

# Religious Consciousness and It's Uncertainties

By J. H. Bavinck

When trying to get a general view of the history of religion two things strike us again and again—first, the similarity of the problems with which the different religions have struggles and, second, the great diversity of the problems, because we find that the five problems which we have enumerated persist. As we have seen, man realized how intimately he was related to the cosmos. He understood that he belonged it; that he was, as it were, a member of, and a cell in, the great body of the universe. This idea is so fundamental in many religions that nearly all the religious ideas and practices can be explained from it. Man felt that he was an integral part of the natural phenomena; the laws which dominate them dominate his own existence also. To possess religious wisdom meant to behave in harmony with the laws, to fit in with the order of the universe. The division of the tribe, the rules concerning marriage, the order of the religious feasts, were all inspired by the thought that man must be conscious of the fact that he belonged to the cosmic community and that he must subject himself to its rules. The meaning of life was to be harmonically included in the community, and together with it to be included in the totality of heaven and earth.

But as soon as man had accepted this idea, doubt continued to arise. Is man merely an atom in he universe, and nothing more? Does nothing in him transcend the natural order? Is he not at the same time at least an onlooker at the great cosmic play? Does not the fact that he speaks of himself as an “I” prove that he is also something different? Can he disassociate himself to some extent from this cosmos of which he is the member? Or is that *rebellion*; is the word “I” the greatest lie of our existence?

This is the first problem with which man is confronted, a problem which his existence implies and which is in essence religious. Man must solve this fundamental problem, in some way or other. There is no religion which does not struggle to find an answer to these vital questions.

The second problem confronting man concerns the norm. Man ever meets this norm, or, rather the norm meets man. It confronts him in the rules which his parents teach him when he is very young, but somehow its effect implies that it's authority exceeds that of the will of his parents. We have seen that primitive religion holds that in prehistoric time the High God or All-father established the morals and rules, which must therefore be respected because they remind us of God. In other religions we see that the norm to which man is subject is in the reality only the expression of the cosmic order as applied to human life. A son of one clan of a certain tribe must marry a daughter of another clan of the same tribe, because the one clan represents heaven in the greatest tribalism and the other the earth, and because heaven and earth marry. In the Chinese writing Po Hu T'ung we find the following questions and answers: “Why is it that the son of Heaven and the Feudal Lords marry nine wives at a time? It is to emphasize the importance of their states and to enlarge their progeny. Why does it happen to be nine? It is modeled after earth with its nine provinces which, responding to Heaven's creative force, leaves nothing without life.” The rules for the emperor and his subjects are patterned after the order of nature.

Nevertheless it did not escape man's observation that the norm contains an element of surprise. True, if man is but an atom in the cosmos, then the all-dominating power of the cosmic order has a hold on him, but this does not mean that he is confronted with the "thou shalt." Even if the very substance of the norm is that man must live in conformity with the structure and the rules of the universe, then the norm implies a certain amount of freedom. This in turn implies that man is able to make a choice, and to do this, he has to be something—something belonging to the cosmos, to be sure, but at the same time something higher, or something on a higher plane, as it were. This is the second problem with which every religions struggles, because it is implied in human existence itself.

The third question which every religion faces is the riddle of the life of man. Is life an act, or it is essentially merely fate? We have seen how this problem is approached from different angles by the different religions. Islam approaches it differently from the ancient astral religions of the Near East, and these in turn approach it differently from Hinduism and Buddhism. But there is always a common element; we always have to do with this same puzzle—how man, who knows every moment that he consciously acts, is at times overwhelmed by the queer notion that his life is like a film and that he himself is, as it were, a puppet in the hands of other powers.

When man is considered as merely an atom in the great cosmos, the dilemma is easy to solve. Then it is clear that life is nothing but fate, something that flows over us and in which we do not plan an active part. We undergo it, we are carried along by a current; we entertain the illusion that we ourselves are active, but all our activity is only powerless passivity. It is remarkable that some of these religions have actually expressed it this way. But we saw, too, that there was a certain fear to give in to this thought, because that would be denying our own life. Then it would no longer be our life; our acts would no longer be our acts; nothing would be ours, and that short and very mysterious word "I," which we use thousands of times, would become a fatal lie.

In the fourth place we consider the riddle of redemption. Again it is remarkable that the idea of redemption occurs in all religions. Actually there is no religion which accepts existence, as given by nature, as such. Through all these religions runs the notion that something must happen, that a change, that *redemption*, is necessary. Hence man *does* something: children are circumcised, initiated, or admitting into the clan after all kinds of circumscribed ceremonies. But even that is not sufficient. Several religions feel that a more radical redemption is necessary. Hinduism hold that true redemption is only found when man is free from this bewildering world and has become one with Brahman, the origin of all things. In Buddhism redemption has because such a central idea that it concentrates all its attention on it. A cry for redemption resounds through all the history of religion.

But this fact confronts man once more with the fundamental problem of his existence. Is redemption an act? Can man bring it about himself, or is it merely fate? Does it happen to man, but without his aid? Another equally urgent question is: must man be saved *from* the world, or together *with* it? Is redemption a cosmic thing, or is it something that involves man as an individual? And then the third, inevitable, question is, What is the result of man's redemption? What is this redeemed state for which man longs so passionately? Hence we see that the ideas and expectation regarding redemption multiply.

The fifth riddle which we mentioned is that of the invisible background of all things. The idea that behind this visible world there were mysterious, invisible, supernatural powers was evidently deeply rooted in the heart of man. Often the myths about these powers are very primitive and childlike, but they always contain something of a strange supposition that the world is only one side of reality. There is more to it, and what is hidden is more important and decisive than what is visible. As soon as man tried to penetrate into this mystery, however, he lost his way in a labyrinth of difficulties. Was this invisible something, hidden behind this world, a “he” or a “she” or an “it”? Or was it all three at the same time; or was it a confused community of gods and demons? When man regarded himself as merely a small part of the cosmos, it was only natural for him to think that the gods and demons centered in him, that he was the focus in which all rays met. But were these god and demons personalities? Did they have a personal will? Or were they merely powers in nature? And did all these mysterious powers merge into one world-soul?

We see that the history of religion depicts a great variety of divine forms and myths. That is why it is such a remarkable history. Again and again the same ideas crop up. Also, this history repeats itself many times. When examining its searching and groping we encounter so many different ideas that we are confused. They are sometimes bizarre, unbelievably child-like and foolish; yet sometimes they strike us as being sublime and imposing. At times these ideas led inhuman, cruel deeds and dreadful wars, but also to self-denial and neighborly love.

Modern man, non-religious man included, is confronted with the five questions of which we spoke. For they are basic to his existence and he must respond to them in some way or other. This need not be done philosophically – the answer to these basic problems can be given in the course of everyday life. Everyday actions, one’s sense of responsibility or the lack of it, one’s ambitions, the things one yearns for, all these are the concrete answer man gives to the basic problems of his existence. That answer is religious – that is to say, it touches the deepest religious realities with which man is confronted. Of course, it may be a negative answer that even denies the existence of invisible backgrounds. But however negative it may be, it responds to the riddles of our existence. Therefore every human life is essentially a choice and a decision. It says something and it does something.

If all this is true, we may ask why these questions, which every religion poses in some way or other, are so unfathomable. I think it is because all these questions concern man’s existential relationships. As long as he is occupied with himself only and looks no further, he can fancy himself to be self-sufficient. But as soon as he becomes aware of his relationships, he becomes stupefied, and asks: what am I in this great cosmos? What am I over against the norm, that strange phenomenon in my life that has authority over me? What am I in my life that speed on and on- a doer or a victim? What am I in the face of that remarkable feeling that overwhelms me sometimes, the feeling that everything must be changed and that things are not right as they are? What am I over against that very mysterious background of existence, the divine powers? It is in this area of existential relations that man is confronted with the crucial matters of life – and one of these is religion. Religion convinces man that there are relations. It reveals the “seams” of creation where one thing is connected with another. We can now give the following definition of religion: Religion is the way in which man experiences the deepest existential relations and gives expression to this experience.

It needs no argument that the five questions which we have discussed up to now, and which all concern the fundamental relations of man, are in essence one. The answer to one of them always implies the answer to the others. We realize, certainly, that we are not dealing with five different relations but who regards either *nirvana*, or money, or *valhalla*, or the well-being of the state, or honor, or being lost in Brahman, as the *summum bonum*, and who, when speaking of redemption, does this in words borrowed from this *summum bonum*, says at the same time what he thinks about the questions concerning the norm, God, and his own place in the cosmos. The one always implies the other. It is impossible to answer partially to the questions regarding existence—every word one speaks touches upon all five questions at the same time. But our investigation has shown that man has often been uncertain. When he started to formulate an answer he dared not follow it through to its logical conclusion because it threatened to throw mankind into precipices which mankind had not suspected. The history of religion reveals a decided hesitation and uncertainty in this respect.

We can say that mankind had to take back its words again and again, and that it never came further than to a partial answer. But even if the answer is partial and uncertain, the fact remains that all questions force themselves upon man as one all-inclusive question: “Who am I, small mortal man, in the midst of all these powerful realities with which I am confronted and with which my life is most intimately related?” This very simple question reveals all the problems of religion in a nutshell.

The Church between Temple and Mosque, J. H. Bavinck (1965) Ch. 8