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A QUARTERLY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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Liberation as a Religious Theme*

The problems which I wish to attack in the present paper (though I can of course do no more than scratch the surface) are set both by the content of the study of religion and by the cultural situation from which we approach that study in western universities. It has long been observed that no difficulty in our discipline is greater than that of finding a satisfactory definition of what it is that we study. I know of no definition of religion which has won anything like general acceptance among workers in the field. Many now regard the search for a definition of religion as inherently fruitless. However, I continue to be interested in this question, and believe that it is worth devoting some energy to trying to get a little closer to answering it. Why could this effort be worthwhile?

As members of an academic society for the study of religion, we are concerned to facilitate the progress and development of our (relatively new) discipline in Canadian universities. The claim which most of us make, that religion is a subject which is considerably neglected in our universities, and that it is worthy of study by academic techniques in departments devoted exclusively to this purpose, suggests that we believe that the study of religion is a distinctive science or discipline. If so, most of our colleagues in other disciplines will expect us to be able to demonstrate that our science is devoted to the study of a distinct object, not already the province of another discipline; that we have a distinctive method for studying it; and that the results are of public interest. If we say, as many of us at present find in all honesty that we must, that we do not know exactly what religion is, and that we are not even certain whether some of the phenomena commonly spoken of as religious really belong in our field or not, some legitimate scepticism may be aroused. Perhaps, however, we have a distinctive method. But it does not seem that we have. We employ, so far as I am aware, no weapons which are not also employed by others, though the way we employ them is doubtless conditioned by the object on which we train them. But that only brings us back to the first question. What is religion? How do we separate this phenomenon or experience from the totality of what is presented to the mind by the world as a whole?

In approaching this question, we must recognize that the nature of religion has come under question within what we should normally regard as religion itself. In my own special field of contemporary Christian thought, it is notorious that the meaning of religion is one of the burning questions. Karl Barth began in his early days to establish a diastasis between the faith which

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he was concerned to express and the religion within which former exponents of Protestant Christianity had located it. In trying to establish a total separation between theology and the philosophy of religion, he broke an alliance between theology and the academic study of religion which had existed in the nineteenth century, and an even more traditional alliance between theology and the liberal university. Barth's mature view of religion is a subtle and dialectical one. On the one hand, religion is unbelief. It is man's godless but perennial attempt to do for himself what only God can do for him – to establish an image of God in his mind, and establish himself in security before this image. Thus religion, as unbelief, is both idolatrous and self-righteous, and must be abolished by the revelation of God, which establishes the true image of God in the world, and also the true relationship between God and man. However, the Barthian dialectic is concealed in the word 'abolition,' which is an inadequate translation of Barth's own *Aufhebung*. In Barth, as in Hegel, the word means not only to abolish, but also to reinstate on a higher level. And indeed, after subjecting religion to a prophetic blast of criticism, Barth restores it once more in the form of the true religion under grace. Once man renounces his unbelief, or permits it to be justified by faith, so that he is at once believer and unbeliever, his religion is taken up by grace and becomes the true religion, or idealized Protestant Christianity. So it appears that in the last analysis Barth's original definition of religion as unbelief breaks down, and must be expanded to include believing Christianity. Some revised definition now seems called for, but if Barth offers one, it has escaped my notice. The true religion is not so much defined as pointed to, in the form of the concrete activities of the Protestant church.

Far more influential among the wider public for theology has been Bonhoeffer's criticism of religion, though it is not based on any such precise definition of religion as Barth's. Obviously Bonhoeffer's criticism of religion is influenced by Barth's, but it differs from it in a number of very important ways. For one thing, while Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth that unbelief is, in this world, the constant companion and alter ego of faith, he does not consider that unbelief must always take the form of idolatry, and hence of self-righteousness. It can, and today does, just as easily take the form of godlessness or nihilism. Bonhoeffer does not think, as Barth does, that everyone worships something. Secondly, Bonhoeffer's view of religion is much less theologically loaded than Barth's, and is far more concrete and even sociological. Religion is a garment which Christianity has worn for nineteen hundred years. During this period, it was the obvious garment to wear. Religion was a meaningful phenomenon in the culture; there were other religions about; and so Christianity became easily intelligible, and in other ways could be assimilated within the culture it sought to enter, if it was presented as a religion, or as religious. Religion is thus a cultural form of interpretation, which Christianity could and did adopt, while this form remained viable. Today, however, it is no longer viable, in Bonhoeffer's opinion. Men are simply not religious any more, he thought. If Christianity continues

to be presented as religion, its appeal will be limited to a fast-disappearing group of conservatives, the 'last survivors of the age of chivalry.' Hence the theoretical distinction between Christianity and religion, established by Barth and his friends, has to be carried through systematically in the interpretation of Christianity, as well as in the cultural forms it must henceforward assume. Thus Bonhoeffer calls for a non-religious interpretation of Christianity, or for an interpretation of its central doctrines and practices 'after the manner of the world.'

We need not for the moment enter into the details of what Bonhoeffer may have meant by religion, but we should pause to consider the consequences for our own study if he is right. If Bonhoeffer is working with an adequate definition of religion, and if his project for a non-religious interpretation of Christianity should be successfully carried through by his successors, it will follow that the new form of Christianity ought not to be studied by persons such as ourselves, but confined to theologians. On the other hand, it will be possible to include the study of the Christian past within the history of religions. Here will be a case of a religion which has undergone a metamorphosis, and emerged as something that is no longer a religion, though it is far from clear what it will have become. Perhaps we should then place it with Confucianism, as a cultural phenomenon which we are probably the best people to study, though it does not seem to fit too well into any of the tentative definitions of religion which we employ.

I confess that, in spite of my liking for paradox and dialectic, doubtless induced by my studies in German theology, this conclusion is a bit too much for me. As a student of religion, I am sure that I am going to be interested in non-religious Christianity, if it ever comes into being, and that I shall be interested in it for reasons of the same sort as those which have already aroused my interest in other religious phenomena. Hence I must conclude that, whatever Bonhoeffer's implicit definition of religion actually was – and his interpreters will tell us how far we can say what the answer to that question is – it must have been too narrow, too much the product of internal discussion among Protestant theologians, to be useful for our purposes. On the other hand, when Bonhoeffer said that religion is coming to an end, his words awoke a great echo among theologians and laymen all over the western world. If he was wrong, in the sense that what he advocated as the non-religious interpretation of Christianity would still from our point of view have been religion, he must have been right about something. This brings me to my next point.

It is surely beyond dispute that if religion has not come to an end in the west, something fairly drastic has been happening to it. The cultural changes which have been going on in the west since the Enlightenment have at least called in question the traditional functions of religion, as exemplified in Christianity and Judaism. It is, after all (to offer a British understatement), not only the theologians who have been dissatisfied with religion. A more drastic formulation of the problem than Bonhoeffer's, which has recently

attracted the attention of a younger group of Protestant theologians, goes back to Hegel and Nietzsche. For these thinkers, the problem is not that religion has come to an end, but that God is dead. Since western religion has been so much bound up with God, this may be a more poetical way of saying what Bonhoeffer said. 'God is dead' is not easy to discuss in its literal meaning. But it may fairly be taken to refer to the cultural change which occurs when a once authentic and meaningful symbol, possessing genuine power, ceases to convey to men what it once did. Men no longer find imaginative and spiritual power in the idea of God. The idea is no longer needed to explain either the facts or the human experiences which it once meaningfully explained and related. The functions of 'God' have been dispersed among other agencies, from science to psychotherapy, and it is not clear that enough is left to make the term useful any more. It might thus be possible for the study of religion to trace the story of the birth, life, and death of one of the greatest symbols man has ever known. All this would, of course, refer to what happens in human culture, and would hardly permit us to draw any metaphysical conclusions, positive or negative. What is interesting for our present inquiry is to remember that religion is not necessarily bound up with the symbol of God, important as it has been. There is reason to think that this symbol plays little or no part in many of the phenomena of eastern religion, from early Buddhism to Chinese Confucianism and Taoism. We might look for signs of the continuance of religion in the west, after the death of God.

But all this sort of talk about the death of religion, or of God, surely gives a genuine urgency to our question of understanding the essential meaning of religion, when we consider the responsibility of our discipline, not just to our students and academic colleagues, but also to the wider public which the university serves. Can there be a non-religious Christianity? Can religion in the west survive the catastrophe of the death of God? Obviously it might survive in pockets or sub-cultures which resist, intellectually and in their corporate life, the changes symbolized by such phrases, but it is already clear that such pockets will be small, and we could well ask if they are going to be important enough to engage our serious attention, when we consider the vast cultural movements which abound in our field of study. One may add for good measure that the changes which have taken place in the west seem to have counterparts in the impact of western industrial and technological culture upon traditional eastern religious culture, as in India and China. Have we anything to say about religion that is of genuine human importance to those large sections of the public we serve which have participated in these changes? If not, can we expect more than the most modest public support for our own activities as students of religion?

I have tried to show so far that a well-grounded definition of religion would be useful, and that it might clear up much confusion, both among theologians and other academics, and among the general public. The confusion is both intellectual, bearing on the problem of understanding religion, and cultural, bearing upon the problem of the future development of religion

in the modern world. I personally believe, contrary to what has usually been supposed by liberal academics, that this is in fact, and ought to be, a matter of concern to most of us, although we are right to be somewhat detached in our support of particular religious institutions. Let me now turn to the question of the job which a definition of religion would have to do in order to be useful in such ways. After that, we shall consider the usefulness of some existing types of definition, before turning to the contribution which the theme of liberation may have to offer to the question.

What kind of definition do we want? Earlier, I objected to the theologians' definitions, because they seemed loaded. They were normative definitions, offered from the standpoint of a particular position within religion, and orienting the phenomena they take into account towards that position. Most investigators in the academic study of religion would rule out that kind of definition, and look for a more scientific one. But what could this be? We might begin by suggesting that a definition of religion would have to describe the facts of religion, in such a way that it could be checked against them; it would please us to the extent that it conformed to the known facts. This suggestion sounds fine, but introduces a very difficult problem of circularity. What are the facts of religion? We shall only know this when we know which of all the many facts in the world are to be accounted religious, and we have already discovered important difficulties in the way of knowing this. In fact, we started looking for a definition of religion partly in order to overcome the frustration of not knowing which facts were religious facts, and hence relevant to our study. So a definition of religion will work well if it conforms to the facts, but it will also be the function of our definition to determine which facts are relevant. It might look as if almost any definition would work, provided we allowed ourselves to be guided by it, without complaining that something important had been left out. But that is not what we do in practice. We object to trial definitions of religion that they work all right in limited contexts, but do not cover equally well all the facts which we consider relevant.

It looks, therefore, as if there is some agreement, at least among western scholars, about the phenomena to be regarded as religious, and hence to be taken into account when we try to define religion. Perhaps, then, we are looking for a definition which contains the seeds of an *explanation* of religion, and not just a description. Ideally, we should like a definition of religion which works equally well for Christianity and Buddhism, Confucianism and Judaism, primitive and modern religions. Such a definition would have power and usefulness to the extent that it showed not only what these cultural phenomena have in common, and what differentiates them from phenomena that are not to be recognized as religious, but also what is going on in all of them, what their dynamic is. A definition of religion that will work for such a wide variety of phenomena will probably be rather vague; on the other hand, most of the more precise definitions seem to work well only for the context in which they were constructed, and often to be almost useless in

another culture. This is the difficulty not only with the theologians' definitions, which are so strongly determined by the problems of Christian thought, but also with those of western philosophers of religion, who are often only theologians wearing a different hat, like Schleiermacher and Tillich, and in a sense Rudolph Otto. Their definitions of religion are implicitly if not explicitly theistic, and one wonders what a Buddhist makes of them.

Another assumption has been creeping into the last paragraph or so, and we must drag it up into the light, and see if it holds good. If we ask for a definition of religion that will work well for all the phenomena commonly studied in comparative religion courses, we are assuming that religion is really a single whole, or a related complex of phenomena. But this assumption requires justification, if we are to persist in making it, and it has been called in question by several investigators. It has been pointed out that it is extremely difficult to find equivalents for the term 'religion' in the languages of other cultures, and that what we call 'religions' are usually not so called by those who participate in them. The most radical suggestion along these lines of which I have knowledge comes from Werner Cohn, of the sociology department at the university of British Columbia, who suggests that the term religion really belongs exclusively to Christianity and to the Christianized Judaism of the west; a consequence of this might be that other 'religions' should be studied not by theologians, but (one imagines) by sociologists. The point is not a frivolous one since, if religion is a distinctive phenomenon only in the Judaeo-Christian west, what we have been accustomed to call religions in the context of other cultures should not be studied by 'religionists' but by members of other disciplines or area studies. Perhaps they should indeed be studied by sociologists or social anthropologists, or perhaps by students of the literature of these cultures, or they should form part of appropriate area studies. Leaving aside our natural imperialism, since there would be plenty left for us to do even if we lost the right to study Asian religions, for example, few of us will be prepared to concede that we do not recognize something important in common between the religions – though we may not yet know what it is – which unites them to one another as importantly as to the culture of which they form a part. One could add that the problem also arises for a particular religion, whenever it leaves a particular culture and takes root elsewhere, as Christianity and Buddhism, in particular, have done, and as Islam has not. Once we abandon normative thinking, it becomes quite difficult to say in what sense the *dharma* is one in Buddhism, or in what sense there is any residual Christian unity among the three hundred or more divided sects.

Looking at the same and other evidence, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith has concluded, in his valuable book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, that we ought to abandon the term religion for academic purposes. Unfortunately, the alternatives which he suggests also seem more idiomatic in a western context, and it is hard to feel that Smith has solved the problem he so clearly and learnedly defines. He evidently shares the conviction of most of us that the religions are particular examples of the same sort of thing, but his way of

saying so does not altogether escape from the context of Christian thought. Here at any rate is one clear alternative that emerges. Either for theological or for other reasons, we may wish to say that the religions are not examples of the same sort of thing; in that case, we shall study them, each in its own terms, without regard to the problems that arise in others, relating them to the history of the cultures in which they have developed, and using whatever discipline seems appropriate. We may wish, with Protestant neo-orthodoxy, to separate Christianity because it is not a religion, or with Werner Cohn, to do so because it is the only religion. Or with many Buddhologists, we may consider the study of the religion we are interested in too absorbing for us to enter into questions raised outside our own study. This alternative would lead to dismantling existing departments of religion, and to founding no fresh ones. It would also lead in my opinion to the loss of valuable insights into the particular religions, by depriving those who study them of adequate dialogue with those who study their counterparts in different cultures.

I have to say that I myself, in spite of the considerable influence of Protestant neo-orthodoxy at an earlier stage of my own intellectual development, have not been convinced of the case for separation, intellectual or administrative, of the study of the religions. So I prefer the other alternative. I should like to find a definition of religion which would bring out the justification for the impression, which I and others cannot escape, that the religions really do have enough in common to be regarded as particular cases of the same thing. Different as they are, they may still differ by way of being different answers to the same question. But what is the question, unless it is something as vague as 'the meaning of life'?

The difficulties which arise when we attempt to offer a definition of religion which would work for all the developed or 'higher' religions are compounded when we try to find a definition which works equally well for primitive and modern religious phenomena. It seems clear that religion does not have the same functions in a primitive society as it does in a modern one. How are we to determine which of these functions is of central importance? Perhaps, for primitive man, the functions of religion which have been superseded or taken over by other agencies were more important than any which his religion may have had in common with ours. But if there is such a thing as religion in general, it will have to be sought rather in what survives such cultural changes than in what has been lost. The same will have to be true of more recent cultural changes, such as those which western religion has undergone in the last one hundred years or so, and of which we spoke earlier on.

We can say, perhaps, that for a definition of religion to succeed, it would have to exhibit what religions have in common, when they are found in different cultural forms, including both the forms created within roughly contemporaneous cultures in different parts of the world and the forms created by different stages in the development of culture from primitive to modern. If there is any validity in such a process of defining, in accordance

with such conditions as these, we shall be forced to conclude that a great many actual religious phenomena must somehow be non-essential to religion, or given by the culture rather than by the religion itself, as Bonhoeffer thought 'religion' was in relation to Christianity. Even theism, so much prized by the west, may from this point of view turn out to be non-essential to religion. That could, of course, raise Bonhoeffer's question again, should Christianity survive the crisis of the death of God in recognizably theistic form. Religion may not be the only significant force in Christianity.

I think that everyone will recognize that the difficulties of defining religion are very great, and I am certainly not ready at this point to produce a definition that will meet my own conditions. What I propose to do now is something slightly different. I want to examine a particular theme, which most people agree occurs within most or all religions, and which in my opinion meets some of the conditions which I think a definition of religion ought to meet. If it met all of them, and if nothing else met them so well, then my theme would be a good candidate for recognition as the essence of religion, to use a nineteenth-century term. Without suggesting that it actually does meet them, and without therefore putting my theme forward as equivalent to religion itself, I want to see if an intelligible account can be given of it, and to what extent it can in fact help us in our search for the understanding of what religion is centrally about. This theme, as my title indicates, is liberation.

By liberation I mean to indicate what is sometimes called salvation in western language. Traditionally, Christianity in particular has been centrally concerned with two themes, the theme of God and the theme of salvation. The integration of the two themes has been distinctive of the work of some thinkers, from Athanasius to Barth, who have won particular acclaim among Christians as interpreters of their religion. The Christian God is a God who saves man. Similarly, for Christians salvation is the work of God. The distinctively Christian view of God as Trinity is bound up with what has been concluded about God from the history of the events of Christian salvation. Indeed, it could be said that the orthodox view of God, enshrined in the Nicene creed, is inseparable from the salvation formularies which attribute salvation to God's grace alone, and in no degree to the work of man. Modern Protestant theology, particularly in the work of Barth, has carried this integration further by its Christological concentration. Christ thus embodies God, man, and salvation in a single symbol. Yet this is the faith which is undergoing the crisis of the death of God. Does it follow that Christianity will also have to give up its interest in salvation? There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this is what has happened on the popular level. It is not just Matthew Arnold, but a vast multitude of lay church members, who regard Christianity as morality tinged with emotion. In this popular residual Christianity, God and salvation have equally disappeared. The current death-of-God theologies tend either to lose their emphasis on salvation, in spite of the importance they attach to Jesus, or to reintroduce God, as Altizer does, in an

unfamiliar form. The latter seems the more fruitful way. When Altizer talks about the *gospel* of Christian atheism, he seems to me to indicate his continued interest in the question of salvation, and indeed it might be suggested that his proposals are well suited to the present cultural stage of Christianity, since they concentrate upon the issue of salvation, and allow what is said about God to be determined by the question of finding an appropriate contemporary meaning for salvation. If Christianity should take this general direction, it will clearly be possible to consider it along with non-theistic religions of salvation, of which Buddhism, in some forms at least, may be regarded as the most conspicuous example. To do this has, incidentally, been one of Altizer's own interests in his writings.

My proposal, then, is to see what can be learned from concentrating on the question of salvation, or its equivalents, leaving aside for the time being even so important a question as that of God, even in the disguised form of Rudolph Otto's 'Wholly Other.' I do not think that I am wrong in supposing that, in one form or another, every major religion has been interested in this question, and further that something like the question of salvation has appeared in some non- and even anti-religious movements. To say this is to suggest that salvation is, if not a universal, at least a widespread human question, and that the way it has been answered has done much to determine the way man lives his life in different cultures. It is also important to my proposal to note that the question seems to be fully alive today, though in a form appropriate to the nature of the modern world. Today what interests people are the possibilities of salvation in this world, either for the individual or for the community to which he belongs. It is partly for this reason that I prefer the term liberation, which also occurs in the vocabulary of Asian religions, to that of salvation. Liberation, in the sense which I have in mind, has a wider currency inside and outside religion than any other term known to me. Thus to use it raises the question which I want to raise in its broadest possible terms, without sacrificing precision.

It will indicate something of the universal scope of the movement of human sensibility which I want to describe if I begin by citing a passage from an author much read at the present moment by those who are interested in liberation in wholly secular terms. In the book which I refer to, the word religion does not occur in the index. The work is Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*.[1] Marcuse is speaking of dialectical thought, or what he pleasingly calls the power of negative thinking, with reference to the philosophy of Hegel, which is centrally concerned with the concept of freedom.

> Dialectical thought starts with the experience that the world is unfree; that is to say, man and nature exist in conditions of alienation from each other, exist as 'other than they are.' Any mode of thought which excludes this contradiction from its logic is a faulty logic. Thought 'corresponds' to reality only as it transforms

1. 2d ed., paperback reprint, New York: Humanities Press, 1960.

reality by comprehending its contradictory structure. Here the principle of dialectic drives thought beyond the limits of philosophy. For to comprehend reality means to comprehend what things really are, and this in turn means rejecting their mere factuality. Rejection is the process of thought as well as of action. While the scientific method leads from the immediate experience of *things* to their mathematical-logical structure, philosophical thought leads from the immediate experience of existence to its historical structure: the principle of freedom.

Freedom is the innermost dynamic of existence, and the very process of freedom in an unfree world is 'the continuous negation of that which threatens to deny (aufheben) freedom.' Thus freedom is essentially negative: existence is both alienation and the process by which the subject comes to itself in comprehending and mastering alienation. For the history of mankind, this means the attainment of a 'state of the world' in which the individual persists in inseparable harmony with the whole, and in which the conditions and relations of his world 'possess no essential objectivity independent of the individual' ...

Dialectical thought thus becomes negative in itself. Its function is to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common sense, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts, to demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change: the explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs.[2]

Marcuse's description of dialectical thought would serve with little or no modification to explain what I have in mind in speaking of the movement of liberation, inside and outside religion. It is not, I believe, accidental that I should wish to invoke the ideas of Hegel at this stage of my inquiry. Hegel is both the last great philosopher to base his own thought on a rational understanding of religion and also the philosopher who provides the dialectical structure for the thought behind the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, from Marx to the contemporary New Left in America and Europe, of which Marcuse himself is the prophet, or intellectual inspiration.

Now I do not wish to contend for an undialectical identity between religious liberation and the movements of liberation of the revolutionary Left, which have usually interpreted religion as a conservative force protecting the unjust status quo both ideologically and institutionally. I do want to suggest that it is meaningful to use the term liberation in both contexts, that they illuminate each other, and that a common structure of liberation may possibly be discerned in both. It is this structure of liberation that I am particularly concerned to uncover. If the same structure is exhibited in the Hegelian thought of the Left as in the phenomenon of liberation within religion, something of real importance will have come to light. At any rate, since such findings could be verified only by detailed analysis beyond the scope of this paper, let me for the moment content myself with the remark that Hegel's

2. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

account of dialectical thinking tending towards freedom corresponds exactly to the structure which I find in religious thought about liberation.

Liberation thinking, then, is also negative, or critical, thinking. It subjects the given reality of man and his world to radical criticism. It views him, and sometimes his world too, as fallen, spoilt, ignorant, bound, alienated from its true being. But such thinking, however tragic a view it takes of man's factual state, is not ultimately pessimistic, either about man or about the world. It insists that man as we know him is not real man, that the world as we find it is not what it ought to be and in the deepest sense is. And so it looks for a transition between the given and the real, which will be no less revolutionary in the experience of the religious man than in the transformation of society looked for by the Left. This is not to say, of course, that the change in man's condition which I call liberation is understood, in religious thought, to happen in the same way and as a result of the same agencies as secular revolution. The similarity to which I draw attention is one of structure, not of content. What is common to both is the hope for a more real or human state of man, on which is grounded the negative criticism of the given reality of man and the world, and an insistence on the necessity of revolutionary or qualitative change, if the real is to be actualized.

Thus, in religion, moral improvement in man is not enough. He must be reconstituted, reborn, enlightened, die, and rise again as a new creation. Merely quantitative change cannot alter his fundamental condition, so as to unveil his true reality. Indeed, it can sometimes make things worse, by concealing from man the need for radical change, as self-improvement makes him more content with himself. There is a real parallel between the attitudes of the religious man to the moralist, and that of the revolutionary to the democratic socialist. Hence Marcuse's sarcastic allusion to Norman Vincent Peale, in his praise of the power of negative thinking. Liberation thinking is negative, or critical thinking; it calls in question the existing state of man and the world even at its best, perhaps especially at its best.

Liberation is clearly more than thinking, just as the accomplishment of secular revolution is more than an act of thought unmasking the contradictions in an existing society. Liberation is the transformation of given man into real man, perhaps of the given world into the real world; it actualizes human freedom, which is the same thing as human reality. How this liberation is conceived of in a given tradition will depend on the analysis of human bondage which it employs. From the diagnosis of what is wrong with things as they are proceeds both an account of what things ought to be, and are on the other side of liberation, and an account of the process of cure, or liberation itself. Thus if the character of things as they are is thought to be ignorance or blindness, liberation is thought of as enlightenment. If sinfulness is emphasized, liberation is viewed as propitiation of the offended and forgiveness of sins. Mortality is seen as countered by immortality or deification; alienation by reconciliation and participation; lostness and weakness by salvation or health; bondage, by freedom or – it is this term that we have chosen to stand for all

the others – liberation. Liberation is a way from the given to the promised reality. Hence the appearance, frequent in the literature of religion, of the image of a journey or quest, sometimes outward, sometimes inward. The goal of the journey is attained, as a rule, only after terrible tribulations and almost total loss of the hope of success. Nor does the traveller fully know where he is going, and the destination turns out, not infrequently, to be the same as the starting-point, though now seen from quite a new point of view. Thus we can trace similarities between the ten oxherding pictures in Zen, the *Pilgrim's Progress* of Bunyan, and the contemporary myths of J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings.*

Liberation movements in religion frequently seem to involve a reconstruction of the ratio between inner and outer reality. Buddhism tries to break through the subject-object structure by measures designed to bring home existentially to the seeker of truth, as Buddhism conceives it to be, that the self is a fiction of society. If there is no self, there is – what? Perhaps Buddha-nature, perhaps emptiness, perhaps Nirvana in its identity with Samsara. Once the self is negated, we can no longer speak in terms of the subject-object structure, and we cannot say who was liberated or to what. The Hinduism of the Vedanta attains what appears to be a very similar goal by realization of the non-duality of Atman, the self, and Brahman, the spiritual principle of cosmic reality. Do we find any comparable descriptions of liberation in western religious thought? It seems to me that we do, though the differences are as important as the resemblances. In its doctrine of the Kingdom of God, Christianity seems to speak of a change in outer reality, preceding the change in inner reality, to which Jesus refers when he calls on the disciple to deny himself, and of which Paul speaks also in the language of death and resurrection. In Christianity the inner liberation is correlated with an outer revolution, which makes it possible. The change in the Christian is a response to an objective change in the surrounding world, the dethroning of the power of evil in the world and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Christian liberation is not the result of ascetic discipline, but a gift coming from the side of Reality itself.

Christians commonly think of their own form of liberation as being distinctive on this account, but they may be mistaken. The ascetic discipline of Buddhism or Hinduism does not appear to be the direct cause of experiences of liberation which may happen in these religions. Or alternatively, it is impossible to avoid the impression that professional ascetics rather rarely experience liberation. In all religions, liberation seems to be more often talked about than experienced or attained. Probably the origin of the talk is the experience of a few, especially of the founders of religions. Even in Zen, where the techniques of liberation seem to have been studied from a very empirical point of view, and rendered extremely efficacious, it is said that that there are only ten illuminated masters in all Japan.

There are two points here which are worth discussing a little more fully. Can liberation realistically be expected in this life? Must it not be to raise false hopes to speak to the masses of the experiences of the masters? And is

liberation really the result of religious genius and ascetic effort, or are things a little more mysterious than that, and even perhaps a little easier than the ascetics like to think?

In their distinctive ways, the religions of east and west both confront the difficulty of expecting liberation to occur in this present life. In the west, the problem is dealt with by eschatological thinking. In Judaism (it seems to me) liberation, if thought of at all, is regarded as wholly postponed, either to the Messianic age for the community, or to a point after personal death for the individual. Since the Messiah has not come, there is no redemption from bondage, and the Jew lives under the Law. This is also in its own way liberating, but full liberation envisaged by other religions does not seem to lie within the view of contemporary Judaism, except perhaps in its Hasidic form, which has important similarities with Gnosticism and Christianity. Much the same might be said of Islam, with the same reservation with respect to Sufism. In Christianity, matters are more complex. Since the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can say that liberation is in principle possible for the believing Christian who is a member of the body of Christ. But full liberation does not seem to be regarded as probable under the conditions of this life. St Paul does not count himself to have attained it, and affirms that we can see only in a glass darkly. Liberation is a matter of faith and hope, not of simple fulfilment. Yet Paul's language also suggests that the Christians are to count themselves as free, and to live out of their promised freedom. It is perhaps the *enjoyment* of their freedom that is postponed to the resurrection of the body. Meanwhile, though all things are lawful, not all things are expedient. Love does not permit one to do what one likes. One's own freedom can impinge unfavourably upon the freedom of others, and must sometimes be renounced out of love. But this love is itself of the very essence of liberation, and will abide when faith and hope are no longer needed.

In the east, it is taken for granted that liberation is attained only after many lives – perhaps millions. Yet progress towards liberation in this life may improve one's starting-point in the next, so that one begins a new life within striking distance of the goal. Conversely, those who are ready to make the bid for liberation in this life have reached that point only through the preparation of past lives. Hence there is not, as in Protestant Christianity, the sense that everything depends on one's behaviour in the short time of one life, a sense which cannot but induce in the anxious an eagerness which is prejudicial to liberation, though it is certainly very often to be observed.

This last observation brings me to the second point which I wished to discuss. It is my impression that we really know very little about the dynamics of liberation, in spite of thousands of years of religion and the contributions of modern psychology and philosophy to the problem. It seems to me that the evidence of religious literature suggests that occasionally people do get liberated in religion, or outside it. In this sense, I am convinced that liberation is a reality and not a dream. But far fewer people get liberated than should be the case, if religion works as well as it claims to. Social liberation seems an

even more distant goal. The genuinely free society has yet to make its appearance on earth, in either church or state, despite the propaganda and pretensions of both. If we could simply dismiss the hope of liberation, the problem would disappear, and be replaced by that of reconciling man to an essentially tragic situation, in which alienation is to be his permanent condition. But suppose that the liberation of the few is really a pointer to what ought to be the condition of the many. In that case, it becomes urgent to understand liberation better than religion itself does, and to make it work independently of religious institutions and their traditions. To understand liberation 'scientifically,' including its dynamics, may seem the mad dream of the religious scientist, but in a sense it is the hope of much psychology as well as of the science of religion. What is clear to me is that we do not so understand it, and that often the guardians of religion understand it less well than many others.

How can we explain the relative failure of religion to bring about the liberation of man? It is certainly this failure which lies behind the fierce hostility to religion shown by many secular movements of liberation or revolution. How can religion become (as it has) a conservative force, in the life both of the individual and of society? I have often been tempted – and the present paper certainly shows signs of it – to equate liberation with the essence of religion. I have not wholly renounced the hope of making the identification good. But what renders it most implausible is the undoubted fact that most of the energies of empirical religious institutions have been devoted to ends that might be described as counter-liberating. Religion has tended to establish the establishment, to control man rather than to set him free, and its guardians are usually on the side of those who rule society, including very repressive rulers as in Spain or Greece, not to mention cases nearer home.

I confess that I do not understand this ambiguity or ambivalence in religion, which so quickly converts movements of liberation into their own opposites, though it is fair to say that the same phenomenon can be observed in secular movements of liberation. Every revolution is betrayed. If one cannot account for this inveterate tendency of human beings to slip back into bondage the moment they have a chance of freedom, one can show how it happens in religion. It is often the result of what I will call 'disciple's folly,' or 'the hang-up on the means,' and it makes its appearance as a rule very shortly after, or sometimes even before, the death of the founder. It assumes that because the holy man X got liberated by the use of the means P and Q, the religious aim is not to follow X to liberation by any means to hand, but 'religiously' to imitate him in his use of P and Q. The following of X then means minding your Ps and Qs, not the attainment of the goal he taught. After a while, P and Q get fenced about with refinements, and any deviation in detail is suspect, until a reformer comes along with something of the creative insight of the founder. Where Jesus and Buddha, the two greatest historical founders of religions, seem to demonstrate their human greatness is in their complete freedom from this kind of folly. That is why they exhibit the path of liberation as a middle way, as strait and narrow, as passing through even the eye of a needle. The way of

liberation seems to run, if we are to take notice of them, in the dimensionless gap between ascetic self-mastery and careless loss of self-control. Neither mere discipline nor mere removal of restraint will, it seems, bring about liberation. Some kind of detached discipline seems to be required, and yet there is abundant evidence that liberation does not come as a direct consequence of discipline – and indeed sometimes comes only when it is eventually abandoned. If the aim is self-loss, we can say that this is not the same thing as reversion to the infantile state before the strong ego is formed. Yet, as Jesus' words indicate, there is a resemblance between the liberated man and the little child. Hence the mere abandonment of restraint upon conduct may bring about only a regression, yet mere discipline seems to harden the ego, instead of dissolving it. Perhaps it is not logical to expect the ego to be dissolved by any operation which the self can perform upon itself.

I am inclined to believe that the evidence shows that in any religion liberation is not an achievement, but is something that happens to a man. Perhaps, therefore, its unpredictability is built in. We shall never control its dynamics, for it is always experienced as gift. But we might learn something of the conditions of receptivity, and it is here that I think real progress can be made, and that the academic study of religion can help to make it. Our study ought not to be thought of as simply the study of texts. It concerns reality, and perhaps the most urgent of all reality studies – the way of realizing true reality. In my own view, this is the central aim of religion at its essential and universal level, and in this sense I consider that the theme of liberation sheds more light on what religion itself is than comes to us from any other quarter.