

## I

## What Does Paul Have to Do with Religion?

### *Beginning the Conversation*

What does Paul have to do with religion? The very question seems strange. Should it not be, what does Paul *not* have to do with religion? Is he not the most important of all the early followers of Jesus of Nazareth? Is he not considered the architect of the religion called Christianity?

The letters of Paul, and the account of events in his life in the book known as the Acts of the Apostles, have been read by millions of people across the centuries and now in more than fifteen hundred languages. He has been the source of the central religious beliefs of Christianity across the globe, a defining authority for faith and practice for the adherents of the world's largest religion. Wherever that religion has spread, Paul's name has been attached not just to churches but also to cities, streets, schools, and colleges. It would be difficult to find another name, except Jesus, so universally identified with religion in much of the world. Paul's name also puts some of his critics off religion entirely: his views about sexuality and women, his apparent acceptance of slavery, and his general prickliness give them cause for their disdain for religion. Whatever one thinks of Paul, surely he has to be counted among the world's most important and influential figures in religion.

But not so fast. There are contrary voices in this conversation. Among those millions of Paul's readers are some who have a professional and scholarly interest in his life and work. And among these academic readers can be found those who express different convictions about religion itself that make our question about Paul and religion more complicated than it first appears. Some argue that the ancient world did not have a concept of religion like ours. Others point to the difficulties in saying what religion actually is: it is hard to get a satisfactory definition of the word. Still others

assert that Paul was in fact *anti*-religion. Together they raise hurdles in the way of this study. We have to clear these hurdles to land at a place from which we can carry on our conversations with Paul about religion.

### THREE OBJECTIONS

#### ‘Paul Is against Religion.’

Let us first bring in those who claim that Paul is against the very idea of religion itself. If so, it will be pointless to expect anything in his letters to assist us in understanding and affirming religious life.

Of course, much depends on what ‘religion’ is. We are thrown immediately into a debate, carried on by many voices, over the relationship between ‘religion’ as a system of dogmas and practices on one hand and something more inward and personal on the other. Among those who see a fundamental difference between the two we can count figures as diverse as William James and Graham Greene, as well as theologians such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Thinkers like these provide the context for the claim that Paul is against religion.

In his 1902 classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James clearly marks off institutional religion (including ‘theologies’ and ‘ecclesiasticisms’) from *personal* religion, proposing his well-known definition: ‘the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine’.<sup>1</sup> Though he used ‘religion’ for this personal experience, James was not concerned about the actual label; proposing other candidates would be a ‘dispute about names’. A century later, this definition would hold appeal for those who, having forsaken the category of the ‘religious’, prefer to think of themselves as ‘spiritual’. Other categories can be used for a related distinction. For Greene, the difference is between *belief* and *faith*, explored most explicitly in his short story ‘A Visit to Morin’, in which the lapsed Catholic author Morin claims that, though he no longer has belief, that does not mean he does not have faith.<sup>2</sup> Belief has evaporated, Morin explains, coincident with his lapse from the sacramental practices of confession and communion. But he almost fiercely affirms that he still has faith. Greene is no doubt reflecting his own struggles over

<sup>1</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture II, 31. For a sympathetic critique see Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*.

<sup>2</sup> The story was published in *The London Magazine*, January 1, 1957, 13–28.

his ambivalent relationship to religion in the form of institutional Catholicism.<sup>3</sup>

While ‘faith’ in this sense is close to Jamesian ‘personal’ religion in contrast to institutional religion, for some theologians the distinction involves not subjective experience but divine action over against religion as human effort.<sup>4</sup> Barth is the best known of the twentieth-century theologians who are, broadly speaking, ‘anti-religion’. For Barth, however noble religion might be, it is ultimately ineffective and useless; only God’s free action in revelation can reach and redeem the human condition. He can put it too starkly. ‘The worst thing in the world is religion and the Bible is against religion and not for religion.’<sup>5</sup> Although Barth’s view is more nuanced than such pronouncements suggest, it has spoken to those Christian believers who regard the formalism of institutional religion and its marriage with civil power as contrary to the Gospel.

Barth’s contemporary Bonhoeffer was troubled by the very idea of religion – so much so that he began to wonder if its time was past and what that would mean for Christianity. ‘Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion’, he wrote, ‘and that remains his really great merit’ – though he did not think that Barth had gone far enough in thinking through its implications.<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer’s phrase ‘religionless Christianity’ has stuck in the vocabulary of later writers, sometimes misunderstood or misrepresented.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, then, some read Paul as rejecting religion on behalf of faith. The biblical scholar J. Louis Martyn in his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Galatians argues that Paul preaches a Gospel of revelation

<sup>3</sup> ‘I have, if you like, more doubts, but my faith has grown too. There’s a difference between belief and faith. If I don’t believe in X or Y, faith intervenes, telling me that I’m wrong not to believe. Faith is above belief. One can say that it’s a gift of God, while belief is not. Belief is founded on reason. On the whole I keep my faith while enduring long periods of disbelief. At such moments I shrug my shoulders and tell myself I’m wrong – as though a brilliant mathematician had come and told me that my solution of an equation was wrong. My faith remains in the background, but it remains.’ Reported in Allain, *The Other Man*, 173.

<sup>4</sup> But not identical: Greene’s ‘faith’, unlike ‘personal religion’, is an attitude without very much cognitive content at all.

<sup>5</sup> In Barth, *Gesamtausgabe* 27:505, recording his remarks at Princeton University in 1962 in answer to question 11 about religions other than Christianity. The main texts for Barth on religion are his commentary on Romans (second edition) and Church dogmatics §17. Garrett Green’s translation of section 17 corrects common misreadings of Barth (*On Religion*). See also Ralston, ‘Barth, Religion, and the Religions’.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 95. Bonhoeffer thinks that Barth replaced religion with a ‘positivist’ doctrine of revelation.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion, see for example Pugh, *Religionless Christianity*.

that cuts against all forms of religion. There is an antimony, he says, between religion and apocalypse that is central to Paul's theology in Galatians. Indeed, 'the antidote to what is wrong in the world does not lie in religion – religion being one of the major components of the wrong'. Martyn's definition of religion descends from Barth; he ascribes it to Paul as one of Paul's major convictions. 'Religion' is human effort over against the Gospel of 'divine invasion of the cosmos'.<sup>8</sup>

I mentioned earlier the complaints of the despisers of religion, who argue that religious belief and practice should be rejected in part *because of Paul's views*, but now it is these anti-religion faithful who, in a strange antithesis, want to reject religion *in the name of Paul*. It should become clear in the following chapters that we can understand religion differently, in ways that enable a continuing conversation with Paul that illumines and challenges religious life.

Two more hurdles remain to clear, obstacles thrown up by scholars to threaten this very enterprise to converse with Paul about religion. First, the ancient world, it is claimed, did not have the concept of 'religion'. And second, no one seems to be able to define 'religion' to the general satisfaction of those who think about such things.

### 'Paul Did Not Have a Concept of Religion.'

Look more closely at the claim about the very concept of 'religion' in the ancient world. Most scholars these days seem to hold that the ancient world (and not just Paul) lacked the very concept of 'religion' as contemporary English speakers use the word. In explanation, they typically refer to the modern notion of the opposition of the religious to the secular, and to the prominence of private belief systems over social practice in our concept. Paul's world was not divided this way. So it is not helpful (goes the argument) to use the language of religion in explicating his life and letters.<sup>9</sup> It would be wrong, then, to seek in his writings ideas that are distinctively 'religious'.

What, though, follows from a claim that a past community of speakers lacked a particular concept? It does not mean we cannot use that term in discussing the past. For instance, the ancient world did not have the concept of microbes; only the invention of the microscope in the late seventeenth century revealed these organisms. Nor can we find the phrase

<sup>8</sup> Martyn, *Galatians*, 39, 349.

<sup>9</sup> Many scholars make this assertion: see for example the introduction in Wright, *Paul*.

‘sibling rivalry’ in ancient texts: it was introduced in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> But while it would be inappropriate to believe that (say) a writer a thousand years ago used those concepts to explain something or other, we make legitimate use of them in explanations to ourselves of things past such as ancient diseases or relationships. If this is right, then *even if* we should not insert the term ‘religion’ into the vocabularies of the ancient Mediterranean world, that does not rule out its appropriate use in our own thinking about that world.

With respect to Paul, it is clear that he engages in and writes about practices that the twenty-first-century reader associates with ‘religion’ and not with political, social, psychological, or philosophical ways of thinking and acting. For example, he offers many expressions of prayer for the recipients of his letters. These words are not simply verbal gestures of hope and goodwill for well-being; they are invocations depending on a conviction about divine interest in human welfare. There are also Paul’s reports of his own experiences that he claims reveal divine presence, addressing him in a direct relationship. These expressions and reports are personal, having to do with Paul’s inner convictions and experiences. But in addition, his letters contain references to social and public practices that depend upon a conviction about the relationship of human beings to the divine. Some of these practices express worship of the divine being in songs, recitations, and ecstatic utterances. Others are rituals that derive their meanings from authoritative commandments and injunctions, such as circumcision or the agape meal Paul calls ‘the Lord’s supper’.

There is another way of putting this problem about using ‘religion’ for the practices and beliefs we find in Paul’s letters. Some scholars argue that *our* idea these days about ‘religion’ has shifted away from reference to practices (such as worship) and moved over to systems of belief – from the relational and social to the private and interior. For instance, Brent Nongbri argues that the ancient terms often translated using the word ‘religion’ cover wider aspects of life and ‘fall outside the idealized, private, interior realm associated with the modern concept of religion’.<sup>11</sup> Our modern usage, in his view, treats religion as ‘a kind of inner sentiment

<sup>10</sup> The earliest citation in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for ‘microbe’ is 1878, and for ‘sibling rivalry’ it is 1930 (though the Wikipedia entry claims it was introduced by David Levy in 1941). The OED 1972 citation for ‘sibling rivalry’ refers to the relationship between Moses and Aaron.

<sup>11</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 45.

or personal faith ideally isolated from secular concerns'.<sup>12</sup> This view of the modern category of religion, if correct, would suggest that the term should not be used in discussing Paul.

I am not convinced, however, that this account of the use of 'religion' is right. Grant that some dominant references reflect the distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular' worlds or spheres; these differences do not map on neatly to the private and the public in all contexts. Perhaps in some societies (the USA, for example) official doctrine keeps the religious private and makes the secular public. But the language does not always work that way, else the 'religious right' would not have a political meaning. There are, in fact, democratic societies with state religions. On surveys and census forms, when citizens are asked to identify themselves by 'religion', they will typically think of their social or group identity rather than consult the current state of their inner convictions.

There is no compelling reason, then, why we should refrain from employing a concept from our English vocabulary in discussing themes in Paul's letters, although he himself did not structure his world in such language. But that takes us to the third hurdle, one that we have just touched on: what exactly is meant by the word 'religion'.

### **'There Is No Good Definition of Religion.'**

If we manage to clear the hurdle of the anachronistic application of 'religion' to Paul, there is still the risk of being tripped by scholars who object to various attempts at definition, and who would undoubtedly cavil at the use of any standard proposal. It is practically impossible to come up with an explanation of the concept of religion that will satisfy the demands of accuracy and comprehensiveness. An effective definition must not leave out good candidates but also cannot let in uncomfortable ones. A claim that religion is simply 'a belief about God or the gods' may push the atheist (with negative beliefs about gods) in through the back door; if religion requires a positive belief in gods it leaves outside the non-theist Buddhist; if

<sup>12</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 7–8. However, in his conclusion Nongbri offers a different account of the ordinary meaning of 'religion'. He recognizes that it is very difficult to avoid some language about religion in studying the ancient world, even though one might not want to attribute the concept itself to the ancients. His proposal is to use a 'mundane' or 'simplistic' common understanding of religion that ordinary folk use when they are not trying to define it. 'In those situations', he says, 'religion seems to be used mostly to discuss things involving gods or other superhuman beings and the technologies for interacting with such beings' (157).

religion is a life-absorbing adherence to ritual performance, that definition may let in the sports enthusiast.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the difficulty, intrepid scholars have not shied away from the challenge. You can discover many candidates in the first chapters of textbooks on the subject; you will be introduced to the disputes among anthropologists, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, linguists, and lexicographers. Sometimes religion is defined by a distinctive set of beliefs, sometimes by practices and rituals, sometimes by its object or by a fundamental attitude towards what is overridingly real.

The failures of professional academics to agree on a definition of religion, however, turn out not to prevent talk about religion. The concept gets used all the time in ordinary discourse. We distinguish one religious group from another, sometimes by their beliefs and sometimes by their practices. Those who object to religion do have *something* in mind that is objectionable.<sup>14</sup> Note too that the hurdles we have identified have their own difficulties with each other. To mount the challenge that Paul did not have the concept of religion, you would have to have a working definition of the term. To claim that Paul was anti-religion would suggest that he understood that concept.

So I am not going to stumble over these hurdles; we can work around them. Disputes over many concepts are never settled to the satisfaction of everyone. What is needed is an approach to our subject that has some elasticity, with core ideas but also room for ambiguities where necessary. Our everyday talk using the vocabulary of religion gathers up beliefs, commitments, practices, social organizations, institutions, and so on. In other words, it is used to describe what we can call a ‘form of life’. I will say something about this idea before exploring what the *religious* form of life involves. That is the place to land in order to begin the conversation with Paul over what can be discerned in his letters about religion as a form of life.

## RELIGION AND FORMS OF LIFE

### What Is Meant by ‘Form of Life’?

An essential feature of a form of life is what we can call a ‘stance’ on the world or a relevant part of that world. It is the place from which you view

<sup>13</sup> See O’Connor, *Skateboarding and Religion*.

<sup>14</sup> Sometimes the target does not turn out to be the right one: see Crane, *The Meaning of Belief*, 1–18.

what is going on, the sorts of things you notice, and how you see yourself in the picture. A simple example will get us started: a play, for instance, is experienced differently by a member in the audience, a character in the play, the director, or the box office manager. The example makes it easy to think of these different places as ‘points of view’ because the viewing of the play is from different locations. However, a stance as I conceive it is not merely a differing opinion (‘you might think Greens are politically naïve, but that is just your point of view’). When you have a stance, you are planted to experience the world a certain way, not just to have opinions about it. Stances include points of view, but also self-location and self-understanding. They are often a *given* in experience (you can come to realize that you inhabit one that is formed by your family, your community, your society), but they can also be *taken up*. You can adopt a parental stance, for instance, without being a biological parent. How successfully you manage that has a lot to do with imagination and empathy. The arts, especially literature, are vital in enlarging our understanding of, and our sympathy or even distaste for, those whose stances are unlike our own.

Stances are closely related to roles, but they have to do with the milieu and habitation in which roles are performed. And you can have a stance without having a role. Roles are socially constructed and defined, with attendant responsibilities. But stances, being attitudinal, do not require roles: if you have a pessimistic stance on life, you might live in modest and quiet despair without performing any recognizable social functions. We speak this way about outlooks and temperament, very closely related concepts.

Having a particular stance, however, does not in itself make for a form of life. A form of life is *actually lived*, not just imagined. That involves relevant practices and activities, including a complex of motivations, aims, desires, emotions, reflections, justifications, and so on. As we all recognize, living out a certain kind of life changes our stance: ask any son or daughter who has become a parent, or any faculty member who has become a dean.

Further, many roles we play require a certain stance but are not sufficiently comprehensive to make up an entire way of living. When I am the member of a university board, I should take up the stance of someone interested in the well-being of the institution, but this stance informs only that part of my life having to do with the business of the institution. A parent does not have that luxury: she finds herself living the life of a parent, well or poorly, for as long as she is a parent. Of course, she has many other obligations that come with their own stances,



perhaps as a member of a university board or the medical profession. But as long as she has a daughter or son she inhabits the form of life we call parenting.

There are as many forms of life as there are widely encompassing stances that are expressed in and informed by relevant practices and activities. I have mentioned as one example *being a parent*. Others spring to mind. Some do relate to roles and functions in society, such as being a *politician*, a *family doctor*, or a *priest*. (Note that the emphasis is on *being*, taking up an identity that informs attitudes and actions.) Others have to do with pervasive stances not directly related to social functions. I am thinking of the *philosophical form of life* or the *academic form of life*. When you live lives like these, you take up a certain attitude towards knowledge and the human ability to gain it, critique it, and pass it on. And you practise making knowledge claims yourself in a certain way. It helps to have a job that pays you to do this, but you do not need that social role to inhabit forms of life like this.

Some forms of life are less worthy than others. *Being litigious*, for instance, springs from a stance on the world about the central importance of the self and the role of law in securing self-interest; it involves all-consuming and seemingly endless legal actions and procedures.

I have not used the phrase ‘*way of life*’, though there is nothing wrong with that expression. It suggests, though, more of practice and behaviour than of stances as stable places offering a determining take on the world. A *dissolute way of life* involves a pattern of behaviour but may be only loosely related to a particular stance on the world. So I will keep to ‘form of life’ for the purposes of this discussion.

I want to make one more point, a crucial one, about forms of life. As noted, forms of life may be given, and we are inculcated into certain forms early on. We can also be attracted to take up a stance just because it is compelling for a variety of reasons, some emotional or personal. In other words, we do not always argue ourselves into forms of life. Moreover, *you can live a form of life perfectly well without being able to articulate adequately just what it is about*.

That is simply a fact about human living. Excellent musicians often falter when talking about their form of life. Philosophers will quickly disagree, sometimes vehemently, once they have got past the first few sentences about what philosophy is, but they carry on living their form of life. Inarticulateness also may be a fact about the epistemic equipment of human beings: we are not very good at finding ways to explain our fundamental stances, let alone justify them.

But enough of forms of life in general. It is time to think again about religion.

### The Religious Form of Life

I have confessed to the obstacle of achieving an acceptable definition of ‘religion’: that is a challenge to anyone who thinks about it. But so is defining ‘philosophy’, or ‘politics’, or many important concepts. As I have just pointed out, inarticulateness about a form of life can be part of the game without spoiling it, for we simply get on with playing it.

What, then, are the attitudes and activities in the religious form of life? Let me propose that the fundamental stance in this form of life is a kind of *ontological humility before the divine*, a humility that recognizes the contingency of existence, our very human dependence upon a divine power, justice, and goodness that beggars the imagination.

I have used the word ‘divine’ more than half a dozen times by now, and it deserves a comment. ‘The divine’ is an adjectival noun, leaving unstated the object being modified or described: the divine *what?* That is deliberate. What is important is that there is indeed something or other in the face of which or whom one experiences awe or absolute dependence or the paltriness of being just this contingent piece of frail flesh. Different thinkers employ different terms, but ‘the sacred’ or ‘the holy’ come to mind, even if ‘the ground of being’ is not a common lexical choice among the religious. The Abrahamic faiths speak of the Lord, or God, or Allah. Some may not speak The Name; mystical traditions clam up and point to the ineffable. In spite of these differences, what is essential is that the stance has *intentionality* – that is, it is not just a feeling or emotional state in itself. The feeling or attitude is *towards* an object that is of a different order of reality than the human.

The stance called ‘religious’ views the world and human life not as self-sufficient or self-explanatory, but as dependent on the ‘divine’; it acknowledges the ‘givenness’ of things even if it is not always articulate about a ‘giver’.<sup>15</sup> That provokes a range of attitudes and responses. For example, the awe and reverence evoked may invest places and objects with special significance; they are *sacred*, not to be trifled with. The givenness of things finds a response in gratitude and respect, often expressed in *worship*, an attempt to acknowledge the relationship with the divine by performing set actions, usually called rituals. One such act is prayer, addressing the divine

<sup>15</sup> To use Marilynne Robinson’s title, *The Givenness of Things*.