"A Conception and Impression of Religion from Dr. W. K. Wright's Book Entitled A Student's Philosophy of Religion"

[19 December 1950] [Chester, Pa.]

King wrote this paper during the first term of Davis's course Philosophy of Religion. Davis asked his students to consider several questions: "If I had never known anything about religion or had never had a religious experience, what pictures of religion would this book impart to me? . . . What message and impressions of a religious character does the book write upon your mind?"

Commenting on Wright's definition of religion as "the conservation of socially recognized values," King says: "Now I want to be religious, but I have some values that I would like to see conserved which are not socially recognized. Would I be excluded? What shall we call the experience in which a prophet, dissenting from socially recognized values, makes appeal to what he regards as a higher standard?" Davis gave the paper an A and commented, "Well done."

After reading this interesting work by Dr. William K. Wright entitled, A Student's Philosophy of Religion, I find that religion is something broad and universal covering the whole of life. It seems that the universality and perpetuity of religion result from the fact that it "endeavors to secure the conservation of socially recognized values." What then is religion? In order to answer this question we must deal with both the genus and differentia of our author's definition. In the genus of his definition of religion he attempts to be broad enough to include within its bounds every conceivable form of religion, and in the differentia he seeks to be sufficiently narrow and specific to exclude from the species of religion everything included within the genus that is not properly religious. If, then, we proceed to seek the genus of the definition of religion we come to some such words as those quoted above: the endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values. Let us carefully scrutinize each of the separate expressions in this definition of religion.

By "values" Mr. Wright seems to mean any of a number of things depending on the degree of advancement of the religion and of the civilization in

2. William Kelley Wright (1877–1956) received his B.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1899 and 1906, respectively, and taught at Dartmouth. He wrote several books, including Ethical Significance of Feeling, Pleasure, and Happiness (1907), A Student's Philosophy of Religion (1922), General Introduction to Ethics (1929), and A History of Modern Philosophy (1941).
which it appears. In lower religions, which Mr. Wright calls “natural religions,” the values are all concrete, tangible, practical wants. If food is something scarce, and means of cultivation of the soil is inefficient, there are likely to be religious ceremonials to obtain food. If water is scarce, as in the Arabian desert, every spring of water may be thought of as sacred. If men find themselves in need of protection from perils of thunder, lightning, earthquake, flood and cataract, then these become matters of religious attention. Protection from disease, especially pestilence, and the desire for long life, riches and posterity are values with which natural religions often have been concerned.

In contrast to natural religions our author speaks of “ethical religions”. In these man is more self-conscious, and reflective and possesses deeper moral insight. Moral conduct has become the chief value to conserve. The greatest evil that man has to overcome is his own sinful nature, which curses him now and threatens to continue to bring harm upon him in a future life. So ethical religions are usually “religions of redemption,” and afford man some way of escape from his sinfulness.

One characteristic applies to all the values of both natural and ethical religions. The values are all “socially recognized.” That is, they are either values that are recognized by many persons, if not by all, to concern the welfare of a whole of the social group, or else they are values recognized to be morally right and proper for individuals to seek for their own benefit. Victory in war, deliverance from pestilence or famine, and counsel regarding important decisions that must be made by the group obviously are matters of general public concern, and endeavor may be made to conserve them through religion. The same is true of the efforts of a family to maintain solidarity with its deceased members, leading it to share delicacies of food with them, to seek the repose of their souls, to ask their counsel, and to endeavor to avert their wrath.4

From this it seems that religion only emerges through the social community. I get the impression that social judgments are more important than religious judgments since the latter are derived from the former. Religion, then is something that comes from within the social whole, rather than from a revelation from without. The logical conclusion of this point seems to be that no one can make a religion for himself any more than he can devise a language of his own; religion is a slow development of group life and common experiences.

4. Wright, A Student’s Philosophy of Religion, p. 42: “One characteristic applies to all the values of both natural and ethical religions. The values are all ‘socially recognized.’ That is, they are either values that are recognized by many persons, if not by all, to concern the welfare as a whole of the social group (family, totem, tribe, nation), or else they are values recognized to be morally right and proper for individuals to seek for their own benefit. Victory in war, deliverance from pestilence or famine, and counsel regarding important decisions that must be made by the group obviously are matters of general public concern, and endeavor may be made to conserve them through religion. The same is true of the efforts of a family to maintain solidarity with its deceased members, leading it to share delicacies of food with them, to seek the repose of their souls, to ask their counsel, and to endeavor to avert their wrath.”
Religion is an "endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values." "Conservation" seems to carry with it a very wide connotation, at least for our author it does. It includes quantitative increase of that object that is of value, in the case of food, rain, and other material goods. It also includes enhancement or intensification of the values, especially in the case of more spiritual goods—such as bravery, loyalty, purity of heart, social solidarity, sense of divine presence and support, and the like.5

Religion is an "endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values." The "endeavor" need not be successful. Often, indeed, especially in savage religions, we perceive it to be wholly futile, as in the case of the Australian ceremonies to secure rain and to increase the food supply. The practise of religion always involves a minimum of faith, or confidence in the efficacy of the religious act, enough to make it seem worth while to try to secure the result in that way.6

As stated above the description of religion just set forth—"the endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values"—is really the genus of the definition of religion and is sufficiently broad to cover all varieties of religion. However any definition to be complete must have a differentia. At first I was about to think that Mr. Wright's definition of religion did not have a differentia, and I was on the verge of accepting the genus as his whole definition. This was about to lead me to the conclusion that many phases of magic, science, art, morality, and law came under the pale of religion, since each of these seeks to secure the conservation of socially recognized values. Reading further, however, I found that Mr. Wright completed his definition by a differentia, which delimited the field of religion from the other forms of endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values that are not religious.

I find that in the case of religious endeavor the conservation of values is always sought through "a specific and peculiar kind of agency and the attitude toward this agency is of a definite sort."7 In other words, the conservation of values is sought through specific actions that are believed to evoke some agency different from the ordinary ego of the individual, or from other

5. Wright, A Student's Philosophy of Religion, p. 43: "Religion is an 'endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values.' 'Conservation' is intended in a wide sense of the word. It includes quantitative increase of the object that is of value, in the case of food, rain, and other material goods. It also includes enhancement or intensification of the value, especially in the case of more spiritual goods—such as bravery, loyalty, purity of heart, social solidarity, sense of divine presence and support, and the like."

6. Wright, A Student's Philosophy of Religion, p. 43: "Religion is an endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values." The 'endeavor' need not be successful. Often, indeed, especially in savage religions, we perceive it to be wholly futile, as in the case of the Australian ceremonies to secure rain and to increase the food supply. The practise of religion always involves a minimum of faith, or confidence in the efficacy of the religious act, enough to make it seem worth while to try to secure the result in that way."

7. Wright, A Student's Philosophy of Religion, p. 44: "In the case of religious endeavor the conservation of values is always sought through a specific and peculiar kind of agency, and the attitude toward this agency is of a definite sort."
merely human beings, and that imply a feeling of dependence upon this agency.

"Specific action" seems to have {been} employed in order to make it clear that it includes any kind of act whatsoever that has been employed to serve the purpose—whether a dance about an arrow, a magic spell or incantation, or purely mental acts like concentrating one's thought upon the eightfold path of the Buddha, thoughtful meditation upon the meaning of life or the sublimity of nature, or the silent prayer a Christian might momentarily make when confronted by a sudden emergency. Such an action, whatever it may be, is always, in the mind of him who makes it, definite and specific.

The differentia proceeds to describe the agency employed. It is "some agency different from the ordinary ego of the individual, or from other merely human beings." The agency greatly varies in different religions, and is variously regarded by different individuals of the same religious faith. It may be some mysterious impersonal power in things known as mana, it may be a totem pole or fetich or a charm or an amulet, a dead or living animal; it may be the Blessed Virgin or one of the saints; it may be nature as conceived by a romantic poet like Shelley or a philosopher like Marcus Aurelius; it may be the deceased spirit of one's father, or it may be some other spirit or god or God. The agency may even be a human being like an Egyptian King or a Roman emperor provided he is {not} believed to be merely human, but in some respects divine.

The last clause of the differentia is intended to differentiate between religion and science, a dichotomy which I didn't make until I had read beyond the mere genus of the definition. As stated above, I was about to include science along with many other things under the pale of religion, since it too, in a manner, seeks to conserve socially recognized values. However this dichotomy was clearly set forth in the differentia of the definition. The scientific attitude toward nature always reveals a mechanical exploitation of nature. Nature is inert, passive, and man may bend and manipulate it according to his needs if it discovers the "laws" of nature, which are of course only descriptive formulæ of the succession of phenomena. On the other hand, the religious attitude always implies a "feeling of dependence" toward power greater than our ordinary selves, and not an attempt to exploit this power.

Interestingly enough, the various religious phenomena which the psychologist interprets are explained under our author's conception of religion. Prayer, for instance, whenever it is clearly distinguishable from the spell, is seen as the endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values through "an imaginative social process" or conversation between the ordinary ego of the individual and the agency invoked. Sacrifice is the offering of gifts to

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8. Wright, A Student's Philosophy of Religion, p. 47: "Religion is the endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values through specific actions that are believed to evoke some agency different from the ordinary ego of the individual, or from other merely human beings, and that imply a feeling of dependence upon this agency."

9. Davis crossed out "clase" and wrote "clause."
propitiate the agency. All religious ceremonial are explained as consisting chiefly in elaborations of prayer and sacrifice. Sacraments are interpreted as rites which {are} believed either spiritually or magically to effect some desired change in the believer by means of the agency invoked. The evangelical revival is seen as a different device to secure a similar purpose; and conversion and sanctification are changes in the personality of the individual attributed to a divine agency. Myths, whenever they have religious significance at all, are interpreted as naive attempts to account for the origin and validity of practices employed in religion, while doctrines and creeds are more elaborate rational and philosophical explanations and justifications. Institutions, like the church or the synagogue, are pictured as organizations for the purpose of preserving and propagating methods of religious endeavor for the conservation of socially recognized values. From all of this I get the impression that all religion can be explained in terms of this endeavor; and the various details of sacrifice, prayer, and other ritual, and the rise of myths, dogmas, and institutions are incidents that appear in the carrying out of this endeavor.

At this point we may consider whether our authors definition has succeeded in differentiating religion from the terms which it is most capable of being confused: animism and magic, in the case of primitive religions, and morals, ethics, and esthetics, in the case of higher religions.

According to the conception of religion set forth here, animism and magic may or may not be religious. They become religious when employed in the endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values. Otherwise they {are} non-religious and on occasion they may become anti-religious. For instance, the simple belief in spirits about one is animism, and may be entirely non-religious. The endeavor to induce these spirits by means of offerings to adopt a desired attitude so as to conserve socially recognized values, is a religious use of animism.

The distinction between religion and morals is not to be made in terms of the content of judgments of good and evil. There is no moral content that is always religious, and none that is always non-religious. The values of religion are all in some sense moral values, though they are occasionally outworn moral values that have survived from a bygone age. What furnishes the differentia of religion from merely moral value is the peculiar nature of the agency through which the religious value is conserved.  

The distinction between religion and ethics is similar. Ethics is the attempt to put morals upon a systematic basis by philosophically defending its principles. Religion is one of the agencies available for conserving some of the values recognized by ethics.

The differentiation of religion from esthetics is also provided for in our author's definition by the emphasis upon the agency employed. The religious endeavor is never an end in itself. Religious interest is always mediated. Esthetic contemplation is interesting on its own account; it is an end in itself. Religious meditation and prayer are always for the sake of conserving socially

10. Davis questioned “furnishes.”
recognized values important to the believer at other times even more than at
the moment of worship.

The genus and differentia of religion have now been explained. It has been
shown how religion differs from other attempts to secure the conservation of
socially recognized values. The total conception of religion set forth in this
book, therefore, may be summed up in the following definition:—Religion is
the endeavor to secure the conservation of socially recognized values through
specific actions that are believed to evoke some agency different from the or-
dinary ego of the individual, or from other merely human beings, and that
imply a feeling of dependence upon this agency.11

After being introduced to this all pervasive phenomenon called religion I
am left with many impressions. First I get the impression from Mr. Wright's
definition that almost anything, even man's dealings with physical forces, can
be religious. To be religious, actions must, according to him, be believed “to
evoke some agency different from the ordinary ego of the individual, or from
other merely human beings, and that imply a feeling of dependence upon
this agency.” This admits, it seems, within the pale of religion man's dealings
with merely physical forces when he uses them for the conservation or the
production of values, and when he feels dependent upon them. For the or-
dinary physical forces—heat, and electricity, for instance—are agencies dif-
ferent from “the ordinary ego of the individual, and from other merely hu-
man beings,” and upon them we are dependent. Does Mr. Wright intend to
include in religion the many specific actions by which we use these forces? Of
course who am I to ask such a question or even to discuss the adequacy or
inadequacy of Mr. Wright's definition? After all I am just being introduced to
the meaning and nature of this great force called religion.

In the genus of his definition Mr. Wright limits the values involved in reli-
gious consciousness to those already socially recognized. Now I want to be
religious, but I have some values that I would like to see conserved which are
not socially recognized. Would I be excluded? What shall we call the experi-
ence in which a prophet, dissenting from socially recognized values, makes
appeal to what he regards as a higher standard? O well these observations are
not too important. The important thing is that the author has convinced me
that religion more than anything else effects a certain amount of social and
moral solidarity and conservatism within the group of worshipers. Society
needs a strong conservative, centripetal agency to solidify its forces and keep
it from losing the values it has learned to recognize and appreciate. The au-
thor has convinced me that this agency is found in religion. Moreover, he has
convinced me that by becoming properly adjusted to the divine power of re-
ligion I can become adjusted to myself and to my fellow man. I will now go
out and seek that religious experience which Mr. Wright so cogently discusses
in this book.

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11. This definition is taken from Wright, A Student's Philosophy of Religion, p. 47; see note 8
above.