

1957


# The Meaning of Religion for Man

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John Herman Randall, Jr.

*With a new introduction  
for the Torchbook edition*



  
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see p 114

To the memory of  
my father  
John Herman Randall

THE MEANING OF RELIGION FOR MAN

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## V

## The Community of Religions

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### RELIGIONS ARE MANY, BUT RELIGION IS ONE

The religions of men exhibit a bewildering variety. Each of the great traditions is itself split into a number of sub-varieties. The major cultures, like China, or India, or our own Western world, all contain a multitude of groups each practicing its own distinctive faith. And when we consider the past, with its long succession of reformations and reformulations, new visions and new cults, within each separate tradition, it seems that variety and change are as characteristic of men's religions as of their other institutions. Religion is clearly not like science, which at any one time is the same for all men. It seems to be much more like art, which likewise reflects and expresses the many differences between and within cultures.

Yet despite its infinite variety of forms, there is a sense in which all art is one. All these different kinds do the same thing, they perform the same *functions* in human life. The African sculptor, the Greek architect, the Romantic composer, the modern painter have, in the end, all been working at the same enterprise: to create something that would be immediately satisfying and artistically significant. Hence, a sensitive man can sympathize with the human achievement of each of these types of art; an artist can receive fresh inspiration from them all.

Religions differ just as widely as the arts in the means and devices by which they have sought their common end. But like art, religions all do the same things for men; they display a *unity of function* in the services they perform in the lives of individuals and of societies. As we have seen, those functions are complex and can hardly be reduced to a formula. But we can summarize them as the expressing

and cultivating of what men together hold sacred—as man's quest for the Divine and his attempt to order life in its light.

Serious acquaintance with the great religions of mankind reveals the close sympathy of aim existing between the higher levels of all faiths, past and present. Such knowledge suggests that, while "religions are many, religion is one." It is one, not in beliefs, not in experiences embodied, not in forms elaborated with loving care, not in spiritual insights attained, not in ideals striven for. It is one in the function it performs. It is one in feeling deeply and interpreting profoundly the significant moments of human life and in consecrating them to the Highest. The various faiths of mankind seem like differing languages through which man has been seeking to express, however inadequately, his faith in the Divine, his hope, his aspiration and commitment. They are tongues in which man has endeavored, as best he might with the knowledge at his command, to relate himself emotionally and practically and intelligently to the universe of which he is a part and to his fellows from whom he is divided.

### DO THE MAJOR RELIGIONS REALLY AGREE?

Each religion expresses, in its own symbolic language and actions, the common quest of mankind for the Divine. All religions agree in the function they serve in human life. But do the great religions display a still further agreement, not only in the common quest to which they are devoted, but also in the spiritual insight they have achieved? Do they share certain universal convictions of value? Do they conceive the Divine in the same way? Do they express the same transcendent ideal of what is the highest Good?

From ancient times many have been convinced that they do. The Platonic philosophy of the Roman world maintained that all religions, rightly understood, are really devoted to the same Good. As Plutarch put it, "There are not Greek gods and barbarian, southern or northern; but just as sun, moon, sky, earth, and sea are common to all men and have many names, so likewise it is one Reason that makes all these things a cosmos; it is one Providence that cares for them, with helping powers appointed to all things; while in different peoples, different honors and names are given to them as customs

vary. Some use hallowed symbols that are faint, others symbols more clear, as they guide their thoughts to the Divine."<sup>1</sup>

This conviction that all religions at bottom amount to the same thing was revived at the Renaissance by Platonists like Pico, anxious to demonstrate the agreement of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It was proclaimed during the last century by various leaders in the Oriental faiths. The Brahma Samaj was founded in 1828 in India to teach the harmony and unity of all religions. The outstanding Hindu religious teacher of the nineteenth century, Ramakrishna, maintained: "God is one, but many are his aspects. . . . Divers are the ways and means to approach God, and every religion in the world shows one of these ways. Different creeds are but different paths to reach the Almighty. . . . Every religion is but one of the paths that lead to God. A truly religious man should think that other religions are also paths leading to truth."

On its more reflective level, Hindu thought has generally maintained the unity of religions. But the recent movement that has made this conviction most central in its religious teaching came rather out of Islam. About the middle of the last century, Baha'u'llah proclaimed in Iran the gospel of the unity of mankind and of the teachings of all religions. The fundamental purpose of religion is to promote concord and harmony between men and nations. Devoted to working for a world commonwealth based on the organic unity of man, which it sees as the consummation of the process of human evolution, the Baha'i faith upholds the principle of an unfettered search after truth and teaches that religion must go hand in hand with science. But the first step is to recognize the unity of God and of the teachings of his high prophets.

But we hardly need to go to the religious insight of universalizing Oriental prophets to find men holding that there is no real disagreement between religions. It is common enough to hear in our own land the view that religions are all really trying to do the same thing. They are trying to teach men how to live better. The ways they do it, we are told, and the points on which they differ are of little moment. Anyway, they all believe in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

#### RELIGIONS HOLD MANY FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS AND VALUES IN COMMON

In understanding the diversity of religions, nothing could be more important than to realize that they are in truth bound together by their common functions—that they are all expressions of men's common quest for the Divine. If we really grasped the significance of this fundamental fact, there would be no further place for the animosities, prejudices, and mutual intolerances that have blackened the pages of religious history. Now one way to emphasize the all-important fact that differing religions have a common aim is to insist that, on all the points that really count, the various faiths of men are alike. And for those with a passionate religious interest in maintaining the unity of the religious experience of mankind, this will indeed be true. For such men will naturally select, as the "points that really count," those elements of feeling and belief, those convictions of value, on which there seems to be substantial agreement.

That there are in the developed religions plenty of such shared elements is clear. However they have conceived the Divine, all religions have felt toward it in much the same way. Thus all have given expression to that sense of the indwelling Presence of the Divine which we symbolize as the "immanence of God." Again, there are certain universal principles of human living, like the golden rules and the law of compensation, that appear in some form in all the great religions. And no religion has a monopoly on any of those transcendent ideals of the highest Good: justice, mercy, compassion, active good will, self-sacrifice. Religious teachers in all the great traditions have proclaimed them as ideal moral standards.

These fundamental religious feelings and this universal moral wisdom may well be the most important parts of man's various faiths, the highest expressions of his religious insight. It is certainly the distinctive insight of the prophets of the religious unity of mankind that the preceding statement ought to be true, that all religions should make fundamental what they share with others. And in trying to enter sympathetically into the religious life of other peoples, trying to find some basis for fellowship with them, it is surely wise

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *De Iside*, 67, 377 F–378 A.

to begin by building upon likenesses rather than by aggravating differences.

### RELIGIONS FORM A COMMUNITY

But whether it is equally wise, or even in the end possible, to stop with the insights common to all religions is more doubtful. After all, the religious means men employ in celebrating the Divine and consecrating their lives to God are very diverse. Each religion possesses not only characteristic symbols, beliefs, and practices of its own. Each has won its own distinctive religious insights, its own convictions of value. To hold that only those insights and goods which are shared with all other religions are "really important" is to express one's own faith in the importance of sharing. And it not only makes devotion to human brotherhood and to the unity of mankind central in one's own commitment to the Divine; it also bases that brotherhood and unity on what men have in common, on what is alike in their beliefs and their ideals.

In our warring world, to foster brotherhood and cooperation between men of different faiths is a religious aim of the utmost importance. Whatever genuinely and effectively furthers it is surely worth believing in. But to express that all-important commitment through the belief that in everything that really counts men and their faiths are alike, raises many questions both intellectual and practical. Intellectually, it is doubtful whether such a disregard of what is distinctive and unique in another religion can in the end lead to any real understanding of the men who practice it or the insights of their faith.

Practically, it is difficult to conceive any genuine cooperation between faiths on such a basis. For those beliefs which men actually hold to be fundamental, and those values which are controlling in the practice and commitment of any one faith, by no means coincide with those that are shared with others. Those that are distinctive may appear to philosophic interpretation as one set of symbols among many others. But they are really essential to the faith of their adherents. Men find it very difficult to sacrifice, or even to minimize, what is vital to their own commitment, however genuine their interest in cooperating with other men. Practically, it is probably unwise

to expect them to cooperate at such a price. For better or worse, the faith in religious unity is not yet the central faith of the great majority in any religion. Those who do make it central, at the cost of subordinating what is unique, are apt to find that, far from having in that way succeeded in uniting religions, they have rather proclaimed a new one.

Finally, and most important of all, to find important in other religions only that which is already embodied in one's own, hardly fosters the highest respect for those other faiths, and may well lead in the end to their disregard and neglect. For why should one pay attention to the insights of other faiths if one is convinced that they really agree completely with one's own? Why should one feel a compelling urge to learn from them?

To see all religious beliefs as the symbolic renderings of deep human experiences and aspirations in the presence of the Divine, frees one from the vain attempt to reduce the wealth of religious life to a core of philosophical truth common to every historic faith. The experiences of men have varied from age to age and from clime to clime, and even in the face of the universal crises of all mankind, birth and love and evil and death, men have felt with subtle but inescapable shades of difference. It is of the very nature of poetry and metaphor, of the symbolic language of religion, to be literally untranslatable into another tongue. The attempt to find a common prose in which to state all this imaginative symbol leads to a blurring of that which clear thinking would keep distinct, to the loss of the rich overtones so fraught with feeling. To reduce religions to their highest common denominator cannot but lead to an impoverishment. It is to forget the many other factors that enter into the practice of a living faith and to misconceive the way in which such faiths must function.

Consequently, in seeking to foster cooperation between religions, in seeking to enter into fellowship with those of another faith, it is not enough to remember that all religions serve the same function, or that they share many important beliefs and values. It is just because every form of religious life enshrines something that is uniquely precious, something that could be expressed in no other way, that it is the part of wisdom, and indeed a religious duty, to strive so far as possible to enter into that insight. A true understanding of how

religious faiths are distinguished thus makes sympathy and cooperation possible and imperative, without leading to intellectual flabbiness and spiritual impoverishment.

Religion is indeed one. But all religions are not alike, even "at bottom." Religions do not form a "unity." They form rather a *community*, in which each plays its own unique and indispensable role in the common quest of the Divine. Cooperation between religions does not mean the forgetting of differences. It certainly does not demand the sacrifice of the distinctive insights of any faith. Rather, it points to the possibility of stimulating ever more creative interrelations between different faiths, in which the very fact of those differences will contribute to a deepening and extending of the vision and insights of each.

#### THE CLAIM TO EXCLUSIVE VALIDITY AND FINAL REVELATION

The most difficult obstacle in the way of such fruitful cooperation between religions is the persistence in our world of faiths, each claiming to possess the sole and final revelation of God and his will. It is of course natural for men to consider their own faith "better" and more adequate than others. Presumably, had they discovered one still better, they would have adopted it. A man must remain loyal to the best he has found, if he has really found it in his own living experience; though this does not free him from the religious obligation to criticize and clarify that faith and to seek to enlarge and deepen it. But this natural loyalty to our own vision need not lead us to deny the value of other visions. We can have it and still recognize that men and societies with a different experience may have found a different revelation of the Divine more adequate for their needs. And closer acquaintance with another religion may even suggest that in some respects—in some practice or belief, in some insight of value—that religion has found a better way of serving the Good to which we ourselves are committed than does our own. This is one way in which religious vision is normally extended.

It is quite another thing to maintain that one's own faith is not only better than others but is the only "valid" faith, the only one whose standards of what is Good have been revealed by God, the only one whose beliefs are "true." As the social scientist and the psychologist can explain, such an attitude is also "natural" enough,

men and their group loyalties being what they are. But the student of human ways will also add that such confident and intolerant dogmatism is most characteristic of "primitive" societies and of group loyalties that have not yet learned the wisdom to outgrow their narrow ignorance and prejudice. It is "natural" only for men with little experience and less knowledge of other groups with differing faiths.

Such arrogance is also responsible for most of the crimes committed in the name of religion against those with other loyalties. Through bitter experience, men have slowly and painfully come to realize that this claim to possess an exclusive and final revelation of the Divine is the most dangerous pretension any group can make. It has led to heresy-hunts, persecutions, inquisitions, religious wars ad nauseam. Against it, our long political experience has compelled us to build up constitutional guarantees of the freedom of religion, which we rightly regard as the most fundamental of all the freedoms of man, because those who attack it will respect no other human right. And against it sensitive religious prophets have had to inveigh, as the highest and worst form of religious pride and the most consuming sin of which a religion can stand convicted at the bar of history.

Whatever earlier theories they may still retain, the traditional religions have begun to learn the wisdom of "toleration" in practice. The lesson has been forced upon them by human experience and has been proclaimed by their own best prophets. The great Roman Catholic Church is in the very process of formulating such binding principles of the toleration of other faiths. Today it is chiefly the new social faiths that are displaying the ignorance and folly of their youth. America in particular has in the past been blessed with the presence of many different faiths making exclusive pretensions to validity, no one of which has proved strong enough to gain a privileged position or to use the state to enforce its claims. In consequence, these conflicting dogmatisms have been compelled to learn to live together in peace and amity. Out of this fortunate experience has developed the American tradition of religious freedom and the strongly rooted principle of the separation of church and state. We have recognized officially a plurality of religious institutions and have insisted that no one of them should have any special privileges before the law.

Religious freedom was first born of expediency and then converted

into a cherished principle as men came to realize the fruits of its wisdom. It has gradually developed, in the democratic experience of America, from a mere negative defense against intolerance into a positive ideal of active cooperation. For multitudes of Americans, the traditional diversity and sectarianism of our religious life have come to suggest the possibility of a genuine community of religious faiths. And for some at least this emerging community of American faiths has already begun to point toward a future community of all the faiths of mankind.

Exclusive religious claims are still maintained by various groups—in theory. But for the most part they have become the expression of a smug complacency rather than of a persecuting zeal. This self-satisfaction can be deadening enough. Where such pretensions are still taken seriously, they make cooperation difficult: it is hard for a religion which believes it has the last word to seek light from another vision. In our modern world, however, with our rapidly growing experience and knowledge of the wealth of insight enshrined in other religions, such claims become increasingly difficult to take literally. In breaking them down, it is the beliefs and values that other religions hold in common with our own that form the entering wedge. Men whose aspiration is so much like ours cannot be wholly outside the pale. Then, once we have realized how much of what other faiths have seen resembles, under different symbols, our own vision, we are led on to consider seriously their distinctive insights. How far the barriers of ignorance and prejudice have already been undermined is clear from the dwindling number of those who would today hold all other faiths to be mere superstition and idolatry. It seems incredible that a century ago such men were in the vast majority, certainly in Christian churches.

But where the claim to exclusive validity is really central in religious faith—where it is what we have called a “fundamental” religious belief—mere increase of knowledge is hardly likely to shake it. It is more apt to provoke a new defense. This is particularly true where dogmatic certainty is embodied in an authoritarian church, in which the claim to be the sole path to salvation is a fundamental conviction of value. Men for whose religious commitment that claim is central cannot give it up; to abandon it would lead to the collapse of their entire faith.

Yet even here we have found that cooperation is possible in prac-

tice, in terms of the moral ideals which are held in common and the visions of the Divine which are shared. For the belief in an authoritative and final revelation is fundamentally a religious belief. The primary function it performs in the faith of its adherents is religious: it strengthens their practical commitment to what they see as God's commands. The further implications of that claim with regard to the inferiority of other faiths are really secondary. Dangerous as they have proved in the past when such authoritarian churches have been in a position to enforce them literally, when deprived of that power, as under American political conditions, these same churches have been willing and able to compromise on putting them into practice. To make the claim is essential to their faith; to enforce it on others is not. They can exercise charity; God, too, is patient with evil. These ecclesiastical claims may clearly create grave problems for others, as the long conflict between church and state bears witness. But these are political, not religious, problems. Even the Roman Catholic Church is beginning to recognize the religious problems involved. The religious problem they create is primarily one for those who make them. Is the kind of certainty and strength they confer worth the limitations they impose, the being cut off from all other sources of religious insight?

#### RELIGIOUS TOLERATION AND COOPERATION IN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

There are two alternatives to the claim to possess the sole and final revelation. The first, fairly well established with regard to religious faith—though hardly equally so with regard to other faiths taken more seriously—is the negative principle of toleration. The second, whose possibilities we are just beginning to explore, is the positive principle of cooperation in religious freedom. Toleration rests, in the last analysis, on a recognition of our ignorance. As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, “However we twist or turn, whatever instruments or pretensions we use, it is not possible to establish the claim that we have the truth.”<sup>2</sup> In the emphatic words of Cromwell, “By the bowels of Christ, remember that you may be mistaken.” To recognize the limitations of even our best insight and vision is the beginning of wisdom, as it is the part of humility. We too may fall short, even as other men.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, New York, 1943; p. 243; p. 239 n.

The ideal of cooperative religious freedom does not rest on the mere acknowledgement of possible limitations to our own vision. It rests rather on the challenging opportunity a multiplicity of faiths affords to see further and learn more. We should welcome and seek the utmost freedom for other forms of religious life, in all the wealth of their variety, just because in them we can look upon the Highest through eyes that have seen what we have not, and find fresh visions of the Divine. The more such visions we can share, and the more spiritual insights we can make our own, the more we can enrich our own faith, and the more we can learn of what is truly Best. The principle of cooperation in religious freedom does not demand merely that men should be free to practice their religions without interference. It means something much more positive. Men should be freed from ignorance, narrowness, and shortsightedness to cultivate the fullest possible development of their various visions of God, in the hope that they may thus add to that store of religious insight which is the treasured possession of the race. For revelation has not ceased; it is progressive and cumulative. The active, searching, and free life of the spirit can be confident that it will win new visions of the Divine.

Moreover, religious vision is shared vision; it is a fellowship of faith. Religious freedom demands that it be freed from all self-imposed barriers and shared as widely as possible. If it be genuinely free and genuinely religious, how can that fellowship stop short before the fellowship of all men's faiths? In the last analysis, cooperation in religious freedom means the opportunity for the various paths men have followed in their common quest for the Divine to converge toward a genuine community of religious, a world faith in which each religion shall play its own distinctive part. This seems to be the form which in our day expresses the ancient religious ideal of the brotherhood of man.

#### DO WE NEED A WORLD FAITH?

What kind of convergence toward a world faith lies within the realm of possibility? What does the ideal of a community of religions mean concretely? Does it mean we should look forward to, and work towards, the eventual emergence of a single universal religion shared by all mankind? Should such a religion somehow embrace all the insights of present religions, organized around the funda-

mental ideal of human brotherhood in the pursuit of the Divine? Should it bear to each existing faith something of the relation which Christianity holds to Judaism and to the other religions of the Roman world whose insights it also incorporated?

To ask these questions is to raise doubts as to whether this is even a worthy ideal. It is conceivable that in the dim future, if a common and universal culture should ever spread all over the world and absorb into itself all local and national cultures, something like this universal religion might be the eventual outcome of the development of a world civilization. Such a unification of culture seems at the moment remote enough. Surely few today would even welcome it, unless the only alternative were sheer anarchy and chaos. But granted the possibility, our present experience points rather to the further universalizing of all the great world religions. Such a culture would be extraordinarily complex and would doubtless, like our own, create the need for many different forms of religious expression rather than for a single all-embracing faith.

The ideal of a cooperative community of religions seems to point rather to a closer fellowship between existing faiths, in which each might learn from the visions of the others and thus deepen and enrich its own spiritual insight. In our rapidly narrowing world, in which civilizations once remote and isolated are being thrust into each other's arms, it seems not unlikely that some such cultural cross-fertilization will take place. But in any process of cultural assimilation, distinctive religious ideals, just because they are so basic and so deeply rooted in a particular civilization, are normally the last to be absorbed. Thus it seems improbable that the high value Western religions have come to set on human personality, the outcome of our long pursuit of the ideal of individuality, will ever take a central place in the Eastern faiths, unless their whole societies should be revolutionized to foster individualism in personal relationships. Conversely, an equal revolution would be needed in our own institution of the family before it could play the major role it does in some of the Oriental faiths.

#### LEARNING FROM THE INSIGHTS OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Should the various religions enter into more of a cooperative community, how could we then reasonably expect them to learn from each other's insights? The direct borrowing and incorporation of



wholly novel beliefs or ideals from another tradition in which they are deeply and intimately embedded is a long and slow process. Until the values they express have been actually worked into men's lives, it is apt to be both artificial and superficial. The various attempts already made to combine elements from Eastern and Western traditions into new semi-Oriental faiths, like Theosophy or New Thought, or the more recent Zen Buddhism—which in this country at least is certainly a combination of Eastern and Western attitudes—have proved neither very popular nor very impressive. They have appealed mainly to those with a craving for the exotic.

It is more likely that when men approach another faith sympathetically, they will be first attracted by its distinctive ways of expressing ideals and beliefs already fundamental in their own. Liberal Christians have found very congenial the Hindu and Buddhist emphasis on the Divine immanence. But they will now encounter these familiar ideals pushed further, perhaps in a new and different direction. They will incorporate this new extension of meaning, not in the alien symbols in which they have found it expressed, but by enlarging the application of their own traditional symbols in the direction indicated. Thus an appreciation of the mystic contemplation so strong in the Hindu faiths would suggest to Westerners, not the adoption of Hindu techniques like Yoga, but rather the more intensive cultivation of the resources of mysticism in their own Western tradition. Again, should the Hindu faiths come to learn from the Western ideal of active benevolence abounding in good works to men, they would doubtless emphasize it in the forms proclaimed by their own teachers.

Nor is this mutual learning, made possible through genuine cooperation, merely a matter of coming to share and absorb new insights. Just as a man sees much more clearly what are the distinctive goods in his own national culture after he has become familiar with what is best in others, so fellowship between faiths can lead to the deeper realization of what is uniquely valuable in one's own. Cooperation with men exemplifying the best ideals of the active and energetic West may well lead Hindus to understand and appreciate the values of Christian forms of good will. But it may also stimulate them to a criticized and clarified but strengthened cultivation of the characteristic values of the "spirituality" of the Hindu tradition. This is what we mean by saying that a genuine community of religions

would bear fruit, not merely in the sharing of religious visions, but also in the further creative exploration and development of what is unique in each.

In these ways, cooperation between religions should make it possible to understand, enjoy, and make use of the symbolic and imaginative wealth, not only of our own but of all the great religious traditions, without binding us to the limited experiences they have severally expressed. In the end, our own faith must be attached to a spiritual ideal that meets the needs of our own life. But it has always been the function of religion to enlarge the experience of the moment and lead men into a broader world. Surely no more promising way of extending our own sympathies and enhancing our own insights exists than that offered by the revelations of the Divine that have come to other men with other needs, and by the imaginative and artistic symbols that have embodied their aspiration and devotion. And by thus entering into genuine spiritual fellowship with the community of men's faiths, we can give tangible expression to our own commitment to the great religious ideals of human brotherhood and peaceful cooperation among men.