Introduction

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To understand the human condition in its deepest and most mysterious respects we rightly look to religion. Religion helps to form elementary imaginative structures about how we do or should orient ourselves in the cosmos. Religion shapes and rehearses in ritual our most important affiliations with one another and with nature, and it provides the rationales both for why those affiliations are important and for what it means to be obligated to them. To be human is to lie under obligation in some sense and religion allows us to imagine and enact this in detail. Religion addresses the most basic questions of the meaning of life or its lack of meaning, of individual grounding and destiny, of personal fulfillment or ultimate frustration, pain, and suffering. Religion articulates what is most real, harmonious, and ideal about human life as well as why human beings usually suffer so from illusion and sick craving, from imbalance and disharmony, and from social injustice and personal sin. When we want to do something about this sad contrast between the normative side of the human condition and its ordinary actual failure, religion gives us maps (myths), models (saints and rituals), and methods (of spiritual growth), even if they amount only to a counsel of resignation.

Of course much about the human condition is not related directly to religion. We need a planet with a favorable ecological niche, gravitic and
atmospheric conditions within a small range of tolerance, and resources for food and shelter. We must cope with parents, endure adolescence, and get along with others so as not to be thrown to the wolves. Communities are vulnerable to dislocation and destruction. Most people get sick and everyone dies eventually. The human condition is an adventure in search of beauty and excellence; it requires institutions of governance, education, and justice; it involves the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and for utilitarian ends; and it is entangled with issues of personal and social maturation, the cultivation of prosperity, and defense of one's place. All of these aspects of the human condition involve non-religious dimensions of life such as biological maintenance, interpersonal relations, plain pain and suffering, human expansiveness, the arts, politics, law, education and learning, psychology, economics, and the successful use of force. How foolish it would be to attempt to treat all of these dimensions of the human condition as functions of religion! And yet, when any of these other dimensions of the human condition gets threatened or questioned in a radical way, or when coping with them pushes the institutions that address them to their margins and beyond, these dimensions re-raise issues of the human place in the cosmos, of the nature and justification of elementary affiliations, and of the meaning and identity of human life—and these are the religious aspects of the human condition.

Alas, alas, the previous two paragraphs are sadly naive and misleading. This is all the sadder because what they say is largely true and would be accepted as common wisdom by nearly everyone who understands them and is not a scholar trained to pick up their naiveté.

The chief reason for their naiveté is that there are many religions, not just “religion in general,” and adherents of those religions do not necessarily say the same thing. Whether they agree on the generalizations asserted above in the name of “religion” cannot be known until we discover what each says in its texts and debates about the aspects of the human condition under discussion and compare those assertions. Until we compare them, we do not know and cannot assert responsibly whether they agree or not, and in what respects. And so it is dangerous, or at least naive, to talk much about aspects of the religious dimension of the human condition in general. Instead of saying “religion is such and so,” we should be open to saying “some religions are such and so” and “other religions are something else again.” The very distinction between religious and non-religious dimensions of the human condition is complicated.

The other reason for the naiveté is that the language of those two paragraphs arises out of a particular intellectual and social context, namely the existential situation of late modernity in Western cultures characterized by the collapse of Christendom. The seeds of that collapse were
sown in the late Renaissance critique of religion that initiated the privatization of religion and its steady withdrawal from public life. World War I demonstrated that "Christian Civilization" in Europe was a contradiction, and a dangerous one. Samuel Huntington has recently detailed the criticisms levied by East Asian, South Asian, and Islamic critics against fallen Christendom as being morally and spiritually bankrupt, existentialism to the contrary notwithstanding. European civilization's intellectual and cultural responses to the collapse of Christendom have been diverse and somewhat frantic. Paul Tillich is perhaps the pivotal European figure to interpret the collapse of Christendom in terms of the human condition.

In the tradition of mediating theology since Schleiermacher, Tillich asked what broader dimensions of human religiosity Christianity is supposed to address. Tillich's was an explicitly philosophical move, asking questions that he thought were more general (or vague) than the particular concerns of Christianity, Judaism, and secular European culture, and that in fact were asked in particular passionate ways in all religions. Instead of using categories such as "sinners rendered up to judgment," Tillich talked about the human condition and about God as the ground of being that makes the human condition possible. Christianity was interpreted as an expression of a broader phenomenon, or as a specific (and for Tillich, uniquely correct) religious response to a broader religious need. His explication of this took advantage of the deep spiritual vocabulary of European existentialism. But its power was not limited to that. Japanese scholars of the Kyoto school as well as Orthodox Christian scholars influenced by Dostoyevsky plumbed the depths of late modern existential Angst, and were in dialogue with Tillich's categories such as the human condition.

Perhaps Tillich's categories characterize much that is important about late modern society in general, including those non-European cultures reacting to modernization or about to do so. At any rate, the notion of "the human condition" and the associated references to existentialist literature, art, ethics, and the critique of traditional religion through generalization, is a twentieth-century idea. It has a European origin and global dissemination through the effects of modernity. How can such an historically and culturally limited concept serve to reveal something basic about religion in general or importantly common to all or most religions? Eighth-century Christianity would no more have recognized talk of "the human condition" than would have eighth-century Buddhism, Islam, or Vedānta. Is it not naive, then, for the opening paragraphs of this section to talk about "the human condition" at all if they are intended to be explications of "religion" or even "all religions?"
Critiques of naiveté, however, are cheap. As Ricoeur and others have pointed out, realism requires the acquisition of a "second naiveté." By paying attention to criticisms, insisting that doubts be based on as much concrete evidence as positive assertions, and disciplined engagement with the real subject matter under discussion rather than merely generalized rumors about it, a legitimate route is open to substantive "critical commonsensist" embrace of the subject matter. From that embrace comes new knowledge that is, at the very least, an improvement over both what is claimed in the "first naiveté" and what is left after its skeptical rejection. All this is to say that, self-mortifying suspicions aside, we know a lot about the human condition and about religion and religions. We do not need to ask whether we know enough that is trustworthy to get started because we already are started. We do need to ask how to make what we think we know vulnerable to correction. One important way to do this is to compare what religious people and their sacred texts say about the human condition.

Starting with the vague theme of the human condition, the specialist scholars of our project seminar used their selective approaches in an effort to determine how the human condition is conceived in each of the six religious traditions being studied. Then we asked what subcategories articulate important comparative relations among the traditions or subtraditions that our experts had analyzed. The discussion was wide-ranging with many dozens of candidate hypotheses considered, usually arising from the rhetoric of the specific text under discussion. It was obvious from the start that an idea or term common to several traditions, such as the self, often means quite different things. This caused us to become clearer about how a category is vague insofar as it is differently specified in the several traditions and how it is specified differently when made concrete in terms of them. The discussion involved a constant tacking back and forth between vague and specific formulations.

In the end—really at the end, in the last revisions of this manuscript—we settled on a scheme of categories as expressing what we most want to say about how the religious traditions compare concerning the human condition. The comparisons fell out under three main heads: cosmological dimensions of the human condition, personal dimensions, and social dimensions.

Issues concerning the cosmos that bear upon the human condition grouped themselves around interpreting the cosmos in four principal respects: the unity of the cosmos (including God plus the world in traditions that distinguish them), ontology or the problems of existence, the value of the cosmos and things within it, and causation or patterns of origination and change in senses that bear upon the human condition.
The personal and social dimensions sometimes seemed quite distinct from one another, as when we discussed the Buddhist no-self doctrine for which social matters seem not so important, or the Jewish notion of the people of Israel for which the niceties of self or no-self seem beside the point. But in the end we came to see the distinction as intolerably artificial and so here treat the personal and social dimensions together. We interpret these in four comparative respects as they bear on the human condition: How they define personal identity, including issues of community, substantiality, continuity, and body-mind-soul relations; how human beings lie under obligation, with a stress on the very different ways religious cultures articulate what is normative, ideal, or binding; how the human condition involves a predicament that religions address as a problem; and how all the above are a function in part of human affiliation with other people, with social groups as such, with institutions of various sorts, and with nature variously encountered.

Obviously, some of these categories are more natural for some religious texts and traditions than for others. For instance, it requires a significant leap of interpretation to apply the category of “obligation” to Buddhism, even though the category does register important Buddhist themes. Again, questions of ontology typically are secondary in Jewish thought and texts, though the category is still needed to account for important Jewish ideas. Overall, we agreed that the categories themselves, the ordering that places the cosmic categories first, and even the propensity to present the categories schematically was rather Confucian in character. As we hope to show in the rest of the book, however, useful results can come of this scheme and its tendency to distort can be checked by subjecting every result to the dialectic of correction. After all, no scheme will be free of implicit commitments and this particular scheme is at least as richly encompassing and capable of registering diverse ideas about the human condition as others that we considered.

Only at the end, we should stress, did this scheme become settled enough to count as a provisional result of an ongoing process. It was not a guide to the discussion or papers throughout, although predecessor candidates were operative from early on. Chapters 2–7 should not be read as illustrating the scheme of categories but as providing the discussions from which the scheme emerged. Chapters 8 and 9 express comparative hypotheses in terms of the scheme that emerged from the earlier chapters and seminar discussions and from their author’s own analyses. The tentativeness of both the scheme and the organization of the comparative hypotheses should be recognized; but the comparative process as we understand it makes the scheme vulnerable to nuancing and correction.
The tentativeness of the scheme, and the comparisons that fall within it, are illustrated in the following way. We noticed early on that an alternative approach to the human condition could be generated from a narrative reading of this distinction in which a human life begins somewhere, goes somewhere, and encounters various situations along the way. This kind of narrative formulation of the elements of the human condition is particularly congenial to Buddhist emphases. We also recognized that the rubric of cosmos-society-individual is especially congenial to Chinese emphases; indeed this rubric emerged from our early discussions of Kohn's paper for this volume. The cosmic-social-individual pattern of categories was adopted for what seems to us now to be a number of reasons: partly because most of our specialists favored this rubric, partly because we felt it more directly addressed cosmic and social topics, and partly because of a previously undiagnosed Confucian disposition among most of the project's generalists. Becoming aware of the contrast between this rubric and the more narrative proposal just described helped us to understand that our decision had a specific history and context. This in turn helped us to find ways to overcome the limitations of perspective associated with the rubric adopted for this volume. Rubrics inevitably invite limitation of perspective; the trick is to avoid being trapped by those limitations by finding ways to enrich the perspective.

But all this turns on comparison. Comparison of religious ideas is as much the topic of this book as the human condition. We begin with an introduction to the problem of comparison and to the theory that guides our approach.

Notes


3. "Critical commonsensism" is the title Charles Sanders Peirce gave to his philosophy. By "critical" he meant that any claim to knowledge had to be treated as an hypothesis and made vulnerable to correction when there is reason to do so; he attributed this philosophic theme to Kant, who used the term "critical" in a different sense, however. By "commonsensist" he referred to the philosophy of the Scottish commonsensists Thomas Reid and Dugald Steward and adopted from that the thesis that thinking is always in the middle of life, never at its beginning or foundation. Therefore we are assuming many things as commonsense dictates, and legitimately do so, until
there is concrete reason to doubt them. The crucial points for Peirce are to
determine what a good reason for doubt consists in, what its occasions are,
and how to make the process of reflective living vulnerable to correction. See
the various papers with “critical commonsensism” in the title in volume 5 of
the Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, ed. Charles Hartshorne and

4. For the technical meanings of “vagueness” and “specificity,” see 1.2; cross
references in this volume are to chapter and section.