

ON BEING RELIGIOUS

By Gabriel Moran

There is a general assumption that most people know what the word religion means. A question does occasionally arise about whether a particular group qualifies as a religion. That issue surfaces in the United States whenever the government gets involved in anything religious or with any group claiming to be a religion. A few years ago, several prisoners in California petitioned the government that their religion required having wine at 5PM each day and that their religious liberty was being violated by the prison system. Did they have a case?

The meaning of religion is highly ambiguous in ways that are hardly ever recognized. I am amazed that I wrote about religion for decades before I realized the basic ambiguity of the term. Once I saw that ambiguity I could not imagine how I had previously missed it. Religion is one of a number of words that at one moment of history nearly reversed its meaning. The older meaning does not disappear and passionate arguments occur between people, each of whom is sure of their meaning of the word. And they are both right.

For example, the advocates of “multiculturalism” could not believe the narrow-mindedness of their opponents. But their opponents were not usually defending “monoculturalism.” They were, consciously or not, assuming the meaning of culture before anthropology nearly reversed the meaning in the late 19th century. In the earlier meaning of culture, which has never died out, culture is a judgment of value; the choice is to be either cultured or uncultured. In the new meaning, culture is simply any group’s pattern of life; culture is always in the plural. One should avoid judging one culture to be superior to another. The answer to conflicts over multiculturalism is obvious. Recognizing many cultures is quite compatible with becoming cultured; but first one has to recognize that two very different meanings are in play. Religion underwent a change of meaning similar to that of culture at a particular moment of its history.

The most common misunderstanding of language is to ask for a “definition” of a term so as to eliminate its ambiguity. But what good is the definition of a word that has nearly opposite meanings? The ambiguity of an ancient word is what makes it rich in meaning and useful for understanding, so long as the user has some control of the ambiguity. There is no lack of definitions for ambiguous terms but multiple definitions do little to provide guidance in how to deal with ambiguity. A 1912 book, *Psychological Study of Religion*, offered 50 definitions of religion. No doubt someone could come up with a 51st but that does not get us any closer to having a useful discussion of religion.

For understanding the meaning of a term the helpful questions are: Who invented the term and why? What were main forces in its history that may have given it a radical shift of direction? The word religion was coined by Cicero because he thought there was no term that described practices by which people acknowledge their debt to the gods. In contrast to “superstition,” religion is true and pious worship of the gods. Cicero of course thought that the Romans were the world’s leader in religion. Cicero’s meaning of religion was not fundamentally altered by Christianity when it took over the word. Religion was a set of (true) practices of worship; what is false is simply not religion. Augustine, in his *On True Religion*, not surprisingly says that (the true) religion, which has existed since the beginning of the world, is now called Christian.

Cicero's meaning of religion controlled the word up to the sixteenth century. Thomas Aquinas has a brief treatment of "religion" in the *Summa theologiae* in his section on justice. He did not seriously challenge Cicero's meaning of religion. The near reversal in the meaning of religion occurred between 1575 and 1625. One can see the edging toward a new meaning before 1575 when there are references to practices outside the officially approved practices that are deemed "true Christian religion." But the meaning was still fundamentally Cicero's when Catholics and Protestants were killing each other over which of them was true or Christian religion.

The near reversal of meaning occurred when someone first referred to Protestant religion and Catholic religion. That distinction gave religion the meaning of different groups that claimed to possess true religion. The term religion now existed in the plural. In this new meaning of religion the name referred to organizations or institutions. The old meaning of practices lived on; "true religion" might be claimed as the possession of Catholic or Protestant religions, or indeed by Jewish or Muslim religions. These new religions were political, social, economic institutions that contained "religion" in the older sense of the word. Both meanings float about in discussions of religion and are the source of constant confusion. A Jewish suspicion of religion as an invention of Christianity is not without a basis. A Protestant Christian attack on religion is more puzzling (Karl Barth: "Religion is unbelief"). But in its older meaning "religion" can obscure the pure word of God.

The first amendment to the United States Constitution contains a cryptic statement about "religion." The sixteen words are: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Did they really think that they had addressed the question? The statement is a conceptual muddle in which the first half of the statement refers to the modern meaning of religion and the second half of the sentence to the ancient meaning. The phrase "establishment of religion" made little sense in the eighteenth century and is unintelligible today; the second half of the statement has no antecedent for "exercise thereof." Armies of lawyers argue about what these words mean as if the statement made sense. The statement says confusedly two things that the federal government should not do but does not give a clue about what the government's role is in relation to religion (practices) and religions (institutions).

For most of the country's history there was not much need for legal arguments about religions. The sixteenth-century idea "America" united U. S. Protestant groups in the practice of religion. In the 1790s "the American" was given the meaning of white, male and Anglo-Saxon. The (true) Christian religion was American religion. Other groups were allowed to practice their religion as long as they kept such religion private. Henry Morgenthau, Franklin Roosevelt's brilliant Secretary of the Treasury, recounts in his diary a conversation in which FDR says to Morgenthau who was a Jew and another presidential advisor who was a Catholic: "This is a Protestant country; Jews and Catholics are here under sufferance." Not an unusual belief in the 1930s although it is surprising that FDR would say it to his Jewish and Catholic advisors.

In the 1940s the Supreme Court began inventing a new language to deal with religion, Its immediate concern was the Catholic Church. The Supreme Court introduced the language of church-state which has simply muddied the waters. Especially in the southern United States,

many of the Court's rulings are opposed because they do not deal with American religion, the mix of apocalyptic belief in America and evangelical Protestantism. Surely it is un-American to forbid bible reading in public schools or prayer before football games in Texas. If the Court says such practices are violations of "church-state separation," the response is that the issue is not a church, it is the practice of true Christian religion. The Court does not know what to do about people who actually practice religion, especially the American religion that dominates the history of the United States.

What is probably the main opponent of American religion is a religious belief founded fifty years ago. It can be called ecologism. It is a serious religious challenge because it addresses a world-shaking issue with a firm ideology and daily practices. The big issue in this religion is that the human race, led by the United States and Europe, has been recklessly exploiting the surroundings of the human race. What is offered as an alternative is a re-imagining of the human being in its relation to everything else, Daily rituals are required to do penance for past crimes and to maintain hope for salvation.

The enemy of this new religion is something it calls "Judeo-Christian tradition," a term invented in the 1890s by people who were not very familiar with either Jewish tradition or Christian tradition. The term was not commonly used until about the time that ecologism declared it to be the source of all our environmental problems. The political right-wing took the bait and it now passionately defends "Judeo-Christian values" and "Judeo-Christian civilization." The term "Judeo-Christian religion" is hardly ever used because there is no such religion in either sense of religion. There is no Judeo-Christian institution and no one is a practicing Judeo-Christian.

Ecologism calls for repentance and humility by the whole human race. The humans, it is believed, have failed to stay in their place and have risen up against Nature. Such rebellion can produce short-term benefits in the form of a comfortable life but disaster is just around the corner unless we repent. The dire warnings, when they are not listened to, often lead to the claim that it is already too late. This part of the ideology is borrowed from the American religion which has always been apocalyptic. The end is near; the final judgment is at hand.

Ecologism is similar to the ancient doctrine of Stoicism, the chief competitor to the Christian movement at its beginnings. While many Christian practices resembled Stoicism the two religious beliefs were incompatible. For the Stoics, Nature is mother of us all; human are one species among Nature's many offspring. Human choice consists in saying yes or no to Mother Nature; human rebellion against Nature only leads to defeat.

The Christian belief was not in Mother Nature but in God the Father who creates everything that is. There is no being that is called nature; nature is a useful concept that humans invented for understanding living beings. The humans share in the condition of natural or living beings: birth, growth, decline and death. But humans by understanding these conditions can improve their own lot and some of the things that make up their environment.

For humans to bow down to nature would be to worship a false god of their own making. The ultimate reality whether called One, All or the Nameless, must be greater than what humans recognize as their own best characteristics, including thought and will. Only a greater than a

human person would be deserving of honor, respect and obedience by humans. As philosopher Max Scheler put it, the religious profession is: “Thou All, I nothing; or rather Thou All, I not quite nothing.”

The environmental movement that emerged in the late 1960s quickly adopted a rigid orthodoxy. It does not receive much criticism except from ideologues on the right whose anti-environmentalism is no help at all. Left-wing environmentalism keeps citing scientific facts that are not persuasive for most people. Scientific facts will never change religious practice. Telling people that the universe is old (13 billion years!!) or very, very big (!!) has no practical effect for most people. They don't become humble from being told that humans are an insignificant speck in the universe.

One of the key concepts of ecogism is “anthropocentrism,” the sin of seeing the world from a human point of view. The worst disease one can have is when the name of the cure has been given to the disease. In this case, the disease was humans removing themselves from the center of their environment. Scientific enlightenment was “ec-centric.” It claimed to have a panoramic view of the world instead of a view from within human beings at one place on earth. Having failed at a godlike view that could control nature, humans are now told to submit to nature. The actual need is to put humans at the center of everything where they can be responsible beings. A godlike view of the universe is still claimed in ecogism even while it talks about humans as just one species among others.

The environmental movement has raised the real religious question: Is the emergence of personal life without meaning or is the universe friendly to the personal power to know and choose? Humans have a difficulty in asserting meaninglessness. They are caught in the paradox of claiming meaning for their statement of meaninglessness. As Nietzsche noted, we still believe in God because we believe in grammar. Nietzsche is often referred to as an atheist, a description that is misleading. He thought that atheism was just another variation on theism, both ideologies having been invented in the eighteenth century.

If a person has any sense of the grandeur of the world, atheism is not a serious question. Debating whether a being named god exists is not relevant to religious practice. The first question of religious-minded people has always been not the existence of god but the nature of god or gods. Is God on our side? How does God communicate with us? The same attitude still holds true among religious people. If anything, the universe is far more compelling today in testifying to divine glory.

The world's great religions are in no danger of disappearing. But religions such as Christianity and Islam have to examine how much religion (in the older sense) is actually practiced within the walls of their particular religious institution. How much awe before the universe do they generate in the lives of their members? Each of the world's great religions has something to contribute to an environmental movement centered on humans in their responsibility to the nonhuman natural world and the artificial world. But each of these religious institutions may have lost touch with religion.