WHAT DOES 'IMPLICIT RELIGION' MEAN?

The first chapter suggested that apprehending the reality, or intuiting what that reality would feel like if we could share its apprehension, requires a sympathetic imagination, in order to raise awareness of one’s own experience and to search for echoes in it of what is being described. It may be compared to reading poetry.

The second chapter showed that naming the reality that is apprehended in this way is less difficult. We search for a form of words that will effectively communicate as much as possible of what is essential and lead to as little misunderstanding as possible.

Defining the terms used in that name is less easy, but is the task of this chapter. For we are back with the problem of trying to describe, at a fairly straightforward level of communication, the core of that which has been apprehended existentially.

The needle in the haystack
In the case of ‘implicit religion’, this difficulty is compounded by our desire to leave open-ended the specific content of that which is apprehended. We could say that we are looking for a noun than an adjective or adverb, less for a ‘what’, than for a ‘how’. Like the proverbial needle in the haystack, we are unlikely to distinguish it from its surroundings, until it pricks us.

This problem is, of course, not unique to ‘implicit religion’. Religious studies have similar difficulty in defining religion. As Ugo Bianchi (The History of Religion, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975:201) says, until we have found what we are looking for, we cannot be quite sure what the ‘religion’ we are looking for, looks like! (We have more idea, of what it feels like.) However, the same problem occurs in other spheres. The engineer will say of the dam that has collapsed, or the car that won’t start. We can’t know what the problem is, until we’ve put it right. (Economists and politicians might feel the same.)

A definition of implicit religion, therefore, is by no means intended to describe the content of the implicit religion that is present in any particular situation. It will not say, for instance, ‘Religion’ consists of beliefs and rituals and fellowships, and therefore we are simply searching for their secular parallels. These may be pointers, raising questions that should be asked; but, with implicit religion as with religion, we may miss the heart of what we are seeking, if we only use the existing lenses in order to find parallels. It may be possible to translate a specific implicit religion into such terms, but we will need to remember that it is a translation.

The motive power, with which we are concerned, may be an existential response; it may be described by its owner(s) in terms of what they feel to be a truth; but to then suggest that they do so ‘because’ they thus believe, might well be to mistake our interpretation for their reality. It would put the cart (of myth) before the horse (of ritual), both as a report of their self-description, and as an explanation of their behaviour.

Defining implicit religion is a way of laying down the parameters within which, whatever is found, will fall. As we reflect upon behaviour (in the broadest sense), or hit upon an explanation for some particular aspect of it, the description of the reality pointed to by this attempt to describe it, will serve as guide-lines. Applying them, we may decide that the explanation is (for instance), psychological rather than implicit-religious. We may then tentatively conclude that a further, implicit-religious understanding either is, or is not, possible.

Three definitions
Three definitions of implicit religion may, then, be suggested. They are three descriptions of the general reality that has been apprehended, and to which each expression tries to point. Their plurality may suggest a lack of clarity of or decisiveness. Certainly, all three have been worked with for over a quarter of a century without any preference emerging. However, it might therefore also be suggested, that, far from indicating conceptual uncertainty, their plurality demonstrates phenomenal certitude. Their number, and hence relativity, witness to the absoluteness of that which is apprehended. It is a fact of experience, before it is a logical construct.

The first of these definitions is, Commitments. If, in its turn, we look to the Oxford English Dictionary for definitions of ‘commitment’, we find a certain paucity of description. (Rodney J Hunter, in Implicit Religion: Journal of the Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality; vol II, 1999, shows how the gap might be filled.) This may illustrate something of the character of what the word means: we know its reality, but find it difficult to put into words.

It points to behaviour whose explanation involves, in part, the exercise of a certain freedom. Fortunately the term does not suggest a restriction to self-conscious and deliberately willed, individual decisions. Commitments can be inherited with one’s mother’s milk, and be entirely unconscious, unknown even to their owner, until perhaps brought to the surface by an individual or national moment of crisis (literally, a ‘judgement’, i.e a ‘revelation’- of what we are
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