Overview

What is religion? What does it mean to be a spiritual human being, and is it something beyond just being part of a ‘religion’? In this chapter, an introduction first examines some basic issues concerning spirituality and the interchange with the religious behaviour of humanity.

The main part of this chapter will then explore current expressions of spirituality and the religious sense that falls outside ‘approved religion’. This focuses on the individual’s emotional experience as an expression of a religious sense. How far is individual spirituality divorced from religion? As representatives of something that is not part of organised religion, what part of human existence can be referred to as spiritual?

Due to my own personal background, this section will also explore some of these issues as they apply within Judaism. There are examples of how spirituality can be experienced outside organised religion in terms of creativity and imagination – but how are these perceived within Judaism? Feminism and sexuality can be a focus for spirituality – but how does Judaism view women, and how does Judaism regard sexuality? Mysticism has become increasingly popular, but how is mysticism viewed within Judaism? And if people today invest their spiritual energies in the market-place, what does Judaism make of materialism?

Finally, this chapter will explore whether individual spirituality can be divorced from religion as expressed and experienced in communal settings. The discipline of religious studies has been busy for over a century researching all types of manifestations of this spiritual life. Religion itself has been part of human existence from time immemorial. So what can this tell us about spiritual human beings, the origin of religion and the role it has to play in society? Examples have been taken mainly from this century with a focus on the Judaeo-Christian traditions. However, numerous outstanding examples could also be taken from other eras and other world faiths, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shinto.
Introduction: The Religious Sense of Humankind

The study of religions has a strong tradition among many disciplines. The near universality of spiritual human experience, impacting on every part of our individual and corporate lives, has begged investigation, explanation, and interpretation. Ninian Smart begins his classic work on religious experience with the claim ‘to understand human history and human life it is necessary to understand religion’. Yet to label something as a religion is now recognised to be a task fraught with difficulty, and any definition of what we mean by religion sooner or later omits one class of what we would wish to call religion.

Durkheim related religions to the sense of the sacred and transcendent (‘A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things’), yet eventually reduced religion to a sociological phenomenon. Tillich defined religion in terms of commitment to an ultimate concern (‘Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life’), and yet there may be many religious people who lack this sense. Similarly, Schleiermacher worked on the premise of ultimate dependence (‘the feeling of absolute dependence being so universal an element of our self-consciousness’), putting himself in danger of ignoring those religious people who may depend on no such absolute. Nevertheless, there may be in Schleiermacher an expression of what we would observe throughout various spiritualities.

And what of Marxism, and perhaps other alternatives, that some may call religion? A Marxist’s ultimate concern may in fact fit into Tillich’s categories, yet offers a world-view that many would hesitate to label religious. Is there anything ‘spiritual’ about a commitment to Marxist principles? Perhaps the Marxist commitment to equality, fair play, etc. is a spiritual concern. The ‘opium of the people’ was Marx’s definition of religion. Did Marxism itself become a form of religion? (We will allude to Freud and Jung later.)

Others like the anthropologist William James concentrate on personal experience of what people may call the divine (‘the feelings, acts and experiences of individual

96 On methodology, see Ian Markham, A World Religions Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 10, who advocates the ‘empathetic’ approach along the lines of John Dunne’s ‘process of “passing over”’ advocated in Dunne, The Way of All Earth (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), ix.
98 See helpful discussion in Markham, op. cit., 3ff.
99 Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912), 47.
100 Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (1963), 6.
102 The development of the kibbutzim is fascinating in this respect – as they grew, there were those that were founded on religious principles, and those that were not, but both believed in a form of human rights and the principle of sharing everything, with an ideal form of communism in the background.