Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion

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Philosophy of Religion

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for regina
the love of my life

Contents

Preface

A few years ago, in a fit of optimism, I sought to develop in a single book certain new thoughts I had conceived on the reconciliation of reason and religion. But the manuscript I completed will remain unpublished, as it turned out to be impossible to do well between two covers all that I had in mind to do. In the wake of this discovery I devised a different plan, the first part of which has now been put into effect. To provide a proper basis for what lay ahead, so it immediately seemed to me, this first part of the plan should involve considering more fully than I had previously done some foundational issues concerning the nature of religion, belief, skepticism, faith (and so on) which kept cropping up in my work. But recognizing that there is in philosophy no thorough and systematic treatment of these issues—or of these issues together with certain others apparently belonging to the same general category, concerning the identity and aims and principles of assessment of philosophy of religion—I soon arrived at the richer idea of writing something that might both serve as my opening volley and open up this overlooked subfield of foundations or prolegomena.[1]

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[1] Despite much talk of religious belief and religious faith, for example, relatively little reflection has been devoted to determining exactly what faith is and what makes a state of belief religious, or to identifying the standards by which assessments of religious belief and religious faith are to be made. Still more rare are attempts to deal with various fundamentals at once, in a sensitive and systematic way. (Some recent works, it is true, seem to be moving in this direction. I think particularly of Richard Swinburne's *Faith and Reason* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981] and William Alston's "Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith," in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality,* ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996]. But it is illuminating to observe that both these works have been neglected. Moreover, it must be said that even in them there is

The book you hold in your hands is the result. Its title, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion,* must accordingly be understood as having a double sense: it not only identifies the more immediate role of my results, to serve as material underlying and informing a particular philosophy of religion (namely, my own, to be developed in subsequent volumes), but also encapsulates the subject that this book may, at another level, be seen as addressing: the subject of the understandings of basic issues that *ought* to underlie a (i.e., any) philosophy of religion—a subject I hope my work will prompt others also to address.

Put otherwise, there are two layers of discussion in the book; both are concerned with prolegomena, though in different ways, and both are to be discerned throughout. In one layer I am developing concepts and principles that I will be utilizing in subsequent volumes, outlining the starting points of my philosophy of religion. Here my *chapters*—more exactly, the positions and arguments developed therein—are the prolegomena. In the other layer my positions and arguments serve as proposals for how philosophers in general might look upon (some) important matters in the subfield I have mentioned (though I expanded my list of topics when I hit on the idea of functioning as a standard-bearer for prolegomenous inquiry, I have still not touched on nearly everything that might be discussed in this area)—proposals put forward as part of what I hope will be a continuing discussion, joined by many, of how properly to deal with this neglected category of fundamental start-up issues. In this case the *correct* views on all these matters, whatever they may be, are the prolegomena, and although I can be seen as suggesting some of what I presently think may be involved in the correct views, my aim in this layer is not so much to facilitate a final consensus on anything as to start a discussion rolling, and to take it some distance in a promising direction. The questions of which issues count as prolegomenous and how they are best dealt with will remain long after I pick up, in subsequent volumes, where the first layer leaves off and finish the task I have set for myself. And that, as I see it, is all to the good.

I hope it will be evident from the foregoing that everything I have to say in this book, at both levels, is up for discussion in philosophy of religion (the field); there is no attempt here to lay down as inviolable or to

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sometimes a one-sidedness that derives from a particular [Christian] orientation.) In the absence of sensitive and systematic discussion of this sort, there is—among other things— a danger that writers will draw their understandings of basic concepts and their basic principles somewhat unreflectively from one source with which they are familiar while ignoring others, or else from a variety of sources that do not speak with one voice and thus generate subtle inconsistencies that go undetected.

legislate certain ways of looking at things or ways of proceeding for philosophers of religion, only proposals for how to deal with a range of basic issues—proposals that I hope will ignite much fruitful discussion and which, in any case, I shall take as a basis for my own ongoing work in the field. Nor (as already suggested) do I suppose that the issues I discuss or my manner of discussing them exhaust what properly belongs to the area of prolegomena. The presence of two layers, two things going on at once, means that what I do in seeking to contribute to the subfield concerned with "prolegomena to a philosophy of religion" must at the same time have some bearing on my own ongoing work. Prolegomenous issues that are only indirectly or very distantly related to the latter will not often be putting in an appearance here. Other writers may make a different selection from among prolegomenous issues or find a different pathway through them. My selection and my pathway are determined by what is needed to frame the discussion of other volumes in the series of books on which I am embarked. For example, it will serve my later purposes for me to get clear about the phenomenology of belief—what it is *like* to be a believer—and so in the chapter on the nature of belief I focus on phenomenology and give short shrift to some recent theories in philosophy of mind. That chapter might therefore seem incomplete, but it gets at what I need for future arguments and at the same time clarifies certain matters that anyone in philosophy of religion concerned with prolegomena might find it important to address, thus advancing the latter cause as well.

Having said that, I must also emphasize that I am very serious about what I am doing at both levels of the book. I think that philosophical discussions of religion (past and present) often suffer from unfortunate tendencies ultimately derived from *inattention* to prolegomena (a tendency toward parochialism is especially common), and I argue vigorously for various claims supporting this view and for certain understandings of basic issues—for example, the nature of religion—that I think may serve to put philosophy of religion on a better footing. Perhaps these arguments can be successfully challenged. I am of course open to that. But my task, as I see it, is to make them clear and advance them as far as I can, in the interest of undogmatic wakefulness. I do not shrink from this task. Furthermore, it seems to me that some of the understandings for which I argue are especially critical to a correct view of the prolegomena and to the future usefulness of work done by philosophers of religion. Here especially it will be evident that what I am supporting is not always properly called a return to basics; such efforts as I am recommending may often take one to terrain not previously visited or properly explored. For when we give sustained attention to prolegomenous issues in philosophy of religion, we may find

that some of the central ideas of the field have been inadequately formulated and that fresh thoughts are called for on various fronts. Only if we are open to *this* will we be able to move forward in a manner that does justice to the lofty ideal that should animate any area and any style of philosophy: an investigation of the deepest of intellectual problems and possibilities that is critical yet creative, analytically precise yet imaginative, tough-minded yet willing to follow wherever the truth might lead, and actively seeking an ever richer and more adequate overall understanding.[2]

It is in response to this ideal, and, I hope, in a manner consonant with its demands, that certain issues fundamental to any philosophy of religion are systematically addressed in this volume. My aim is to get clearer about how philosophy should understand the nature and interrelationships of religion, belief, religious belief, religious disbelief, religious skepticism, and religious faith (Chapters 1–6);[3] the nature of philosophy's proper aims in respect of such phenomena (Chapter 7); and the principles governing the evaluative activity to which, as we shall see, an understanding of these aims most urgently invites us (Chapter 8). To that end, I have thought through the issues and presented and defended the views that seem to me, on reflection, most adequate. (I have sought to develop all this material rigorously and systematically, laying aside some popular assumptions—including some I used to accept—and thinking everything through from the ground up.) I hope that a deeper understanding of the fundamentals, and a wider interest in taking such an understanding further, will be the result. And, of course, I also hope that a proper foundation will have been laid for understanding and being convinced by the arguments I shall go on to develop in future work.[4]

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[2] An objection that may be found tempting in this connection is that philosophers of religion cannot expect to reach agreement on all the prolegomenous issues before beginning other inquiries. But I am not advising everyone to defer all other investigations until the prolegomena have been dealt with. Inquiries into various such matters should, I would rather say, be going on continually alongside all the more common forms of investigation into the staples of the field; and the latter should be seen in light of and undertaken with a sensitivity to (and an openness to being modified by) the results of the former.

[3] The first aspect of the task mentioned here I shall treat as equivalent to the task of getting clearer about how philosophers should *define* the *concepts* of "religion," "belief," etc. (Notice that—as to some extent suggested above—we cannot assume that ordinary or accepted linguistic practices will always provide a quick or completely adequate answer to this question.)

[4] Someone might—despite what I have said—see in what I am doing the danger of seeking to make philosophy of religion (the field) conform to preconceived ideas about what I wish to do in *my* philosophy of religion (the particular set of positions and arguments I am developing). I am aware of this danger and can only reply that it is also possible to reverse the point—to see in what I am doing an attempt to make my own project conform to what can responsibly be applied to the field as a whole. Perhaps my work in this book exists in a tension between these two possibilities. But if so, it is a creative tension.

I have many people to thank for their help with my ongoing project. I think especially of John Ackerman, William Alston, David Burton, Stephen Maitzen, Paul Moser, William Rowe, Terence Penelhum, Richard Swinburne, and William Wainwright, and also the students of upper-level courses on philosophy of religion at Mount Saint Vincent University and members of audiences in Halifax, Truro, Calgary, Boston, and Miami (you know who you are). Paul Draper and Daniel Howard-Snyder I single out for special mention because of the extent and detail of their comments, which have led to many improvements. For this generosity far beyond the call of duty I am immensely grateful. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Mount Saint Vincent University provided much-needed financial support and occasional release from teaching duties; I am very thankful to them. Last (but also first) come the members of my immediate family, whose effects on my life are deep and no doubt invisibly present on every page. My sons, Matthew and Justin, have in the time of this writing grown into fine young men, and their speedy development reminds me daily that time waits for no one. My artist wife and muse, Regina Coupar, is she on account of whom I will hold on to time for as long as I can. To her this book of new beginnings is dedicated, with deepest love and gratitude.

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Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion

On Religion

A rather large concept, which contributes its color to every part of the map whose configurations we are seeking to discern, is the concept of religion. Because of its pervasiveness in philosophy of religion, a book on prolegomena to inquiry in that field might be expected to have something to say about this concept. Indeed, a careful analysis would seem warranted. Yet the need for this can be contested, and its justification can be misunderstood. I therefore begin this discussion by considering more closely why it ought to be undertaken.

1. *Why Discuss This Issue?*

One reason that might be put forward for analyzing "religion" involves the goal of better understanding the meaning of "philosophy of religion." Someone might be led to ask what religion is, hoping thereby to acquire a deeper understanding of what this field of study is all about. But it is a mistake to think that a discussion of how to define "religion" which seeks to settle this notoriously disputed matter will help one more fully understand what philosophy of religion is about. Such thinking assumes that there is agreement among those who competently use the term "philosophy of religion" as to what religion is, and also that analysis will inevitably lead one to a clarified version of their understanding. But there is no agreement. This is, as I have noted, a disputed matter, featuring endless wrangles among students of religion of various stripes over the correct understanding of that obdurate term. Indeed, we might better say that philosophy of religion has been concerned with what philosophers have *taken* as religion and so advise

those seeking a fuller understanding of what that field is about to consider what *has* been so taken. Since this is not the same for every philosopher who sees herself or himself as commenting on religious matters, it seems appropriate to say that the word "religion" in "philosophy of religion" really expresses quite a generous, collective idea—the idea of the conjunction of all the items that philosophers have ever used the word "religion" to name!

This thought might seem to support the view that there is no point in philosophers' seeking to arrive at a more precise understanding of "religion"; the diversity of usage we see here, which might seem to cry out for philosophical tidying up, instead renders the search for a single definition superfluous. *Any* of the questions philosophers have taken to concern religion, so it may be said, make appropriate topics of discussion for philosophers of religion; thus, to determine whether one's inquiry remains within the boundaries of their field or falls outside, one need only consult past practice.

Yet that conclusion, it seems to me, does not quite get it right, for we have not only the past to think about but also the future. We look to the practices and preoccupations of the past to formulate our understanding of "philosophy of religion," but in the present, and from within the field thus named, we may arrive at a new or revised understanding of what it *should* be about, and this understanding may involve, among other things, a proffered and accepted definition of "religion" appropriate to the purposes by which, according to a new consensus, it *ought* to be animated.[1] I suggest that adequate attention to the matters I have called prolegomena may in time produce just such a state of affairs. Philosophers who want (inter alia) to address religious belief or religious faith need a criterion by which to determine, of any state that might seem to instantiate one of these phenomena, whether it is religious or not. Otherwise put, philosophers who offer or criticize evaluations purportedly applicable to all members of the general classes of religious belief and religious faith require a criterion by which to determine the extension of these classes. Only thus, it seems, can definite results from the field as a whole, criticized and checked and confirmed by a wide body of inquirers, be forthcoming. Now if such points were to be taken seriously, and the consensus mentioned above should come to be, we could of course continue to understand the term "religion" as it appears in "philosophy of religion" collectively (indeed, we might have a new understanding of the former term to add to the collection), but we

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[1] It might be argued that more than one definition could be utilized at the same time by different groups: parceling out the possibilities, we might have different understandings followed through by different research programs. This possibility is considered more fully later on, but for now I assume the preferability of a single definition that all accept.

would also recognize that in its current phase the field had adopted a narrower, technical definition to suit its purposes.

I suggest that these considerations provide an adequate reason for pursuing a fuller understanding of "religion," even though the first consideration mentioned above does not. (What this implies is that the question of how "religion" should be understood by philosophers of religion as they go about their work and the question of how "religion" functions in the phrase "philosophy of religion" are to be distinguished as different questions.) Philosophers of religion need to do something about the unclarity and inconsistency in usage of such fundamental terms of their field, not necessarily by seeking to solve the problem once and for all in a manner suitable for just any form of inquiry into religious matters (though it would be good to know what the problems are that prevent such a solution and whether they must remain intractable) but by discussing and determining the range of the phenomena into which *they* wish to inquire, and the nature of items within that range, and also by behaving accordingly in a consistent manner. What is taken as religion in the field may thus in time come to reflect a wider agreement, and as a result, coherent and mutually illuminating discussion in the field may be greatly facilitated. Otherwise, where, for example, discussions of religious belief and faith are concerned, we will be passing each other like ships in the night and perhaps leaving our readers in the dark as well. In sum, a reference point for discussion in the field is desirable, and this a closer look at "religion" might provide.

Let us therefore consider this term more carefully. I will impose no special constraint on the exercise of intellectual curiosity at first—we begin with some of the most general issues about the nature of religion, which anyone thinking about religion, in whatever field, might encounter—but it may be expected that, as we progress, the question of how the various insights we glean should affect the understanding(s) of "religion" utilized in philosophy will come ever more to dominate.

2. *Religion and the Religions*

The first thing to notice is that there is really more than one concept lurking here: the word "religion" is ambiguous. This point is implicit in the work of William James[2] and developed at length by the well-known scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith.[3] Smith distinguishes two basic

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[2] See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; New York: Penguin, 1982), pp. 28–31. James speaks of two "branches" of "the religious field" but then also of there being more than one "sort" of religion.

[3] In Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American

senses—call them *personal* and *institutional,* or, if you like, *internal* and *external*—of "religion." (The former labels are appropriated from James; the latter are mine.) Employing the once familiar but now little used personal sense, we may explain such things as new references to spiritual matters in someone's conversation and accompanying changes in behavior by remarking that they have "got" religion, or observe that a certain community's religion is generous and sincere while another's is judgmental and exclusionary. Here we are talking primarily about the personal dispositions of individuals. We are talking about religiousness or religiosity—what many today might call "spirituality" and what Smith calls "piety." Notice that in this context the article and the plural form are at best awkward and often inappropriate.

Using the word "religion" in the more common institutional sense, on the other hand, we can say that Islam is a world religion, or ask individuals filling out application forms to name their religion (we don't really expect them to tell us what they think about God or whether they went to synagogue last week, do we?), or speak in the plural of the world religions. Here we are talking about a thing to which one might adhere or belong, something in an important sense external to individual persons—what Smith calls a "cumulative tradition," a huge phenomenon straddling the centuries. (Or we may be speaking, more narrowly, of one part of such a tradition, the kind of thing on which many of us tend to become fixated when thinking about religious matters: namely, a belief or symbol system of the sort exemplified by one of the Christian creeds.)

Both James and Smith think that the former, personal, notion of religion is the more basic of the two. Why? Because institutional religion appears to be the result—as Smith puts it, the "deposit"—of religion in the personal sense. Perhaps there are other and yet deeper factors at work here, such as psychological tendencies or neurological patterns or the activity of a Divine being or earlier institutions, but there certainly seems to be a relation of causal dependence between particular instances of institutional religion and personal religion: without the Buddha's experiencing "enlightenment" under the bodhi tree and embodying its principles in his behavior, without many others' similar patterns of action and interaction, there would be no such religion as Buddhism. Without the experiences that enlivened the disciples of Jesus after his death and without the actions they took in developing and propagating their understanding of what had transpired among them, there would be no such thing as Christianity. And such connections, a follower of Smith and James will say, have implications

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Library, 1964), esp. pp. 47–48, 141, 174–175.

for the decisions we ought to make in academic study. Surely, for example, we should begin by seeking to understand the relevant *personal* facts when our aim is to understand the religions of Buddhism and Christianity.

Now all of this seems both sensible and important. Of course we need to recognize that items in the category of "traditions" and items in the category of "personal religiousness" can be causally linked in a variety of ways. Thus it may also be possible to learn much about what is in the latter category from what we know about the former. (The religiousness of members of one generation, for example, will be causally dependent in many ways on aspects of traditions dominant in previous generations.) Nevertheless, it remains plausible to hold that religion of the personal kind is in an important sense more fundamental than its institutional counterpart. Significant changes in religious tradition can usually be traced to what some*one* has been *thinking* or *feeling* or *doing*—here we need to be reminded of the importance of "founder figures" in explanations of such changes. Traditions, whatever their ultimate source may be, are deeply influenced by people and will tend to go where people choose to take them, and the meaning of "religious tradition" will always be constrained by what we are willing to identify as personal religiosity, in its individual and communal manifestations. It follows that *even if their concern ought ultimately to be with traditions,* it is natural and appropriate for philosophers of religion thinking about the parameters of their discipline to begin by considering what is included in the personal sense of the term "religion."

Another closely related reason for philosophers of religion to begin with this personal sense is the following. Although just about any general proposition or creed will be of potential interest to philosophers, in order for a proposition or creed to be rightly identified as deserving the attention specifically of a philosopher of religion, it will need to be the sort of thing that can properly be the object of *religious* attitudes such as religious belief or faith. And, of course, one cannot distinguish such attitudes from others without first knowing something of what religion in the personal sense is about. A slightly different way of addressing this issue would point out that even at an elementary level, philosophy of religion is bound up with discussion of the meaning and justification of religious claims, as well as the nature and rational appropriateness of religious attitudes; that "claims" evidently may be and are made by people; and that attitudes are in the relevant way "personal." Add to these points the fact that full and proper attention to the nature and possible realizations and outputs of religion in the personal sense has in any case been neglected by philosophers in their single-minded concern with assessing certain particular and common religious attitudes and creeds (or elements thereof), and you can see the appropriateness of recommending urgent and first attention to this issue and of concentrating

on the personal sense of "religion" in a book on prolegomena to a philosophy of religion. In any case, these considerations are influencing my decisions here. Hence, unless otherwise indicated, it is the personal sense that I have in mind when I use that term in future discussion.

But what sort of notion have we latched on to here? Speaking of "religiosity" or "spirituality" or "piety" may get us into the right neighborhood when thinking about how to understand "religion" but clearly leaves a lot to be desired. Having distinguished one meaning the word may have from others, we therefore still need to consider whether a satisfactory definition of the meaning that concerns us can be provided. The distinction urged by James and Smith may of course be expected to help us: in considering the multitude of definitions to be found in the literature, we can now leave aside those referring specifically and exclusively to traditions or belief systems.[4] But even then, a great profusion of offerings remains.[5] And it has proved rather difficult to find anywhere in this array a definition that cannot be undermined by counterexamples. A possible response to this state of affairs is to say that no one definition of the usual sort will do, and that those who think otherwise have fundamentally misconstrued the nature of language and of concepts. Now this position, if correct, might be expected to have important implications for philosophy of religion. I therefore propose to begin consideration of whether a definition for religion in the personal sense can be found by examining it more carefully, focusing the discussion on its most popular contemporary representative—the so-called family resemblance approach.

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[4] Because of an apparent failure to recognize the distinction we have made, however, the personal and the nonpersonal are sometimes conflated in discussions of "religion." Take, for example, the definition, very influential in the social sciences (and so in religious studies), offered by Clifford Geertz in his "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion,* ASA Monographs, vol. 3, ed. Michael Bainton (London: Tavistock, 1966). Geertz writes: "Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (p. 4). Clearly, Geertz means to be speaking of institutional religion, but it appears that he wishes to slip much belonging to personal religion in on the side. Without going into details, we can observe that, as well as insights, there are at least two other limitations in this definition. First, it suggests that the "system" is primary and that personal religiosity is secondary and derivative (whereas there is at least reciprocity of influence). Second, the definition seems too broad: on Geertz's understanding, an entirely pessimistic and destructive system or orientation could count as religious, and this seems a rather too generous use of the term, perhaps even for those not specially concerned to meet the needs of philosophy of religion.

[5] William Alston, touching the tip of the iceberg, lists nine alternative definitions in his "Religion," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 7:140.

3. *The Family Resemblance Approach*

The family resemblance idea, derived from Wittgenstein's later philosophy, is that we need not find some way to make all the pieces from the ordinary usage of a word like "religion" fit into a single necessary-and-sufficient-conditions definition of the term. Instead, we ought to accept that the different pieces reflect different applications of it which are "bound together in a family by a network of overlapping similarities and not by any strict identity."[6] According to Peter B. Clarke and Peter Byrne, who defend this approach, if the family resemblance idea applies to it, we should find the following facts when considering our uses of the word "religion":

> (a) There will be a characteristic set of features to be seen in the examples of religion. . . . (b) Over and above the fact that they are religions, there will be no single feature or set of features to be found in each and every example of religion. (c) There will be no limits to be set in advance to the kind of combinations of characteristic features [that] newly discovered or developing religions might be found to exemplify, nor will there be absolute limits to the additional features [that] such new examples could add to the set. (d) The various examples of religion will then be related by a network of relationships rather than shared possession of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership of the class. (e) The meaning of the word "religion" will nonetheless be projectible: that is, having rehearsed the characteristic features of religion in an inclusive family resemblance definition or having become acquainted with some central examples of religion, one will be able to say of newly found examples whether they are religions or not.[7]

I will respond to this in a moment, but before I do, I want to get clearer about points (a) and (b). In giving their own gloss to point (a), Clarke and Byrne speak of certain characteristic dimensions of religion: "theoretical, practical, experiential and social." These are distinguished from nonreligious versions of the same dimensions by "characteristic kinds of objects (gods or transcendent things), goals (salvation or liberation) and

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[6] Peter B. Clarke and Peter Byrne, *Religion Defined and Explained* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 7.

[7] Ibid., pp. 11–12. Clearly, the focus of Clarke and Byrne is on what I have called institutional religion (or else they conflate the two senses of the term "religion" that we have distinguished), but almost everything they say can be taken as applying to personal religion as well. That, at any rate, is how their proposal will be taken here.

functions (the provision of meaning and unity to group or individual life)."[8] There are apparently two (related) sets of things here: the dimensions of religion; and their objects, goals, and functions. And although there is some unclarity, it appears that Clarke and Byrne are best taken as saying that whereas the concepts "dimension," "object," "goal," and "function" apply to all cases of religion, the manner in which these constants are *exemplified* will vary: we can speak only of typical or characteristic dimensions and typical or characteristic objects, goals, and functions. The judgment as to whether something is a case of religion will depend on whether we judge it to exemplify a sufficient selection of the characteristic dimensions, as well as a sufficient selection of the characteristic objects, goals, and functions. And so this example of religion may possess one combination of the characteristic dimensions and objects, goals, and functions; that example, another. But—and here we come to point (b)— no one combination is necessary and sufficient for something to count as a case of religion, and indeed, no one feature (that is, no one dimension or object or goal or function) will be found in every case of religion.

Now let me respond. First, although the last claim here mentioned— that no one feature (dimension or object or goal or function) will be found in every case of religion—is to be expected in a family resemblance approach (since otherwise we are back to being able to talk about at least necessary conditions), Clarke and Byrne are not consistent in their affirmation of it. Second, that claim is in any case false—or, at the very least, the intuitive plausibility of a consideration that supports its falsity and has yet to be defeated appears to outweigh any intuitive plausibility attaching to the family resemblance approach as applied to "religion"—and so both it and the approach of which it is a part seem unworthy of our acceptance.

To see my first point, notice that although the characteristic dimensions of religion are, according to Clarke and Byrne, four in number and so can appear in varying combinations, these authors seem to mention and to have in mind but one characteristic object, one characteristic goal, and one characteristic function (or, at any rate, the number is in each case reducible to one), from which it follows, if—as they assume—religion always has an object, goal, and function, that there are *three* features that *each* instance of religion must possess. The objects mentioned, as we have seen, are "gods or transcendent things," but since gods are taken to *be* transcendent things, the simpler expression "transcendent things" would do just as well.[9] The goals mentioned are salvation or liberation,

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[8] Ibid., p. 13.
[9] P. 13 refers to "god-like beings or more generally sacred, non-empirical realities." Clearly,

but both of these instantiate the general idea that is elsewhere taken as specifying a goal of religion: the idea of achieving "states of being in which such basic facts as death, suffering, conflict can be overcome."[10] And the functions mentioned are the "provision of meaning and unity to group or individual life." Although providing meaning might seem to be different from providing unity, it is clear that religion does both if it does either, and so again we do not really have ideas that can be separately realized. Therefore, Clarke and Byrne, it appears, are committed to the view that in *all* instances of religion one will find the idea of transcendent things, the pursuit of states of being in which such basic facts as death, suffering, conflict can be overcome, and the provision of meaning and unity to group or individual life. But this view is contrary to what is explicitly stated by and essential to their family resemblance approach. Thus we have an inconsistency.

There is a passage in which it seems that Clarke and Byrne recognize the possibility of such a complaint and seek to deal with it:

> We can accept that the specific distinguishing features of religion (object, goal and function) are exemplified in different degrees, and manifested in quite different ways in different religions. If we say that all religions have as their object "the sacred" this does not point to a determinate property which all religions share. "Sacred" is an umbrella term which hides differences rather than reveals obvious unity. A general contrast between sacred and profane is implied in it but how this contrast is drawn will differ from case to case, as different religions will be seen to have particular ways of distinguishing the special type of object or state which is their focus.[11]

But this will not do. We are now being told, in effect, that yet another layer of properties represents the features no one of which is shared in common between examples of religion—namely, those identical to the *ways* in which the features mentioned by Clarke and Byrne (e.g., the provision of unity) are realized—which is compatible with the latter features being in some form always present. But this is a shift, since earlier it was the latter features themselves that were said to be not uniformly present in religion. And, of course, just the fact that those features can be spoken of as such at

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the realm of the "sacred" is here taken to include the gods, and since in the next sentence the word "transcendent" is taken as a synonym, we may infer that, on the view here discussed, gods are transcendent things.

[10] Ibid., p. 9.

[11] Ibid., p. 13.