

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 2

Article 8

2010

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Recommended Citation

Cox, Olivia (2010) "Speculation on the Nature of Religion," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol2/iss1/8>

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Speculation on the Nature of Religion

by Olivia Cox

The human concerns that inspired the founding of many religious traditions and still pervade them today create a multi-faceted and strikingly diverse myriad of world faiths. Tracing these complex, rich religions to their barest foundations and considering the question of what unites them at the core is a daunting charge. This question is made slightly more manageable, however, and less overwhelming if it is pursued in conjunction with an examination of my own religious experiences. It is possible to gain deeper insight into some facets of the universal nature of religion by reflecting on my own religious journey, a tenuous web of spiritual ups and downs that began with an inquisitive high school student seeking answers and seeking a place. By considering each step forward and tumble backwards on my spiritual path, I have crafted my own unique definition of the nature of religion. I was initially motivated to seek a religious venue for the purpose of effectively understanding my place in a high school community where I felt irreversibly lost. For this reason, my perception of religion is largely based on orienting myself in the world through the use of a spiritual model, the guidance of a moral compass, and the consensus of distinctions between the sacred and the secular.

As a high school sophomore, I found myself disheartened by and entrenched in the stereotypes imposed in what seemed like every aspect of my school community. Feeling almost paralyzed by the limitations of my label, my high school caste of the quiet, smart girl, I encountered the intensely human experience of seeking direction. Day after day, my mind teemed with an inexpressible number of questions that occupy the recesses of other wondering human brains as well: Why am I here? What am I meant to do? Why am I specifically the way I am? Why are we all here? For me and probably for many others, the list multiplies

as one delves deeper into consideration of the human condition. A monumental step in my religious path was accepting the reality that it would never be possible to answer these questions in ways decisive and conclusive enough to completely quell my every existential concern. Instead, I realized, accepting the views and tenets of the Methodist church is the best way for me to address those concerns and to gain a better understanding of myself in relation to the world around me.

Many religion scholars stress this role of religion, as a venue for humans to acquire a constant, orienting point about which to construct their lives. In his influential work, The Sacred and the Profane, Mircea Eliade expands on this concept, stating that against the chaotic backdrop of a world “in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established,” religion “reveals an absolute fixed point, a center” (21). As a Methodist, an integral part of my fixed point is the purpose to lead a life with Jesus Christ as my model. In a world that so often hurdles me into positions in which I wonder why I am where I am and the way I am, having an ideal for which to strive and a purpose to pursue allows me to make the most of my time on Earth. In my view and my experience, aspiring to a Jesus-like existence is not the culmination of a search, but rather the initiation of steps in the right direction. As soon as I affirmed my beliefs in Methodism, I was not completely satisfied and inwardly content; my concerns with existence, my high school, and society were not magically resolved because I had “found religion.” I still wrestle with those questions on a daily basis, but I am better able to cope with them, less prone to being emotionally and spiritually crushed by them, now that I at least have the orienting center point of a spiritual ideal. For me, aspiring to a spiritual ideal, tailoring the thoughts, actions and words of my everyday life to fit it as closely as possible, has provided me with a clear, uncompromising purpose and consequently with a starting point for what I am sure will be a life-long quest of seeking to understand the real. In reflecting on the reasons I entertain the spiritual aspiration of a Christ-like life and the implications of that aspiration, I am able to delve deeper into the question of the nature of religion, for the establishment of

an intentional spiritual model is an integral part of the foundation on which much religious experience, including my own, is built.

In addition to providing direction through a spiritual ideal for which to strive, religion has also granted me the invaluable security of a guiding moral compass. As a spiritually searching high school student, I had already encountered many times the genuinely human experience of being at a crossroads. I was well aware of the reality that whether monumental or trivial, we actively make decisions throughout our lives on Earth; it is a consequence of being human. In accepting this reality, however, an intriguing question arose in my mind: What should play a role in our choices? Should we rely on the fleeting circumstances of the moment to formulate an action plan, adopting a case-by-case system for all the quagmires we encounter? To me, this does not seem a favorable option. My religion provides me with a living, working guide for doing the right thing for myself and others. I find security in the moral code prescribed by my spiritual beliefs; it is always available to consult during times when I am questioning or unsure of my path through life. In considering my own religion’s established views on ethical conduct, which I utilize as the basis about which to construct my life, I gain greater insight into the nature of religion as a guiding reference for people as they face the complex, challenging choices and struggles of everyday life.

In speculating on the complex nature of religion and examining it within the context of my religious experience, an additional aspect of religious tradition presents itself. At the foundation of all religion is the distinction of what to revere, what to consider holy. At one juncture on my spiritual path, I found myself grappling with this concept of holiness. After approaching life with a largely secular viewpoint for many years and then re-accessing the belief system of the Methodist church, I struggled with what seemed to me at the time to be a hazy, ambiguous line between the sacred and the profane. It seemed frighteningly risky to rely solely on my own thoughts, feelings, and decisions to tackle the harrowing task of categorizing the secular and the sacred. I choose to accept what the Methodist church has assessed as holy not only because I have faith in the steps and processes that led to

those assessments, but also because I question my capacity as a single individual with a single, sometimes narrow perspective to make a truthful, valid distinction between the sacred and the profane. The possibility of my perception of the world, which is subject to the changing conditions of my circumstance, to inspire me to misguidedly label the sacred is a frightening thought. For me, the distinction between the sacred and profane in a religious context is attractively secure since it is surely based on the collective views of more than just one individual. However, the decision to share in those collective views motivates an interesting and challenging question: How should I gauge the truth of the perspectives of the group? Is it right to trust them merely for the reason that they are collective and not individual? These are questions that continue to shape my religious experience and continue to make my religious journey a dynamic, ever-changing one.

In examining my own decision to accept the Methodist categories of the sacred and the profane, I facilitate a deeper look into the nature of religion and the draw of a concrete, inarguable set of practices, rituals, and texts to regard as holy, as prescribed by a particular religious path.

The many facets of religion are created by the human elements that pervade them and human dilemmas that inspired their founding. While formulating an uncompromisingly true explanation of the nature of religion is an overwhelmingly challenging charge, it is possible and potentially more valuable to instead gain insights into the common, universal elements of religion by reflecting on my own religious experience. I am able to glimpse the nature of religion through examination of my own motivations for seeking religion, which included a thirst for individual orientation and a need to define the sacred and the secular, as well as consideration of the life-shaping, spiritual tools provided by my religion. Reflecting on these purely personal religious elements facilitates a peeling away of the diverse workings of the world's many religions and a closer look into their common foundations, creating a better understanding not only of the human inspiration to seek and to possibly found a religion, but also of the nature of religion itself.

WORKS CITED

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc, 1987. Print.