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What is religion?, 1928.

"WHAT IS RELIGION?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

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WRHS




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Reporter
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In attempting to answer the question, What is religion? it would of course be a very simple thing to give a dictionary definition of the term "religion." And yet that would hardly do. The term "religion" belongs to that group of tremendous words which defy concise and accurate definition,--like the terms "justice," "truth," "honor," "art." The word "religion" baffles definition; it is a word of wide horizons and vast constellations. And then, too, it is a word which has undergone a long historic process of change--an old word; and each succeeding generation has read into that word its own ideas borrowed from its own knowledge and its own experience.

So that the very indefiniteness of the word and its changeful career have caused it to be frequently abused. The term has been bandied about by almost everyone and any one who has some pet theory, which for the sake of prestige he wishes to cloak in the sacred vestments of religion. There are even those who, by multiplying words, thereby confusing thought, would have us believe that their agnosticism or thinly disguised atheism is also religion.

Now in all things it is important that we think clearly. I have no quarrel with the man who is not religious. I may feel, as I do, that such a man misses something in life. He misses the lift and the glory, the

exaltation and the contentment which religion gives him. But I do not hold that against him any more than I would hold against him the fact that he were blind or insensate to music or non-appreciative of literature. But I do insist that such a man ought not to wish to convey the impression that his religion is, by some intellectual measure of man, religion, or that his lack of faith can be transformed by some alchemy of model thinking into true faith.

Words are important, terms are important, because words are expressions or approximations to ideas, and when we use words loosely we are likely to find that our thinking is loose, incoherent and illogical. Thus, for example, there are many people who confuse religion with morality and faith with humanism. Some laymen do it unconsciously; some clerics do it quite consciously in order to conceal their own fundamental lack of religion.

Now the two terms morality and religion are not identical at all, and faith and humanism are not identical. They are related terms,--related as the fruit is related to the tree, as the effect is related to the cause, but they are not one and the same. To be good is not yet to be religious; and the Golden Rule does not represent the whole of religion. I have often heard it said by laymen, "I believe and practice the Golden Rule; therefore I am as religious as the next man."

Now of course the Golden Rule was first voiced by a profoundly religious man--Hillel, and was again restated

by another profoundly religious man--Jesus. But for both of these men the Golden Rule was only a consequence, if you will, of their religious convictions, one of the many expressions of their basic faith. It was not at all their entire and complete faith. The man who says "To do good is my religion" is confusing in his own mind cause and effect. To say that religion is nothing more than being good and being noble is begging the whole question of what religion is. It is a bit of sophistry at best,--petty-fogging. It side tracks the whole tremendous question of God, of Providence, and human freedom, and retribution, and prayer--basic ideas in religion. It tries to identify religion with morality.

That is acceptable in the kind of thinking that one hears in Rotary Clubs. It is laughed out of court in the realms of philosophy and theology.

Again I say I have no quarrel with the man who is not religious, but I should like to expose him who, under the guise of some form of sociology, would palm off agnosticism as religion. I have no quarrel with the Jew who is not a believer. We are a people, and like every other people, we have our believers and our non-believers. But I do have a quarrel with those who would reduce Judaism, the religion of the Jewish people, to a secular system of moral ethics or to some kind of a culture or to some kind of a civilization, which may mean something and usually means nothing.

All these attempts are efforts to rid out of Judaism God, faith, worship, and such attempts now being made throughout the land, to my mind, account for the frightful confusion which is attacking our synagogues. Our spokesmen today are largely secularists, inexperienced social workers, if you will, who mess about with ritual and prayers and Bibles and religious education, when their real inspiration is not the religious inspiration at all. "The priests do not say Where is God?" And like the priests, so the people.

That is why our synagogues, conservative and liberal alike, are today not places of religious inspiration but hectic places of secular activity, vieing, competing with secular entertainments, with vaudeville and music halls in attracting people,--vulgar places, loud places, befuddling places. Under the guise of religion many of our synagogues and temples through their so-called temple centers and community houses and what not, are proffering a dubious fare to their disciples,--midnight frolics and cabarets and jazz dances and discussions of free love,--all under theegis of the synagogue, all in the name of religion.

In the olden days the layman used to know the difference between the sacred and the profane, and the synagogue and the temple would represent in his life to those qualities of sanctity a holiness, a dignity, a reverence which he sought in his own life to approximate. Today

the synagogues, in their intellectual confusion, have obliterated the distinction between the sacred and the profane, but instead of sanctifying the profane they have profaned the sacred, and many a Jew today--that holds true of the non-Jew as well--is beginning to wonder, is beginning to ask, What is the difference between a synagogue and a social club? All this by way of digression.

Now to return to our main argument. Religion is more than morality. Morality is concerned with the relation of man to his fellowman; religion is concerned with the relation of man to his God, to the universe. Emerson said Religion is the relation of the soul--God. Religion is concerned with those problems of the why and the whence, the wherefore and the whither--desperate problems which probe right to the very heart of existence. Religion has definite convictions concerning the purposes, the management of the cosmos, of the whole universe.

There are two possible conceptions, my friends, which one can take, two possible attitudes which one can entertain touching his relation to the universe or his conception of the universe. The one is the materialistic, the mechanistic; the other is the idealistic or the religious. One may conceive of the universe as a vast process of change and flux, without beginning, without end, without creator, without purpose, without intelligence, without will; a universe of motion but without a prime mover, a universe of life but without a life giver, a

universe of law but without a law giver--an impersonal, unheeding, unaffected universe of becoming, of ceaseless becoming. When all is said and done that is the attitude of the materialist; that is the attitude of every mechanistic theory of the universe; that is the attitude of the atheist, of the non-religious man. The man who holds to that view may be a very good man and a very noble man, but he is not a religious man, no more than a man who believes in private property can at the same time be a communist. They are mutually exclusive terms.

The other view is diametrically opposed to this view of the mechanist. The universe is not a thing but a personality. All that is is an expression of the mind that willed it to be; all that transpires is a manifestation of a mind at work; at bottom the universe is not matter but energy, and the quintessence of that energy is the divine mind. There is but one absolute reality in the world, and that is the free creative thought of God. In it all things have their origin, their meaning, their destiny. That personality which is the universe, and which is greater than the universe in the sense that the artist is greater than his art,--that mind willed it; that all things which exist shall have a measure of life in a greater or less degree, and that man shall have upon this earth the highest measure of life; that he shall be to a degree free, and because he shall be free he shall partake of the glory of creative effort and enterprise.

Now that, when all is said and done, is the attitude of religion to the mystery and to the mysterious problem of the universe. He who believes in it is a religious man; he who does not is not a religious man. He may be a good man but he is not a religious man. I said he who believes in it is religious. I should supplement that by saying he who believes in it and regulates his life accordingly is a religious man, for unless this conviction is forcefully held, unless this conviction becomes a mood and a motive and a directive influence in life, unless it becomes a part of the very warp and woof of one's mental and intellectual life, it is not conviction at all, it is meaningless.

When one has this religious conviction, this belief that the world, the universe is the dwelling-place of mind and will and intelligence and purpose, and that man is related to it in an essential way, this conviction leads to certain moods which we characterize as religious moods, and the first of these moods is reverence. Reverence is a characteristic religious mood. The man who believes in the existence of God, an all-embracing presence, stands in that presence not afraid, not crushed, but humbled, venerated. That same voice that warned Moses in the wilderness, "Remove the sandals from off thy feet, for the place upon which thou art standing is holy ground," that same voice warned the religious man, the profoundly religious man to avoid flippancy, arrogance,

pride, vainglory, but to stand in rapt and solemn adoration.

The Hebrew word for religion, my friends, is very significant. It is called Adonai---the fear of God; not fear in the sense of dread, but fear in the sense of revering, reverence. Even the flaming seraphs in heaven exclaimed, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory."

That is the first mood into which religion leads a man--a mood of reverence. And the second mood is the mood of what we may call worshipfulness, devotedness, piety. That too is a characteristic religious mood, and the person who has not got that mood to that extent is not really a profoundly impressed religious man. The truly religious man is conscious of his total dependence, overawed by the majesty, the sublimity and divinity all about him, and by his own imperfections and limitations he will wish to pour out his soul to the listening heart of the universe. He will wish to give expression to his sense of gratitude and thankfulness for the gift of life which is his, and for the challenge of living which is his; he will wish to reach up and make known the desperate needs of his life and soul in the midst of the trials and tribulations of the world.

The religious man will pray instinctively, spontaneously, pray for strength in his weakness, light in his darkness and hope in his desolation, confident that such

prayers can be answered because God is there to answer them. The truly religious man will have a mood of confidence. Alone in a mechanical world, heedless, careless about our concerns, man is helpless; nothing except his own strength can help him. But in a world in which God is father and kinsman and friend, a personality that can reach down and help, the religious man is full of confidence. "I shall not fear even if the earth shall be changed, when the mountains shall tumble into the midst of the sea." I read from the Book of Proverbs this morning that phrase, "Faith in God, that is a citadel of strength. Faith in God, that is a fountain of life."

The religious man, because of his religion, will come to look upon the moral law as God's law. And that is very important. The religious man does not say, as the secularist says, that the moral law is only social convention; that morality is a matter of social convenience or social experience. The religious man finds his sanction for the moral law not in human convenience but in the will of God. Moral laws are not social custom. Moral laws are eternal--to be just, to be true, to follow the best instead of the worst. These are elemental and eternal charts in human destiny. They are not subject to time or place. And the religious man believes, because his primary conviction leads him to the belief, that the moral law cannot be ignored with impunity; that there is such a thing as retribution and compensation in the universe; that

good yields good and evil yields evil all the time; if not now, then subsequently; if not in one's private life, then in one's public life; but always, inevitably, God's judgments are true. "Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness." "Even if thy judgments are sometimes as obscure as the deepest depths, they are righteous altogether."

So **that** the religious man thinks of his relations with his fellowmen, man to man, parent to child, husband to wife, not as being determined by custom, or even by law, because custom and law are almost always lagging behind the moral law; he thinks of his relations with all about him in the light of God's moral law, which is a call to self-perfection, to ceaseless aspiring, to rise to higher levels of self-perfection. That is why the religious man is not merely a moral man. He is a moral path-finder.

It is no accident in history, my friends, that the great moral ideals of the race were first uttered by lips which had been touched by the burning coal of divine inspiration. It was from the hearts of profoundly religious men, from prophets and sages and seers and men of God that the great codes of social righteousness were first given to mankind. It was the prophets of Israel, God-steeped, God-intoxicated men that first pronounced those doctrines of justice and love and righteousness, which to this day are our guide and our challenge.

These God-like men were not content merely

to abide by the laws of their times or by the customs of the society in which they found themselves. They transcended them because they were following the gleam of a light that was not of land or sea, but a consecration of the prophet's dream. Because the religious man believes in God and that man is created in the image of God, he believes that every human being is a God-like being, that every human life is holy and inviolable, and that to do wrong, to oppress, to exploit, to cheat, to be dishonest, to make a man unhappy is not merely to violate a social usage or law, ^{but} to desecrate the image of God, to be blasphemy, to be sacrilegious.

That is the relation between morality and religion. Religion is the dynamo, the power-house, the reservoir of moral enthusiasm. It drives moral activity; it inspires righteous conduct; it stimulates a man to clamber up the battlements of life,--to be moral and to be finer. But the driving motive, the impulse, is faith; faith in God, faith in the planfulness and meaningfulness of the universe; faith in the meaningfulness and purposefulness, if you will, of human life and human destiny; faith in the reality of what we call the spiritual; faith in the divine origin, not only of physical law but of moral law as well; faith in the divine compensation and retribution. That is religion. And the religious man believes; the religious man is reverent; he is devout; he is worshipful; he is pious; he serves, he loves, strives and is humbled.

Had I the time--which I have not--I should like to dwell a moment upon the technique of religion, upon the value of the **synagogue**, the rituals, public prayer, ceremonies and symbols. They, too, cannot and should not be spoken of lightly. They cannot be brushed aside as if of little value. They are the aids towards the religious life; they are the sign posts; they are the guides; they are reminders; they are stimulations towards the religious life. The religious sentiments, like the artistic sentiment, must from time to time be stimulated by things visible and real, or it not only remains dormant but inoperative and valueless in life.

While institutions and ceremonies are not the heart of religion, they are avenues along which one may travel to the sacred shrine of religion. And theology should not be spoken of flippantly, although it is a thing of the dim, distant past. Whatever one learns about God or thinks about God is theology. This morning I am not concerned with that problem; I am concerned just with clarifying a concept---What is religion?

Anyone who can say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and say it as though it expressed the deepest depth of his life, that man is religious. Anyone who can say, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom need I fear?" and mean it, that man is religious. The man who can say, "In thy hand I entrust my spirit when I am asleep and when I am awake, and with my spirit my body,

too. The Lord is with me, I shall not fear,"--that man
is religious.

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1. Diet. def - tremendous words - deft - wide horizons -
- long historical process of change.

(a) Its very indeterminacy & changeable career -
abuse = ^{Term} banned - pet theory; Multiplying
words - agnosticism -

(b) Now in all things it is important to
think clear - no quarrel - Pity - No more
hold it against - But he must - vict.
legisidomain - alchemy of muddled
thinking -

(c) Terms are important -

2. Thus e.g. compare Rel. with morality -
faith & humanism - Some laymen
- unvers; Some preachers; —

(1) W identical

(2) Related - Fruit - Tree.

(3) To be good - is not yet - Solder - Rule.

- consequence. Man who says "To
do good is my rel." confusing Cause & Effect

(4) To say that Rel. is nothing new >
- bejssing whole question - superseding

(a) Mechanism - without beginning. - endless process
of flux - Motion without - when all is
said & done - Man may hold this still
- but today this - communication -

(b) drama. opposed - Reasonability -

- all that is, expression of one -
- at bottom - Energy
- One absolute reality -
- all that Exists -
- God has united -
- This, when all is said -
- He who has it - & who regulates

6. I said - who regulates - Unless -
- words, motion, sound - harmony.

7. The conviction - 13/12 1966 to 6/1/67 - Review -
- not afraid - gives it - philosophy
- 1/1/67 - Rapid & Sublim. Communication
6/1/67 = 6/1/67

8. Unshap - Memorandum - Very - Total Dependence

side-tracking - Rel - morality - Rotary Club.

3. Again I say - I have no quarrel - Exposure -
- under covers, soc. palms off;

(a) I have no quarrel with Jews.
- reduce Judaism - Concern a Univ. effort
to read God -

(b) Accounts for frightful confusion of
- Synagogue - Sportsmen secularists
- unexp. soc. workers - mess about

1/2 all talk is pseudo - secularist
(c) Unconv. rhetorical style - bebe places &
ying with Vandell - Vulgar -
- Under guise - Syn. now profess
a delicious fare

(1) I agree knew diff. bet.

4. All this by way of depression - To return
- Rel. is Univ. & morality. Emerson -

5. Two possible conceptions - (1) Materialistic
(2) Idealistic