

CULTURE AND RELIGION IN AMERICA

THE relationship between culture and religion has been an enduring problem in every age. However, the emphasis on the relationship of both and the prevalence of one over the other differed from time to time and from culture to another. This is due to the fact that culture and religion are complex human phenomena yet subject to the social milieu. Hence, it seems to the writer that for a possible better understanding one has to look for a definition of religion and culture. Then, one may look at them in different stages as they developed in time. In view of these stages one may see to what stage one's concept of the relationship of religion and culture belongs and how it could effect his personality.

DEFINITION OF RELIGION

According to E.O. James, 'the essence of religion in its rudimentary forms is to be sought in the recognition of a transcendent order and the elaboration of a technique to enable man to deal with the unpredictable and inexplicable elements in human experience whether individual or collective, in this world and beyond the grave'.¹ The transcendental order mentioned in the definition is highly debateable whether it is a real positive concept, that is a concept representing a reality or a negative concept created out of the limitedness or finitude of nature and then endowed with the positive qualities. Hence, I prefer to go along with Bellah and define religion as 'a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate condition of his existence'.² Hence, it seems to the writer that what should be our concern is the symbols as an intellectual human expression of the encounter with the ultimate as expressed in culture. This is also due to the fact that symbols are mostly tangible and intimately involved and evolved with culture. Then what constitute the ultimate concern will be left to the philosopher and what constitute the recognition of the ultimate concern will be left to the psychologist.

¹ James, E.O. *Comparative Religion*, Barnes and Noble, New York 1961, p. 56.

² Bellah, R.N. 'Religious evolution', in *Readers in Comparative Religion* edited by William A. Lessa, E.Z. Vogt p. 37. Same article is reprinted in *Sociology of Religion* ed. by R. Robertson. Penguin edition, Baltimore Maryland, 1969.

DEFINITION OF CULTURE

Hoebel defines culture as an 'integrated system of learned behaviour pattern, characteristics of the members of a society'.³ The culture as an integrated system grew out of man's biological needs.⁴ However, after culture comes 'into existence and becomes established as a tradition, culture exists and behaves and is related to man as if it were nonbiological in character'.⁵ Thus, culture becomes an integrated form of the human expression of being in the world and evolves as a form too.⁶ Since culture is an integrated form or system, any aspect of it such as religion should be studied in relation to the other parts of the system so that a greater understanding could be achieved.⁷ This is mostly true of religion whose symbols are a creation of culture and yet keep the culture alive. The extensive need of symbols in man to express his religious experiences may account for the durability of such symbols in culture.

THE EVOLUTIONAL STAGES OF RELIGION

According to Bellah, there are five stages, namely primitive archiac, historic, early modern and modern. He developed these five stages on the principle laid by Geerts that the general order of existence 'tends to change over time at least in some instances, in the direction of more differentiated, comprehensive and in Weber's sense, more rationalized formulations'.⁸ It seems to the writer that religious symbols as an expression of culture could be compared to the psychological growth of a person though the analogy is not perfect.⁹ Finally, one must keep in mind that in considering these stages, one must not expect a complete separation between them. One may find traces of the first stage in later stages.

Primitive stage of religion: The primitive stage of religion ap-

³Hoebel, E.A. *Man in primitive world*, MacGraw comp. New York, 1958 p. 151.

⁴Goldschmidt, W. 'The biological constant', in Hammond P.B. ed. *Cultural and social anthropology*, Macmillan Company, New York 1968.

⁵White, L.A. 'The evolution of culture', in Hammond P.B. ed. *Cultural and social anthropology*, Macmillan Company, New York 1968.

⁶White, L.A. *op.cit.*

⁷Beale, A.R. and Springler, G., *Culture in process*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1967, p. 11.

⁸Bellah, R.N. *op.cit.*

⁹Bagby Philip, *Culture and History*. University of California, Press, Berkeley, 1963, p. 116.

peared in the upper paleolithic period when the Cro-magnon dominated the scene.¹⁰ For the first time, man found power 'to transcend and dominate his limitations by his capacity for symbolizations and thus attain a degree of freedom'.¹¹ The myth that came into being then, was not a fiction as Profs. Milinwaski points out or a theory about life but a reality to be lived. This could be easily seen if one sees the world not only as a place where material things are to be perceived, manipulated but also a material for religious experience.¹² In fact, the myth as a religious expression was intimately related to the features of the actual world. The primitive man identified himself in rituals with the objects of the myth they had created'. So, to obtain communion in this beneficent abundance it is necessary to become en rapport with the sacred species venerated, so that for the time being the human agent (i.e. the shaman or dancer) in all probability believed and felt himself to be the creatures he represented'.¹³ The religious cult had also a social effect, that of unifying the solidarity of the clan. Finally, in doing the rituals, emotions of hope and success followed. Later on, when man became an artist of the rituals, they performed them for the emotions sake.¹⁴

Archaic religion: Rituals and emotions cannot keep themselves untouched by intellectuality. Man began to interact the figures. He first objectified them and endowed them with power, control over the world. Later he dealt with them in a purposive way. At this stage, according to Whitehead, the myth explained both the rituals and the emotions.¹⁵ Thus the myth reinforced the hidden purpose of emotions. Religion then took the form of a cult to the objectified gods. Thus, the sacrifice began to be a means of communication between man and their gods. It also served as a means of expiation especially when the people felt guilty because something went wrong with the crops.¹⁶ At this stage, religion was still merged with the structure of the community. Leaders of the tribe were

¹⁰ Smart, N. *The religious experience of mankind*, Charles Scribner, New York, 1969, p. 39.

¹¹ Bellah, R.N. *op. cit.*

¹² Smart, N. *op. cit.* p. 52.

¹³ James, E.O. *Sacrifice and sacrament*, Barnes and Noble, New York, 1962, p. 20.

¹⁴ Bellah, R.N. *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Whitehead, A. *Religion in the making*. Meridian books, Cleveland, Ohio, 1960, p. 23.

¹⁶ James, E.O. *Sacrifice and Sacrament*, *op. cit.* p. 34.

invested with the sacred power to whom or through whom a sacrifice was offered. At times the leader was obliged to renew his potency by some ritual.¹⁷ Hence, the individual and the group considered themselves as a divine cosmos. Struggles between groups were considered as struggles between different deities.

Historic religions: In the previous stages, the worldly things were invested with divine power; at this stage man began to feel the divine as transcendental. This meant that the highest value was beyond the empirical world. Hence, at the same time it implied some derogative quality for the empirical world. A new order of values came in. Though the hierarchical order of this world was still emphasized, the order itself was directed and influenced by the transcendental value. A dualism was developed between the earthly things and the other world. This could eliminate some of the tribal or national tributes invested with the highest value. However, as one would expect, the highest transcendental value continued to be vested with historical ideas. The said dualism was manifest in the dualism of civil ruler and religious ruler while in the first stages of religion they were one. Some persons who claimed to have direct contact with the transmundane established themselves as religious leaders. This was evident in the Jewish religion. At the same time, the distinction between rural people as people with lower values versus the urban group who had higher values was developed. At times the balance between religious and political groups was hard to achieve and this could be seen through the conflicts the Religious leaders had with the political leaders of the time. Yet at times, according to Bellah,¹⁸ the historic religions legitimized and reinforced the existing social order. At this point, it would be necessary to distinguish between the priestly and prophets' leadership. The prophetic leadership has always been a reaction to some social way of life which was creating trouble. The priestly leadership, has always been considered conservative of the established way of life.¹⁹

Early modern religion: The new era of religion was brought by the Protestant reformation. The dualism between this world and the other world and the hierarchical ordering between them was shattered. This was brought as Erickson points out through the initial

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 34.

¹⁸ Bellah, R.N. *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Wach, J. *Sociology of religion*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1960, pp. 348, 656.

disregard of Luther's obedience to the earthly father and by his rejection of the symbols used by which man thought that he would communicate with the Father in heaven.²⁰ Thus, a new and direct obedience as well as communication with the heavenly Father was opened. Thus, salvation is not achieved any more through the mediation of either church or community. Salvation has become a continuous process identical with the person's life. Out of these premises many social and religious conclusions were drawn which effected the social and church structure directly or indirectly. In this new religious approach, one finds a combination of worldliness and transcendentalism. This combination orients the individual to action within this world but it does not sanctify any activity by means of rituals or mystical union. This has led in time to a great emphasis on the individual activism and responsibility. Moreover, with the doctrine of an unmediated relationship of the person to the sacred minimized the commitment to any institution. This opened a continuous road to a redefinition and reformulation of tradition of the structure of society with which tradition was often identified.

Modern religion: There is a question according to Bellah²¹ whether this period should be treated as a different period or a continuation of the early modern religion. This difficulty is due to the modern religious symbols. It seems to the writer that we have now an extension of the premises and conclusions of the previous period. We have symbols though different from the past but these symbols live shortly and are changing constantly because symbols require tradition to live long and that we cannot have. The very continuous change itself has become our tradition. This leads both the individual and society itself to a continuous search for standards of action both in religious and civil areas. Thus, while in the past the person could hold symbols for a long time because he had not rejected the rigid and stable puritanical concept of personality, in this period when even the concept of personality is constantly changing, there is no more room for any stability for symbols.

THE PRINCIPLE OF EVOLUTION OF BOTH RELIGION AND CULTURE

P. Tillich thinks that the basic principle of a religious life is the awareness of the 'ontological unconditioned'. 'Man' he says

²⁰Erikson, E.H. *Young man Luther*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1958. The theme runs throughout the book especially in chapter III.

²¹Bellah, R.N., *op. cit.*

'is immediately aware of something unconditioned which is the prius of the separation and interaction of subject and object, theoretically as well as practically'.²² The call for awareness is as old as humanity itself though very often it is traced to Socrates. The awareness is a human quality of reflecting on one's activity and its relationship to what elicited that activity. But the individual becomes aware of himself and of activity through the social life as a medium. Yet the pattern of a social life is a reality as well as a symbolic expression of man's search for meaning. The search for meaning is based primarily on the unconditioned which is existence. This existence involves what is and what could not be. Hence, the unconditioned is a positive concept as much as a concept of existence. With the encounter of the unconditioned, man yearns for the ultimate. The concern for the ultimate has brought dynamism in both culture and religion. This dynamism in religion is even equated with the dynamism in psychology in the growth of personality.²³ Thus, we find that the search for the ultimate which is primarily a religious process creates culture which then in turn is used by man as a medium for the continuation of the process of search for the ultimate itself.

RELIGION AND CULTURE IN U.S.A.

Religion versus culture: The symbols resulting from man's search for meaning can be crystalized in a religion or culture in space and time. Then, religion would become as a ritual that is an institutionalized religious idea.²⁴ The same thing could be said about culture when it is localized in a place. Then, it becomes an American or Russian culture. It may happen then, that the search for meaning gets stagnated, and religion may lose its commitment from sight. Any religion which has not lost its commitment should be involved with the metaphysical question of evil, suffering and death which are part of the unconditioned reality on which religion is built. These problems as Slater points out²⁵ have been flushed

²² Tillich, P. *Theology of culture*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1964. p. 23.

²³ Pruyser, P.W. *Dynamic Psychology of religion*, Harper and Row, New York, 1968, p. 19.

²⁴ Luchman, T. *The invisible religion*, The Macmillan Company, 1967. p. 22.

²⁵ Berger, P. *The noise of the assemblies*, Doubleday, Garden city, New York, 1961, p. 48.

Slater, Philip. *The pursuit of loneliness*, Beacon Press Boston, 1971.

out from the American culture. There is even the tendency to use words which are misleading in interpreting the real situation. Take for example the poor people who are part and parcel of every society; to avoid the problem of poverty in a rich country, people tend to substitute the word poor by less fortunate or less privileged. This might take off some of the sense of guilt which otherwise might burden the mind of those who are better off. The problem of old age is also flushed out by sending old people to old homes. Some of them are never visited. So they die away from homes and unnoticed by the young generation. People want to hide death even in the last moment: they embalm the body to make it look as if the person is still alive. In spite of the fact that people try to put these and many other problems under the carpet and thus thwart the reality of life, such problems continue to exist. What people really do is fooling themselves by creating misunderstanding of life. If then, a religion which is based on the metaphysical truth is contrary to our culture one would wonder why the churches do not seem to have friction with the American culture.

Church pro culture: According to Wilson²⁶ religion instead of being the source of value for nationalism and patriotism, the reverse is true. Thus, to belong to a church and to go to church independently of what denomination it is, is coming from the fact that to be a good citizen demands that you have faith and attend some type of church service. This is most evident among the protestant denominations which according to Berger²⁷ may not be true of the catholic in spite of the fact that the catholic church has also been Americanized. Yet, according to some priest, with whom I came across, even among catholics, there are some who attend other denominations.

Historical development: That the reader could have better understanding of this problem, one has to look at it from the historical perspective and see how it happened. To begin with, the church alignment with the secular values in U.S.A. was not from the beginning. It came to be, through the same religious principles it embraces. The church had to understand and reflect the aspirations of the first settlers as well as their economic states. No other religion than the protestant religion whose origin and structure were based on man's ability to seek freedom from a social

²⁶ Wilson, B. *Religion in a secular society*, Penguin books, Baltimore Maryland, 1969, p. 113.

²⁷ Berger, P. *op. cit.* p. 48.

pressure and thus create an individuality that could help the first settlers in their struggle. However, Calvin's doctrine with the emphasis on the negative aspect of man as evil created anxiety as it widened the separation between man and his ideal self. To eliminate anxiety man created a frenzy activity which at the same time was needed by the situation of the locality and thus could justify it as a necessity.²⁸ In spite of the activity and the available riches not all could become rich. Class struggle could be more feasible in this country than in Europe. In Europe there could be little or no social mobility but here it was available and thus everybody wanted to have the best. Out of this approach resulted the present philosophy which dominates the country, namely the cut throats competition. In the meantime, religious dominations grew out of this strife. Hence, religion had eventually to justify 'the gradual acquisition of enhanced riches'.²⁹ Thus, the denominations began to stand for the social status of the person who embrace it. Churches then, were the voice of a specific community with certain status.³⁰ Now, the churches became the symbol for what they stood with no influential power.

The community life is at the present time shattered by the social and spatial mobility. The churches have become 'agencies of synthetic community life. They draw people together on a Sunday, people who otherwise would never be together though they may live next to each other. The custom of introducing coffee after church service or the meeting of the pastor at the entrance door, the shaking of hands during mass all introduced so that people could begin to know one another through these social meetings occasioned by the religious service. In spite of these external activities the churches have become bankrupt.

The churches embraced the values of the culture and left behind the transcendental values based on the unconditioned reality of which we spoke before. Yet our young people are fed up with culture and want something more meaningful. No wonder they feel disenchanted with the churches who support culture. However,

²⁸ Fromm, E. *The sane society*, a Fawcett Publication, Greenwich, Conn. 1967, p. 160.

Fromm, E. 'A social psychological interpretation of Lutheranism and Calvinism', in *Religion, Society and the Individual* by Yinger, J.M. Macmillan Company, New York 1968.

²⁹ Wilson, B. *op. cit.* p. 131.

³⁰ Wilson, B. *op. cit.* p. 139.

there is great paradox in this country. In England and in all Europe, the people do not attend the church when they feel disappointed, here they continue to attend the church but they feel it does not offer any ideation.

The paradox of the present religious stage: The reader is likely to assume that the present stage is the best according to the stages of religion mentioned above. However, the very instruments the people used to gain freedom made them slaves and still worse took away from the power of thinking and thus made them turn back in some way to the early stages. One would wonder how this could happen. By pushing for liberty the people had to create specific rituals. The very rituals have become the real thing and the reason for their creation was forgotten. The people feel overwhelmed and bound by these rituals. Yet we cannot see that we are not free because these rituals carry with them the connotation of freedom. There seem no end for the adoration of the golden idol we have created. As the Jews in the Old Testament while they were in the desert could not take the sense of freedom and returned to the slavery of the adoration of the idol so we too gave our freedom for the idols we have created.³¹ It seems to the writer that while the primitive man could enjoy his rituals and even used them to be emotionally involved, we had to subdue our emotions and we cannot even enjoy our own rituals. Our values are as worldly as those of the primitive man but while the primitive man conceived the world in a rather stable way, we are conceiving it as in continuous great motion. It is a view of life which has been sanctified by a religion and has then become sacred. Thus, in spite of our scientific inventions, the writer thinks that we are regressing to a primitive way of life in the system of values.

High statistics of church attendance and contributions registered in America by all denominations can in no way be considered as a diagnostic sign of a deep religiosity.

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³¹ Fromme, E. *Your sons shall be as Gods*, Fawcett publications, Greenwich, Connec., 1969, p. 87.

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