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What is religion?

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Idinopulos argues that it is the failure to recognize the difference between the observable and the nonobservable that confounds our understanding of religion.

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[Headnote]

The study of religion is not the same thing as the practice of faith, and therein lies the problem.

"Religion...means the voluntary subjection of oneself to God."

The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1913

"We have learned more about 'the religious,' but this has made us perhaps less...aware of what it is that we...mean by 'religion.' "

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 1962

I begin with two epigraphs. The first, which speaks for itself, is useful in pointing to the transcendent dimension of religion. Today increasingly, we who are students and teachers of religion are in danger of ignoring this dimension. The second epigraph is drawn from Wilfred Cantwell Smith's excellent study of the dilemma facing any serious study of religion. I should express the dilemma this way: our rationally based academic study of religion must be the study of what is observable, which includes historical knowledge of the rituals, mythologies, religious communities, ideas, teachings, institutions, arts, architecture. But religion is not exhausted by the observable. There is another dimension called the nonobservable, which is the source of religion's purpose and meaning. It is the failure to recognize the difference between the observable and the nonobservable, confusing one with the other or by denying one in behalf of the other, that confounds our understanding of religion.

What are the difficulties in understanding religion? Begin with the multiplicity of religions. History shows a bewildering variety of religions, cults, sects, denominational developments, and spiritual movements of every sort. Taken together, the world's religions reflect the geographic, social, and linguistic diversity of the planet itself. While no scholar can be expected to know about all these religions, anyone seriously studying any of them will hunt for some principle, definition, or criterion of meaning that identifies the "one in the many." What should we understand by "religion" amid the study of religions?

The question inevitably leads to comparison, a rational seeking of the intelligible, common element or pattern of meaning in a group of otherwise diverse entities. Comparison among religions assumes some sort of commonality among religions, a very big and perhaps faulty assumption. Unfortunately, most comparisons of religion seem to consist less in the discernment of commonality than in the imposition of it. Whenever, for example, different religions are compared according to such notions as deity, eternity, grace, judgment, salvation, and so on, selected criteria of meaning are used to organize data rather than to discern a pattern within them.

If there is something common to religions that makes useful comparison possible, it is not obvious to everyone. This should not surprise us if we recognize what Smith called "the inebriating variety of man's religious life."² Today, increasingly, religion scholars

