

# *Defining Religion: The Supernatural as Personal/Impersonal*

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I will begin by submitting a definition of religion. A religion is a system of beliefs and practices resting on the assumption that events within the world are subject to some supernatural power or powers such that human needs, either physical or psychological, can be satisfied by men's entering into relations with such powers. The supernatural powers in question are called supernatural in virtue of the fact that they can allegedly be known, related to or influenced primarily by means other than those of reason and sense experience. The fundamental belief characteristic of all religions is, thus, belief in a higher supernatural power which can control everyday events, and the fundamental practice characteristic of all religions is the attempt to influence this power.

The power, however, is conceived of in two basic ways which differ sharply from one another. One way sees the power as an impersonal energy, a kind of supernatural electricity, which can be manipulated and controlled. Obviously that manipulation is what we have always called magic, which is the art of compelling a supernatural power to do one's will. The root concept of magic is the belief in a supernatural energy which can be concentrated or dispersed and which is subject to invariable laws. These laws are somehow learned by the magician and then applied by him according to certain formulas as he chants his incantations or performs his rituals. If these incantations and rituals are correctly performed, the desired results are inevitably achieved. If the desired results are not achieved, the conclusion is that something went wrong with the ritual. Francis Bacon said that to command nature you must obey her. The magician believes that to command supernature you must obey her, obey her by learning her laws and applying them. Magic shares with science the characteristic of seeking invariable laws, but it departs from science with respect to the object of these laws—the supernatural rather than the natural. The means of learning these laws are dreams and visions rather than observation, experiment, and reason.

We have said that there were two basic ways of conceiving supernatural power. We have been talking about the first way, the impersonal. The second basic way is the personal, the I-Thou relation. Supernatural power is conceived here in terms of disembodied persons—gods, spirits, angels, demons. Man's relation to them is, in intention, an interpersonal one. You enter into interpersonal relations with the gods, in prayer. Man begs them, cajoles them, loves them, hates them, is faithful to them or is unfaithful to them. His attitude is that of a suppliant, whereas the magician's attitude toward the supernatural is that of an engineer. These disembodied persons relate to man in a personal way. The gods love him, they hate him, they choose him, they reward him, punish him, and so on. Any number of models of interpersonal relationships may operate in this kind of religion. The gods may be regarded as friends or enemies, for instance. Or a political model may be used; God is a king and men his subjects. Or a

family model may be used; God is the heavenly father and men his children. Sometimes holy mothers are brought in, then holy infants. Under this scheme, all men are conceived as brothers and they are said to be each others' keepers.

The best examples of these strongly personal religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The God of these religions is conceived as personal. I am using the term *personal god* to mean a god who is thought of as a person, or three persons in one as in the case of Christianity. God thinks, wills, watches, evaluates; gives out commandments, rewards, punishments; has mercy, seeks for his lost sheep; and so on.

The impersonal and the personal concepts of religion can be thought of as two ends of a spectrum. At one end you have nothing but magic, the impersonal force being collected, stored, routed, rerouted, and dispersed by magicians. At this end of the spectrum, the supernatural power is completely impersonal, the magician is in control, he is an engineer of the supernatural. The witch doctor curing somebody or putting a curse on him is an example. At the other end of the spectrum, you have a personal, absolutely omnipotent God who decrees all things from moment to moment. Islam is the perfect example. The word *Islam* means surrender; the basic idea is total prostration before God's will. In between, toward the magic end of the spectrum, you have Greek polytheism, where, although the gods are persons, they are in constant conflict with one another, and their action is limited by the amount of divine power they can work up for the occasion. The gods had, so to speak, to do push-ups in the Greek polytheistic system. Further over toward the personal is Catholicism, where God is omnipotent but who confers upon his priests the power to perform rites which work more or less automatically; *ex opere operato*, that is, efficacious when correctly and seriously performed. Think of the traditionalist Archbishop Lefevre and his ordinations disapproved by the pope. The pope was very upset, but he had to admit these were *valid* ordinations, even though "irregular" and therefore disapproved of by God.

If you recall the movie, *The Exorcist*, there was a scene in which the bed containing the little girl was suspended in the air, and the priest, sweat rolling down his face, with a crucifix in his hand, kept repeating, "by the power of Christ I compel you, by the power of Christ I compel you!", until finally the bed returned slowly to the floor? This is an example of the mixture within religion of the personal and the impersonal, of God-controlled power and man-controlled power.

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Source: George Walsh, *The Role of Religion in History* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998), pp. 3-5.