

What on earth is religion?

By ALAN HOWARD

RELIGION is not an easy subject to talk about. Apart from the fact that it usually arouses strong feelings-and feelings are rarely conducive to clear thoughts about a matter-the things with which religion has to do are so far removed from ordinary understanding, that they impose a certain restraint on the speaker from the start. The worst one has to fear in talking about anything else, is that one may hold one's ignorance up to ridicule or contempt. In expounding a view on religion one may all unwittingly offend.

Nonetheless one can, and up to a point should, repeatedly ask oneself what religion really is, if one is not to connive at some of the most lifeless traditions of human society or (by refusing to entertain the subject at all) to cut oneself off from one of the strongest supports and impulses of human nature. If only because religion has such deep roots in a past beyond any power of recall, one should ever and again ask, "Has it after all any reality which can still recommend it to the serious attention of modern man and, more specifically, warrant its inclusion in any programme of modern education?",

Any answer must depend primarily on what significance one places on a simple and universal fact of human experience, namely that the universe, and one's whole life and significance in it, have an origin far beyond the wit and hope of man to understand. We are aware---or we can become aware---of that environment of appalling grandeur and mystery in which we live, before which knowledge is silent, and in which our most important activities seem mere trivia.

One may ignore that experience; one may try to explain it away; but one cannot ultimately deny it. Any attempt to do so is about as convincing as the remark of the old lady, who, on seeing an aeroplane for the first time, said, "I don't believe it."

The acknowledgement in all ages that such an experience of itself substantiates a reality of being, beyond our comprehension, is, in whatever form men may have acknowledged it, all that is primarily meant by that little word "God". Since one must have a word to characterize one's experiences, then "God" is as good as any other, and far better than most alternatives that have from time to time been used.

That this word has come into such disrepute today is not because it no longer has any meaning, but because more and more people are rejecting the meaning they supposed it to have. It is the fate of words to tend to become identified with the thing they represent, and so it is easy for the unthinking in our day to imagine that by rejecting the word they have disposed of the thing.

Nothing could be more shortsighted. Not only is the "thing" as real today as ever, but one must not overlook the fact that meanings evolve as well as everything else. The problem of religion in our time is not so much that God is outmoded, but that God needs to be redefined in the light of all man's accumulated experience.

Not Proven

God then is still the primary and unavoidable datum of religion. It is what religion is about. The various attitudes men have taken towards it, the various pronouncements they have made about it, are the sources from which the various religions have sprung. Some men have gone in terror of God; others have tried to propitiate him, or even manipulate and exploit him; and some have made him the excuse for the most reprehensible and inhuman conduct that history bears witness to. But God continues in spite of this to be the ultimate hope and meaning of human experience.

In the last 100 years or so, it has become customary in science to ignore him, and to try to come to terms with the world on the basis of sense experience only and the logical thinking connected with it. This has led to, and up to a point consolidated, the widely prevailing materialistic view of man and the world in which God is entirely left out.

But science has "disproved" neither God nor religion in doing so. It has merely-and quite justifiably-restricted its investigation to the "how" and "why" of things. Religion, on the other hand albeit on the basis of what some might call an unscientific premise -has always been concerned with the "who".

Fortunately, there have been those in all ages who, perhaps because of the intensity in themselves of this initial "experience of God", have made the simple acceptance of, and a concentrated and devoted living with it, the main business of their lives. That is to say, they have dedicated themselves with all their powers of intellect, feeling and will to it.

They have even developed a technique, by which they have made their whole being, not just their senses and logical thinking, an instrument for its reception. These are those whom we know as the founders of religions, the mystics, the saints. In so far as they were able they have communicated the result of their researches to

mankind in general, together with advice on how to follow up and confirm their findings.

Whether their work, had it ended with the findings, would have recommended itself to any persons other than the few who were similarly disposed, is an open question. But in almost every case these men also made a great impression on the generality of mankind because what they did also transformed them. It transformed them in the moral stature of their personal lives; in the power of their personality; often in their practical and even political wisdom. In many cases, through their access to powers beyond the reach of ordinary men, they were able (during their lifetime or posthumously) to find ready acceptance of their teachings and practices, even among those least able to understand them.

It is a subtle form of self-deception to imagine that religion arose out of the gullibility of the ignorant masses who "fell for" what these religious leaders and teachers had to give. Granted that the masses were gullible; granted, too, there were charlatans and power seekers who corrupted the work-these men did.

But it is not gullibility when people recognize either by his work or by his person one who stands head and shoulders above his fellows, because he is an expert and an authority in the particular field he has marked out as his own.

We above all should recognize this. We live in an age inundated with experts and authorities. We can hardly express an opinion of our own which is not also the echo of a statement by such a one.

" Religious experts"

We, too, are often misled. Many an epoch-making discovery which we have received with all the world "on authority" has been found 10 years later to be worthless or bogus. But this does not discredit the genuine authority, either in this age or any other, either in this field of investigation or in that. It is in this sense that we can speak of experts and authorities in the religious life. Modern man is by no means forswearing the sophistication with which this age has endowed him by still going simply and humbly to the "religious experts" if he really wants to know what religion is all about. Their claim is direct, and as modern as today.

If anyone is prepared to follow certain disciplines and studies (which, after all, is no more than science enjoins on its followers mathematics is an obvious example), he may so deepen his experience of God as to come to an awareness of him beyond his former capacity to imagine.

Nobody, of course is obliged to do this, just as no one is obliged to study mathematics. But equally no one can say anything worthwhile against it, unless he has done what the teachers of the religious life recommend. In other words, only the thoroughly religious could disprove religion, if such a thing were possible.

That they do not, of course, is obvious. They have found that it has become real and meaningful for them, in the way that it has done so for countless others. The recognition' of the awe and wonder of the being of God leads step by sure step into a deeper and deeper experience of him.

Religion as a general human striving, of course, is one thing; each separate religion, with its conflicting contentions, is another. Even here, however, one should not yield too easily to despair or cynicism. A particular religion is nothing more nor less than' a specific way of being religious in the general human sense. It should surprise no one that a man born and brought up in India, say, will have a different way of being religious from a European or an American.

That is just the way things are. But it has no more to do with the essence of religion, than being born in London or Calcutta has to do with what is necessary for human being to come into the world, or living on curry (or roast beef) to do with the essential need and process of nourishment. The essential is religious experience, and this is a basic factor in all the religions.

Differences in doctrine

The most difficult thing about the different religions is, to put it naively, to decide which is the better or the right one, when certain doctrinal tenets, seem fundamentally different. The jingoistic loyalty to one's own tribal version of God which featured so powerfully in the past is perhaps on its way out at last. Though the dogmatic certainty of the Christian denominations still persists, there is every sign that a union which would make these separate Christians more "Christian" is eagerly desired on all sides.

It is a different matter altogether, however, as between, say, Christians and Mohammedans. It seems for ever unlikely that they would ever seek, let alone find, a common religious basis. The

question of which is the better or the right one here is something more than tolerance or compromise can solve.

One can nevertheless take comfort from looking back, if only one looks back far enough. We are a long way from that ancestor of ours who prostrated himself before a stone image, or offered up his children as a living sacrifice to some Moloch. Religion, too, evolves, and the separate religious forms are after all nothing more than mutations upon the evolutionary tree of religious experience.

If evolution does imply an increasingly perfect adaptability to the requirements of life (accepting man's need for religious experience as one of these requirements), then somewhere it must have given or now be giving a revelation or experience of God which stands higher than anything ever known before. It should thus be possible to submit the various religions to an objective evaluation which would put the matter beyond all doubt.

Obviously no adherent of any particular religion could do it. Even if he could be sufficiently objective, his declared adherence to one would make adherents of other religions smell bias in his conclusions. Equally, no one who was antipathetic to or ignorant of religion could do it. It could only be someone who, completely familiar with the sphere, the spiritual, from which all religions draw their content, could survey it with a scientific detachment untrammelled by any loyalty to this or that sect.

Evolutionary expedient

Strangely enough this is what Steiner claims to have done. He says, moreover, that it is something which in future will become increasingly possible for more and more persons to achieve.

The various religious faiths, in other words, are stages by which man evolves to an objective, knowing participation in the facts and beings of the spiritual world, which all religions have spoken about in one way or another. Each faith is a temporary evolutionary expedient by which the human consciousness is prepared for such an enlargement of itself as will enable it to know what it has hitherto only believed, to see what it has hitherto only felt.

When that happens, says Steiner, mankind will see that, for instance, with the coming of the Christ into the world a certain climax in evolution was reached, to which not only all that had happened previously contributed, but which all religions in their way foreshadowed.

The incarnation of Christ in both its symbolism (or "mystical fact", to use Steiner's term) and its historical authenticity was the final act of that creative-evolutionary making of man as the "image of God". By that act man reached the level where he could be invited by divinity itself to partake again in all that he had been obliged to forsake in order to grow into an independent but earth-conditioned creature. He may continue to occupy himself only with those earth conditions, or he may rise to a more universal life of which those conditions are only one aspect. The choice is his.

This is not a religion; at least not in the sense of a faith which one believes or of a tradition which one accepts because one has been brought up in these or those circumstances. It is not something which one compels or even merely persuades other men to believe. It is-or it is not-a fact of evolutionary development. It demands not faith but research, spiritual research, if it is to be substantiated in individual experience.

The major contribution that science has made to human progress is that it has forged a method by which the world may be known. In that method Rudolf Steiner was trained; for it he had the highest regard; and in the use of it he maintained the strictest integrity. It was the starting point of and basis on which all his more recondite researches into the spiritual sphere were made.

Only in one particular do Steiner and modern natural science part company-over the claim of modern science that there are limits to knowledge beyond which man can never go. He will have none of these limits. In his own contribution to the theory of knowledge he shows how, if one really understands what "knowing" means, there is a clear path from the knowing of the natural world to the knowing of the spiritual.