events, to solve problems of identity.

However, there are certain points along the plane of human experience where chaos could reassert itself. Insuperable ignorance, the experience of suffering and the problem of evil (with the concomitant problem of cosmic injustice) can threaten both an ordered, cultural world and the interpretability of human experience. Should there be the remotest indication that a secular culture is unable to cope with a significant human experience, for example a specific instance of death or dying, then severe anxiety results. In such a situation human beings face the dire inability to interpret their experience.

At this point of the potential disintegration of a secular cultural world, there is an urgent need for religious culture. A 'religious culture' could include the living world religions, indigenous religions, syncretistic religion, Marxism, Humanism, Existentialism and so on. It could also include personal religious systems. The religious person construes the world, others and self in terms of ultimacy, of ultimate order.

All cultural adherence brings about a human group. Religion also brings about a group. At an earlier stage the human group formed by everyday culture would have corresponded with the religious group. Both everyday culture and religious culture

would result from the interaction of genetic makeup, with its propensities, with a particular physical and social environment. Religion would develop likewise, although it was geared to be activated by a specific propensity.

In time, the religious culture could spread from one community to another, even though the environments might differ. This could be done by borrowing and adaptation, or by force (with or without adaptation).

In keeping with what was said with regard to secular culture, all human persons who have reached a level of human development (and are not mentally handicapped to a significant degree) should therefore be designated as 'religious persons', although the 'religion' of some people might not necessarily be recognised as a conventional religion.

Just as a specific dialect in a culture will affect the general propensity to communicate by language, so the cultural framework surrounding an individual can postulate that the focus on the human group and the human group are widely separated. There is, in other words, a distinct gulf lying between them. In this case the focal symbol will have a separate, personal form, such as a particular and identifiable god or a pantheon of gods or detached Reason. By definition these deities, such as Zeus or Allah, would be distinct from, and distant from, the group. If, on the other hand, the framework postulates an intimate closeness between the focus and the human group, with easy access between them, then the symbolisation will have an impersonal form. An example would be *brahman*, the Hindu symbol of infinite being that encroaches on an individual's personal space and yet extends into infinity, or Gaia, the invented muse of intimate ecological connections.

Religious cultural activity is about bridging the gulf or activating the intimate closeness between the individual and ultimate order and meaning by means of that focus.

The attainment of ultimate order is, of course, an ideal; there is no guarantee that this ideal will be or has ever been achieved in reality. The human person has a general propensity for ultimate ordering and seeks instinctively to achieve it; every mature person seeks a form of liberating order and meaning not offered by secular culture.

Once again, as was the case with secular cultures, the distinction needs to be drawn between ultimacy in itself, 'out there', and the focus as humanly symbolised by a particular religious group. Ultimacy in itself is ultimate order and harmony. It is neither capable of validation nor disproof. It is a reality in the sense that it proposes a real end-point for those individuals who espouse it. The focus, as humanly symbolised by a particular group, will always be uniquely real to its adherent religious group but will always remain a culturally conditioned symbol. In other words, Allah is unique and can only be understood or critiqued within the context of the religious culture of Islam. The same is true of any of The Dreaming symbols or *nirvana*. Each can only be considered within the confines of its specific religio-cultural parameters.

What has been proposed so far is that humans have an innate propensity to seek ultimate order, and that specific religions offer them the ability to activate that propensity in culturally diverse ways by adopting a particular culturally constructed religious focus.

1.6 Multiculturalism and Religious Pluralism

Yet, the confrontation of secular values and religious values is not the only complication. The social groups within the modern world are usually cohabited by more than one cultural group. Each has its own secular culture; its own values; each would have its own secular ethical system of principles to determine those values (Crotty 1992).

There are two attitudes, at diverse ends of a continuum, which become evident once such culturally diverse groups cohabit. One is ethnocentrism: the attitude that only one culture is valid for all human beings. Ethnocentrism is a natural reaction to enculturation; other cultures are instinctively considered to be misplaced, deviant, corrupt. At the opposite end of the continuum is some form of multiculturalism: a program directed towards harmonious and unified co-existence.

Multiculturalism as a program for harmonious living (and not a misnomer for apartheid or forced assimilation) maintains that there are many humanly constructed cultures, all of which presumably give adequate order and meaning to their constituencies and activate the propensities of these constituencies in variant ways; it maintains and encourages the preservation of a variety of cultures. It esteems and promotes the variant configurations of culturally different groups, including their different patterns of family structure, their languages and their value systems.

In a multicultural society, a variety of relationships between the dominant (frequently the numerical majority) group and the minorities can exist (Smolicz 1984, 1988). Minorities can be suppressed by the dominant group. But, if such a culturally diverse society is governed by a degree of consensus, rather than coercion, a set of shared values could be evolved that overarch the differences between various ethnic groups. Under such a cultural 'umbrella', ethnic groups may retain certain core values, such as a distinct language or family tradition, while adhering to other values included under the umbrella.

Hence, a Vietnamese living in Australia, where knowledge and facility in the use of English is a core value of the cultural umbrella, would learn English but also would be encouraged to retain Vietnamese. This would seem a laudable form of multiculturalism. At other times deference to the umbrella would mean adapting practice. An Australian aborigine whose culture allows him to be betrothed to and have sexual relations with a child under twelve would be expected to defer to the core value of the cultural umbrella that defines a higher age for sexual access.

Such a multicultural society would maintain a dynamic equilibrium between the overarching or shared values of the broader community, on the one hand, and the separate ethnic core values on the other. Both the dominant group in that

community and less powerful groups would all continue to exploit their own values, some of which would percolate into the overarching framework. The shared values within the umbrella should not be regarded, however, as the private domain of any one group, but as common to all in the society. If the dominant group, for example, did totally control the umbrella, the result would be assimilation not multiculturalism.

The opposite of assimilation is separatism, where the overarching framework is only vestigial and each ethnic group is encapsulated within its own value system. There would be little interaction between the different cultural groups.

Assimilation and separatism are both the result of, and the breeding ground for, ethnocentrism: the conviction that only one cultural system is valid. The eventual destruction of a cultural umbrella that remained open to the insertion of values other than those of the dominant group is the blatant aim of ethnocentrism.

Beyond these assimilationist and separatist positions lies the vast area that is covered by the label of multiculturalism. This position involves some form of on-going interpenetration between the overarching or shared values of the broad community within the umbrella on the one hand, and the separate ethnic values of the constituent groups on the other.

Religious pluralism is structurally akin to multiculturalism. Obviously there are differences and disagreements between rival religious symbol systems. Disagreements can relate to belief symbols or to practical symbols (Hick 1989). Some of the disagreements can be relegated to historical differences of opinion: Jesus died on the cross (Christianity) as against Jesus did not actually die on the cross (Islam). Historical evidence could, in theory at least, reconcile such disagreements but they are not of vital importance in comparing rival cultural systems. Historians disagree regarding facets of secular cultures too. Other disagreements, on the surface more substantial, are really quasi-historical: reincarnation is possible (Hinduism); reincarnation is impossible (Christianity). It might be possible to conceive a historical test that would substantiate one or other side of the argument. Once again, however, the disagreement does not touch the essence of the cultural system.

Where religious cultures do differ substantially is in their ways of symbolising and relating to Ultimacy. The symbolisation and the determination of a mode of relationship are moderated within a specific world view, by unique life experiences and unique historical events. Ultimacy has been variously symbolized as YHWH, Allah, Nirvana, the Dreaming. Such symbolic forms are culturally conditioned responses activating the single propensity to achieve an ultimate focus.

The distinction needs to be drawn between Ultimacy in itself, and Ultimacy as humanly conceived within a particular religious group. Ultimacy in itself is the ultimate focussing of things. It is neither capable of validation nor disproof. It is a reality, beyond the human order but it becomes part of human awareness in terms of sets of concepts which structure cognitive consciousness. Ultimacy as humanly conceived in symbolic form within a particular group will be unique to that group. The differentiation of religious cultures, therefore, is primarily dependent upon variant, human conceptions of Ultimacy.

The observer of religions, however, could take up one or other of several stances towards religious cultures. The first would be exclusivism, the view that one particular religious culture is alone valid, possessing the only valid symbolization of Ultimacy and the only legitimate mode of maintaining contact with that symbol of Ultimacy. The second would be inclusivism, the view that one religious culture is certainly valid and true but that other religious cultures may share, partially and perhaps inadequately, the truth of the one valid culture. Thirdly, there is pluralism. Pluralism would maintain that all religious cultures that do enjoy or have enjoyed currency are true. They all embody variant but valid symbolizations of Ultimacy and variant systems of relating to Ultimacy. They are incommensurable and no value judgement can adjudicate between them. Choice between one and another would be dependent on an individual's life circumstances, prior enculturation and some degree of personal choice. Any critique of a religion must be performed within that religion's cultural context.

Neither in the case of secular culture nor in the case of religious culture is there any space for absolutism. Culture, religion, values are all marked by relativism. It is the ethnocentrist and the religious exclusivist who would stand by absolute human or religious values. The multiculturalist and the religious pluralist would be aware of the fact that cultures and religions as systems are relative and therefore their values are relative.

We rarely have, in the modern world, a homogeneously cultural society. We have a variety of secular cultures and religious cultures and the two do not always overlap. Also, we usually have some form of co-existence of secular and religious cultures. This human situation is complex and is becoming ever more complex. We are here at the hub of our original query. Human values and religious values cannot be viewed as absolute. No longer do we have the luxury of allowing this misconception to survive. Values are a concomitant of a more complex cultural situation. Relative values are constantly becoming lodged in an overarching umbrella in society after society; that is the direction that humankind is taking. That overarching system may be rudimentary; it may be faulty and selfishly manipulated by authority. This requires adjustment, it requires action.

1.7 Analysis of Religion

We need now to analyse this religious culture, religion, in broader detail. As was said above, religion is about bridging the gulf between a human group and Ultimacy. We now state that the central phenomenon of any religion is not its sacred text (if it should be a literate society), nor its ethical system, nor its doctrinal teaching, but its religious experience, the quality of human reaction that is aroused by a deep-felt moment of making contact with Ultimacy.

To confirm this priority of religious experience, we could take the example of Islam. Its sacred story (not necessarily an historical story!) recounts that at a certain moment Muhammad, while deep in meditation on a hill outside Mecca, was

enabled to contact what he interpreted as Ultimacy. On this occasion he identified Ultimacy by means of *al'ilah*, 'The God' or Allah. For him *al'ilah* became a new religious focus that gave him access to Ultimacy. By means of *al'ilah* he was able to understand life and self through the focus of Ultimacy. He described this experience as *islam*, absolute submission and awareness of human frailty in the presence of Allah. He thereby achieved an ultimate order in his life. Muhammad's religion is the religion of *islam* or 'submission' and its adherents are *muslims* or 'people submitted' to Allah.

Whether the sacred story is historically true is of no importance. What is important is the religious experience the sacred story has generated.

But Muhammad might have died without revealing how he had achieved his personal contact with Ultimacy; he might have kept it as a personal secret. In that case, there would have been no followers and no Islam. However, he left a body of myths (or sacred stories, not to be confused with the popular use of the term meaning untruths) and accounts of rituals (or religious ceremonies) which could allow his followers to bring the same ultimate meaning and direction into their own lives. Islamic myth and are the principal means by which a Muslim can contact *al'ilah*, as he did.

A similar process can be identified with all religions. Religious experience is effected by sacred myth or story and ritual. In the first place, myth is the way religious people speak and communicate with each other. All religious traditions have a fund of such stories. Importantly, though, sacred stories are not necessarily historical stories.

1.8 Religious Myth

Having used the term 'myth' a number of times up to this point, we now need to look at it more carefully. For the anthropologist, myth is of great importance in studying any cultural group. It is more important than written texts.

We can note the obsession with written texts among the three Abrahamic Religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Christians today all look to and revere the Christian Scriptures and the Hebrew Scriptures (to a lesser extent) for the religious information they purvey.

The study of authoritative religious writing, such as the Christian gospels, ideally should begin with stories. Stories predate writings. All religious traditions have a fund of stories. They are sacred stories; they are not necessarily historical stories, as has already been said. This is equally true of Hinduism, Aboriginal Australian religions and Christianity. The technical term for the more important of these stories is *myth*. In everyday usage myth is taken to mean something that is untrue. A 'true myth' in everyday parlance is as much an oxymoron as a 'straight curve'. However, in its technical usage, myth means that story which is really real, that which is true above all else. In this sense a myth might be historical, ahistorical, real or fictional—but always *true*.

Myth is a metaphorical story that is intended to convey the most profound spiritual truth, a truth not communicable by everyday language. It recounts the stories of a sacred past for a particular religious tradition. Yet it does more than recount. It recreates the original 'world' of the Time of the Beginnings in which the way of life of a human group, the fund of its common understandings and its principal values were established. What was said and done in the Time of the Beginnings, as the myth relates it, affects the way of life of the religious group here and now. Myth guides the group as to how life should be led, informs the group as to how reality came to be the way it is, warns the group of the threatening danger that cannot be readily perceived. Myth evokes and directs the deepest human energy; myths are public dreams and like dreams they are vehicles of communication between the conscious and the unconscious. If myth is not true, then nothing is true.

Myths convey ultimate meaning to the group. For convenience we can name this ultimate meaning (including answers allowing people to cope with questions such as: what is the answer to the meaning of life? What is the answer to death? Why do innocents suffer? Why is there evil in the world? Myth deals with the cosmos' link with Ultimacy (such as creation stories), about alienation from Ultimacy (stories about a primordial fall, an initial distancing of the group from the sacred), about the possibility of the group's own link with Ultimacy (a myth about a religious founder such as Abraham, Jesus or Muhammad), about final reconciliation with Ultimacy (eschatological myths). Myth, together with ritual, create the religious experience and in turn experience evokes ultimate meaning and gives ultimate direction to the participants.

Where can myth be located amongst the phenomena of religion? It needs to be said that the central feature of any literate religion is not its sacred text, such as its gospels or its Qur'an or its Torah, nor its ethical system nor its doctrinal teaching but its religious experience, the quality of human reaction that it aroused by a deep-felt contact with Ultimacy.

1.9 Ritual

Ritual is sacred drama, a dramatic portrayal, which complements myth. One core ritual is the re-enactment of that past event when contact was initially made between a founding community and the world of the sacred, which the community acknowledges as being ultimate. The Jewish Passover is the dramatic portrayal of the Exodus out of Egypt. It brings the past Exodus event into the present for the believing group. It is as if the group of Jews, gathered in the home on the festival of Passover, become part of the original Passover people and experience the saving, guiding, comforting presence of their God. That experience was the founding experience of Judaism and Passover brings it into the present. Was there an historical Exodus? We do not know and it does not matter. Other rituals derive their relevance from a core ritual.

Initially we identified the priority of religious experience in the totality of religion. Ritual, myth and religious experience are essentially connected. Religious experience is stimulated and transmitted by myth and ritual. It is this combination of religious experience, carried by myth and ritual, expressed and protected (in literate societies) by authoritative books.

With these essential ideas about religion (with the components of myth associated with ritual and religious experience), we can now look at the phenomenon of sacred and authoritative books, collections of sacred stories that form the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. They are the repository of myths and rituals and the outcome of experiences.

We will begin with the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish group among whom they have been created and still flourish.

Notes

For further information on topics in this chapter, see:

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Chapter 2

The Study of the Jewish Past

Until the nineteenth century, biblical ‘events’, as related by stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, had been generally considered as deriving from a Golden Age. They were regarded as historically reliable reports from an era when life was radically different from what modern people know today, a time when wondrous natural and human events, miracles and bodily cures wrought by divine intervention were commonplace; it was a time when giants, angels and demons openly roamed the world.

But there has been a serious re-thinking of the Hebrew Scriptures since the nineteenth century of this era.

2.1 The Search for an Historical Israel

Historians since the nineteenth century have not been satisfied with a naïve recital of the events in the Hebrew Scriptures. There was first the acknowledgement that the Hebrew Scriptures were based on pre-existing sources. The stories of creation and the early generations of humans in the book of Genesis were found to have parallels in the myths of other ancient literatures, and few had problems in calling these ‘myths’. The stories of the Ancestors, the Exodus, the Taking of the Land were found to contain duplications and discrepancies that pointed to the combination of several earlier documents or traditions.

This uncovering of previous sources was devastating news to many practising Jews and Christians who had long claimed that these stories and sayings were inspired words handed on by divine dictation to outstanding people like Moses, David and Solomon describing events and recalling words that shaped human life and history. Much re-thinking was required.

There followed at that time an important acknowledgement that the Hebrew Scriptures had made use of literary forms other than history. There were for example texts that were similar to myth, legend, fable, poetry, wisdom-writing and

occasionally, but not always, history. These literary forms were also found in other ancient Near Eastern literatures. Of vital importance, it was claimed that the texts needed to be understood according to these particular literary forms, which were not always familiar to readers in modern times. Poetry could not be read as scientific discourse; legends could not be read as history. It was decided that the process of writing and re-writing of the Hebrew Scriptures, their transmission, had to be charted in order for the meaning to be extracted.

There have been desperate attempts, even in the recent past, to prove that at least the historical outline of events in the Hebrew Scriptures was trustworthy, even if some details might be questioned. Archaeology and non-biblical historical records were engaged to give fuller descriptions and dates to the Ancestors, the Exodus, the building of the two Temples, the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile of some of its citizens into Mesopotamia. However, historical sources and archaeology could not always provide this information. It was still maintained nevertheless that while there might be debate over some historical issues and dates in the Hebrew Scriptures, the pivotal events themselves were sacrosanct. They were real and factual events that had occurred more or less as outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures.

2.2 Moves to a Text-Based Approach

But in time even these pivotal events fell under scrutiny. The archaeology of Jericho, whose walls were said to have tumbled when Joshua's invading soldiers blew the sacred trumpets in the book of Joshua, did not seem to indicate any destruction at the time proposed for the end of the Exodus; in fact, there was no Egyptian evidence for any Exodus, which must have been a massive enterprise; there was little or no evidence for any grandiose kingdom of David and Solomon, nor the building of a magnificent Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. By the middle of the twentieth century there was a move away from the emphasis on the past events of Judaism, even pivotal ones, as being bearers of meaning, to a stress on the text itself as the bearer of meaning. The question was asked: what do the Hebrew Scriptures, with their literary forms and rhetorical structures, tell us? Whatever might or might not historically have taken place in the past became less and less important.

As a result, there was to be a new development as the twentieth century came to its end. It depended on the text-based approach just described above. It was a minimalist theory that recognised only a small amount of history, included almost by accident, in the biblical texts and placed the writing of biblical scrolls, which were to be eventually incorporated into the Hebrew Scriptures, quite late.

Previously, it had been strongly maintained that texts incorporating the earliest forms of the Hebrew Scriptures, the forerunners of the Hebrew Bible, could be dated back at least to scribes in the time of David and Solomon. Texts were said to be almost contemporary with the earliest events (the reign of David, for example)