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A theory of religion revised

JIM STONE

Philosophy Department, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA 70148

Abstract: **This essay is a revision of my earlier effort to overturn the prevailing view that there is merely a 'family resemblance' between religions. A religion is a system of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the practices place the practitioner in a relation-of-value to a supermundane reality so grand that it can figure centrally in the satisfaction of substantial human needs. A 'supermundane reality' is one that exceeds the mundane world revealed by sense perception. The theory generates a useful taxonomy of practices and theories closely related to, but substantially different from, religions.**

What feature do all and only religions share in virtue of which they are religions? Philosophers lately tend to agree that there is merely a 'family resemblance' between religions (to use Wittgenstein's term), a network of features generally shared, most of which belong to each religion, no one of which belongs to every religion. The best way to show that a question is not misguided is to answer it, as I tried to do in my paper 'A theory of religion'.[1] I've become persuaded, however, that the theory presented there provides, at best, a sufficient condition for religion, not a necessary one. Nonetheless I believe that the theory can be revised so that it expresses a necessary condition too. That is the project of this paper.

In what follows I will briefly recapitulate the old theory, explain why it fails, then amend it so that it answers the question that begins this essay. Finally, I will apply it to hard cases and consider putative counter-examples. Religion has an essence, I will maintain, which the new theory reveals.

The old theory

The feature of religions that provided the basis for my theory is that a religion can be practised. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism – each involve activities that, when done in the right way for the right reasons, constitute the practice of that religion. A religion is a kind of system of practices. But what differentiates religious from non-religious practices? A religion, I wrote, must be

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rationalized by beliefs that articulate an account of the universe, or an account of the reality that underlies the universe, according to which there is the possibility of *fit*. That is, the beliefs entail that there is a relation in which a person can, but need not, stand to the rest of what is, which is fundamentally appropriate to the way things are, or to the way the reality that underlies the universe is, such that standing in this relation is, in and of itself, the greatest human good. I called a collection of beliefs that expresses an account of fit a 'religious world view' (RWV).

A system of practices is a religion only when it is rationalized by a RWV, I claimed. But what is the relation between practices and fit that makes performance rational? The relation cannot be merely productive if the system of practices is to be a religion: the whole purpose of performing the practices cannot be to produce fit in the way that labour added to leather makes shoes, or dieting results in weight loss. If the practices are chiefly a method or technique for producing fit, they are not a religion. Rather, a system of practices is a religion only when it is rationalized by beliefs according to which the performance of the practices constitutes fit: to perform the practices because one accepts the world view is to assume significantly the appropriate relationship.

I gave this analogy: suppose friendship is a symmetrical relation, so that I am someone's friend only if she is friends with me. Visiting my sick friend in the hospital to cheer her up isn't merely a technique for producing deeper friendship, but part of what it is to be her friend. To behave in this way toward someone who likes me is to assume significantly the relationship of friendship to that person: it constitutes being a friend. But I might be her friend and never visit her in the hospital, because she is never sick, or because of my phobia for hospitals. This behaviour isn't essential to friendship. Nor is friendship reducible to the set of behaviours I do from affection for my friend. I could do them all and fail to stand in the relation of friendship if she doesn't reciprocate; and even the same reciprocal behaviour is compatible with different degrees of friendship, which depend in part on depth of affection – often a matter of luck, natural proclivity, or grace.

Similarly, taking the mass may produce a deeper relationship with God, but the mass isn't a method or technique for getting closer to God. To participate in the mass is already to stand in the appropriate relation to God. At the same time, taking the mass may not be essential for fit: we might allow that a man on a desert island who finds a copy of the Gospels might be saved simply by his love of Christ. Nor is fit reducible to the whole set of behaviours we do because we accept a Christian RWV, for there may be degrees of fit attainable only by God's grace. The force of the claim that a practice constitutes fit is that to perform it is to enter significantly (but not necessarily completely) into the appropriate relation. What matters is that in performing it one ipso facto participates in the relation that is the *summum bonum*: the practice isn't merely instrumental to the attainment of fit.

The theory of religion, then, was this: 'A religion is a system of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the performance of the practices

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constitutes fit.'[2] The practices may be celebratory or commemorative; they may be productive of good harvests, eternal life, even deeper degrees of fit; but if they are a religion, they must also constitute fit according to the RWV.

One of the theory's strengths was that it helped to generate a useful taxonomy of practices and theories closely related to, but substantially different from, religions.

Spiritual paths

A system of exercises rationalized by beliefs according to which the exercises are merely productive of fit (in much the way that dieting and exercise produce but do not constitute weight loss) is a 'spiritual path', not a religion. This distinction largely underlies inchoate popular attempts to contrast religion and 'spirituality', or to distinguish religion in a 'narrow and a wide sense'. A programme of austerity, breath control, mental exercises, and physical postures that are merely instrumental to the attainment of '*moksha*' (or liberation) is an example of a spiritual path. Breathing exercises in no way constitute God realization; they are merely a technique for producing fit. Vivekenanda entitled a book *Yoga: The Science of God Realization*. By contrast, studying the Torah on the Sabbath isn't a technique for producing the appropriate relation to God. To perform the practice is to participate in the right relationship. Judaism is a religion; Yoga is a spiritual path.

Theories of the good

A theory of the good is an account of what constitutes the greatest good for human beings. As I mean it, 'the greatest human good' need not be the only intrinsic good. Rather, the *summum bonum* is the intrinsic good, such that any life which attains it is well worth living, and any life without it is seriously defective. In addition, the greatest good is often viewed as the ground in which other intrinsic goods are meaningful and truly satisfying. Every RWV includes a theory of the good: the *summum bonum* is identified with fit.

Philosophies of life

A theory of the good can leave us largely in the dark about how to live. The theory that the pleasant life is the best life doesn't yet tell us what to do to have a pleasant life. We can say, tentatively, that a philosophy of life is a theory of the good conjoined with practical recommendations for attaining the good. Hedonism conjoined with Epicurus' counsel that the most pleasant life is devoted to study and contemplation is a philosophy of life. Of course, philosophies of life are often unsophisticated. Also, the theory of the good and the practical instructions are sometimes expressed by a single statement. The view that family is what matters most in life involves a rough-grained theory of the good – affectionate relations with one's family are what matter most – and the practical locus of the

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good is obvious: to have the good one ought to spend plenty of time with one's family, and so on. Note, however, that it is counter-intuitive to cast religions as philosophies of life. The view that what matters most is to participate in the life of the risen Christ by taking the mass and saying the rosary, or that the supreme good is participating in the manifestation of the godhead in human history by keeping the covenant and studying the Torah – both seem inappropriate candidates for philosophies of life. Here we tend to think of philosophy as an alternative to religion. We can capture these intuitions as follows: A philosophy of life is a theory of the good that doesn't identify the good with fit, conjoined with practical instructions for attaining that good. I don't maintain that this definition expresses the 'fact of the matter' about philosophies of life, of course; only that it captures our intuitions in an interesting and useful way. Secular humanism is a philosophy of life.

Cults

Cults are ritual practices meant to please a supernatural or quasi-supernatural being (or a collection of such beings) too limited in its attributes to ground an account of fit. Consequently a cult is not by itself a religion. Cults can exist within religions, however. For instance, a figure (supernatural or human) may arise against the background of a pre-existing RWV, who is taken to have the power to help those who worship her attain fit. She is too limited in her features to provide an account of fit by herself; nor is she a mere representative of the divine (the divine in one of its forms). We worship her, not the divine, believing that in return she will use her power to help place us in the right relation to the divine. Early Christian theology is motivated largely by the need to position Jesus so that he is neither a cult object within Judaism nor a mere representative of the Jewish God. Note, too, the critical emergence of a new constitutive practice – the Eucharist – as Christianity separates from Judaism.

The old theory refuted

Why is this theory mistaken? Imagine a people who believe in gods who reward them with cattle, long life, and good health if they perform animal sacrifices. A professional priest caste officiates at these bloody rituals, which are done solely to obtain worldly goods. According to me, a religion essentially involves a metaphysical connection that is the main point of human existence, and it enables us to enter into that relation through the performance of constitutive practice. But the people I'm describing already know the point of their existence – cattle, long life, and good health – and they are utterly uninterested in metaphysical connections. Consequently, my theory entails they have neither a religion nor a spiritual path. I wrote: 'A religion cannot be wholly a matter of commerce with the gods'.[3] But this conclusion is mistaken, surely. In fact, I have

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just given an account of a religion that significantly resembles that of the ancient Aryans.[4]

My paper dealt with this objection in three ways. First, as mentioned in the first section, I reject the proposition that ritual practices meant to please supernatural or quasi-supernatural beings are necessarily sufficient to comprise a religion. For instance, rituals meant to propitiate elves and fairies so they won't play barnyard pranks on us don't constitute a religion. The objects of religious practices need to be sufficiently grand (taken either individually or collectively) that they are in a position to satisfy substantial human interests. Second, I was convinced that any religion sufficiently developed and complex to satisfy important human needs would, in fact, also ground practices constitutive (or at least productive) of fit. Indeed, there are graven stone disks that survive from ancient Aryan religion, predating 2000 BC, depicting holy men meditating in a cross-legged position, an apparently yogic practice that several hundred years later was said to lead to God-realization.[5] Third, I maintained that there is often a division of labour in a community that practises a religion, so that ordinary practitioners allow that a class of experts – rabbis, *rishis*, or priests – define what the totality of practices is about. Indeed, if we support the holy men meditating in the forest, the religion we practice includes their practice too. It is controversial, therefore, whether Aryan (or any other actual) religion is a counter-example to my account.

But even if we allow all of this, a theory that tells us the essence of kind *K* must apply to merely possible instances as well as actual ones. Suppose for argument sake that no Aryan had a concept of fit. One would have to be in the grip of a theory to deny that the entirely mercenary practices I described above comprise a religion. A 'fitless' religion is possible, surely. As my theory denies this, it's false.[6]

Another difficulty was my account of fit. I wrote:

> **So, 'fit' denotes any relation satisfying three conditions: (1) a human creature is one term and the universe (or the reality that underlies it) is the other; (2) the relation can obtain but it needn't; and (3) standing in this relation to the universe is, in and of itself, the greatest human good.**[7]

I no longer think the universe *simpliciter* can be a term of the 'fit' relation. I take it to be intuitive that religions are concerned with a reality that surpasses the ordinary world that sense perception reveals. This reality consists either of (a) sentient supernatural beings (e.g. gods) or of (b) an insentient metaphysical principle underlying the universe (e.g. the Unconditioned, *Sunyata*, or the Tao). This principle has features that mark it as belonging to a different order of reality from the objects that make up the mundane world: it cannot be named or cognized, it can be described only in contradictions, it doesn't arise or pass away, it issues in everything else, it is utterly changeless, or ….

In short, religions relate practitioners to a reality that transcends the mundane world revealed by sense perception; we might call it a 'supermundane reality'. Symptomatic of this fact is that religions often involve individuals specially

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empowered to negotiate the supermundane level of reality: shamans, saints, holy men, or priests. (a) and (b) share the feature that each constitutes such a reality. Even supposing we occasionally see the gods walking among us, a significant part of their existence must be unseen. (Indeed, the beings in question might better be described as 'supermundane' than 'supernatural', for the practitioners may lack our concept of 'nature'.) They reside primarily on Mount Olympus or in a celestial realm. A 'god' who rents the apartment next to mine, gets a job driving a bus, joins the Libertarian Party, marries a co-worker, and becomes completely immersed in the mundane realm forever, is a theological oxymoron. Similarly the insentient metaphysical principle must at least partly transcend nature, even if we sometimes see its operations in nature. It comprises a level of reality deeper than what sense perception (even assisted by scientific instruments) reveals, and its nature is best discovered by other means, e.g. meditation. The physical forces binding quarks will not serve. In addition, the elements that comprise the reality to which a religion relates us must be sufficiently grand (taken either individually or collectively) that they can figure centrally in satisfying the sort of substantial human needs that people generally want religions to meet (e.g. long life, immortality, the end of suffering). Gremlins do not a religion make.

Hence (1) should read: 'a human creature is one term and the other is a supermundane reality'. And (3) should read: 'standing in this relation to the supermundane reality is, in and of itself, the greatest human good'.

The new theory

The world's great religions all involve 'fit-constitutive' practices, I submit; we might call such religions 'fitful'. For example, to practice *vipassana* meditation in *Theravada* Buddhism is to enter significantly (but not necessarily completely) into the right relation to The Unconditioned or *Nibbana*: to 'reside' or 'rest' in it. The meditating monk 'abides detached, not grasping at anything in the world'.[8] To abide detached, not grasping at anything in the world is to reside in The Unconditioned. It is said in *Soto* Zen that simply to sit *zazen* is to be enlightened; while meditation produces deeper degrees of enlightenment, one 'touches the other shore with every step one takes in crossing the stream'.

As we've seen, however, an adequate theory must give a unified account of religion that also includes 'fitless' religions. Can my account be revised to do this? I said above that religions are concerned with a supermundane reality that consists either of sentient supernatural beings or of a metaphysical principle that underlies the universe. This reality must be sufficiently grand that it can figure centrally in the satisfaction of substantial human needs. There is, of course, a certain vagueness in the idea of 'substantial' human needs. Consequently there may not always be a fact of the matter about whether a possible set of practices is a religion (the user's manual for the new theory advises us to err on the side of inclusion, how-

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ever). But a vague idea needn't be a 'family resemblance' concept; consider 'baldness'. Nor is vagueness theoretically problematic so long as we know what to say in clear cases – doubly so if borderline cases are merely possible.

Let's call a supermundane reality that has all these features an 'SR'. This suggests the following account (A):

> (A) A religion is a system of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the practices place the practitioner in a relation-of-value to an SR.

This includes both 'fitful' and 'fitless' religions. In the latter case, the Aryan's rituals produce a relation-of-value to an SR consisting of supernatural beings. The relation is that the gods are pleased with the person who orders the sacrifice performed. It is valuable because it is instrumental to attaining wealth, long life, and good health. Let's call a set of beliefs that rationalizes a religion a 'religious world view' whether or not it includes an account of fit.

Here is perhaps a clearer way of expressing the new theory, one that deploys the terminology of the old theory (call this second formulation B):

> (B) A religion is a system of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which (1) the practices constitute fit, or (2) they produce a relation to an SR which is of value because it is instrumental to attaining human goods.

(I mean 'human goods' to include anything viewed as good by those who practice a religion, whether or not they view that good as important or substantial.) 'Fitful' religions satisfy (1); 'fitless' religions (2). Either way, a religion is a set of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the practices place one in a relation-of-value to an SR. Note that, while a 'fitless' religion satisfies only (2), a 'fitful' religion can satisfy (1) and (2) both. For a system of practices that satisfies (1) may contain practices that satisfy (2). Indeed, one and the same practice can be both constitutive of fit and productive of other human goods (recall that on my account the 'greatest human good' need not be the only intrinsic good). Of course, to satisfy (2), practices need only help produce a relation that is of value because it is instrumental to attaining human goods. The practices needn't work automatically; the gods may not always like our sacrifices. Nonetheless the practices must be understood to at least tend to produce (or contribute to the production of) a relation-of-value to an SR. Both (A) and (B) (2) are to be understood accordingly.

This second formulation has the advantage of clearly preserving the distinction between religions and spiritual paths. As yoga practices don't constitute fit, they fail to satisfy (1); nor do they satisfy (2), for it is not the case that the relation they produce to an SR is of value because it is instrumental to attaining human goods.

What happens to the rest of the taxonomy? Every RWV that rationalizes a 'fitful' religion presents a 'theory of the good': the *summum bonum* is identified with fit.

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However there can be 'fitless' religions that are merely instrumental to attaining goods, and the practitioners may lack a self-conscious theory of what constitutes the *summum bonum*. Still, they know what they like (e.g. cattle, good health, and long life), and we might as well call these preferences a rough and ready 'theory of the good'. Hence it appears that every religion either presents or presupposes a theory of the good.

The new theory must deal with merely possible counter-examples, however. Imagine a people with practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the practices constitute a fit-like relation except for one difference: standing in it, though intrinsically very good, is insufficient to make life worth living. They value this relation as many of us value education – a considerable intrinsic good that neither guarantees, nor is a *sine qua non* for, a good life. Consequently, their practices don't satisfy (1), because they fail to constitute 'fit'. Supposing they don't satisfy (2) either – they don't comprise a religion according to (B), which is counter-intuitive. (Note that they do constitute a religion according to (A); but (A) and (B) were meant to be equivalent.) A religion needn't of necessity present itself as a matter of ultimate concern. I must modify my account of 'fit' so that standing in it to an SR, while a considerable intrinsic good according to the RWV, needn't be either necessary or sufficient for a good life.[9]

The upshot is that a purely 'fitful' religion doesn't necessarily involve a theory of the good; for fit may not be identified with the greatest good for human beings. None the less the statement 'every religion either presents or presupposes a theory of the good', while not a necessary truth, is true. For people who have arrived at a conception of fit are bound to invest fit with extraordinary intrinsic value. And people who believe their practices result in a productive relation to an SR that is sufficiently grand to be able to satisfy substantial human needs, go for what they can get.

I wrote above:

> **The view that what matters most is to participate in the life of the risen Christ by taking the mass and saying the rosary, or that the supreme good is participating in the manifestation of the godhead in human history by keeping the covenant and studying the Torah – both seem inappropriate candidates for philosophies of life.** (180)

I defined a 'philosophy of life' as 'a theory of the good that doesn't identify the good with fit, conjoined with practical instructions for attaining that good'. As there can be 'fitless' religions, however, as well as productive relations to the SR of a 'fitful' religion, a philosophy of life can certainly advert to religion in its account of the good and/or its instructions for attaining it (e.g. 'What matters in life is wealth, longevity, and good health, and the way to get all that is to sacrifice to the gods', 'My philosophy of life is to do whatever the Bible tells me; then I'm bound to end up in heaven'.)

I also wrote earlier: 'Cults are ritual practices intended to please a supernatural

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or quasi-supernatural being (or collection of such beings) too limited in its attributes to ground an account of fit'.[10] This deficiency of cult objects tracks another one, I believe. If *x* is too limited in its attributes to ground an account of fit, *x* is too limited to by itself satisfy most of the substantial human needs that people generally want religions to meet. The Virgin Mary cannot by herself enable us to attain what we ask her to help us get; propitiating the smallpox god may spare us pox, but there are plenty of other things we want that relating to him cannot secure. An SR (as I defined the term) is sufficiently grand that it can by itself figure centrally in the satisfaction of those needs. As both 'fitful' and 'fitless' religions require an SR, a cult is not a religion.

Note, however, that a multiplicity of cult objects, each one getting us something else we want, can constitute the SR of a 'fitless' religion. A religion can be comprised of a bundle of cults. And such a collection can ground an account of fit, too. The breakpoint between such a 'fitless' religion and a 'fitful' one may come when the collection of cult practices, taken collectively, is taken to constitute fit with the gods, taken collectively. The *summum bonum* is to stand in the relation to the divine realm, as manifested by the gods, which is constituted by ritual devotion to the particular gods. Hence the idea of holiness emerges. Consider, for instance, Euthyphro's suggestive contention that holiness isn't holy because the gods love it; rather, the gods love it because it is holy. Holiness doesn't owe its value to the gods. But surely it owes its value to some extent to the divinity to which the believer is related. This suggests that holiness transcends the gods: the terms of the relation are the believer and the divine. In sum, a cult cannot by itself be a religion, but a bundle of cults may comprise a 'fitless' religion from which a 'fitful' one can readily emerge.

I wrote above of cults that exist within religions that 'a figure (supernatural or human) may arise against the background of a pre-existing RWV, who is taken to have the power to help those who worship her attain fit' (180). As there can be 'fitless' religions, and relations to the SR of a 'fitful' religion that are of value because they are instrumental to attaining human goods, the cult object may be thought to be able to intercede in ways that produce a relation between the SR and us that is of value because it is instrumental to attaining human goods. For instance, Catholics believe the Virgin Mary can effectively petition God to give us what we want.

Hard cases

Let's apply the theory to hard cases. Suppose we believe that God created us on earth solely so that we will better appreciate the delights of heaven. All of us are saved and bound for glory, no matter what we do. Nothing we do can constitute a more suitable relationship to God or dispose Him to treat us differently. Indeed, there is no need to even think of Him. This is not a religion on my account, for

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nothing we do can place us in a relation-of-value to an SR. I embrace this conclusion; a religion requires practices that satisfy (i) or (ii) in B above. Our belief is best viewed as a limiting case of a philosophy of life: the *summum bonum* is to spend eternity in heaven with God, and the way to attain it is to do whatever we like.

Suppose, however, that our beliefs change. God, if we pray to Him, will arrange that our earthly lives are a little more pleasant: we will get to go to the movies more often, have fewer warts, be served somewhat bigger veggie burgers at McDonalds, and so on. This is a religion on my account, for now we have practices that place us in a relation-of-value to a supermundane reality grand enough to figure in the satisfaction of substantial human needs. (Indeed, we believe that God does satisfy substantial human needs, even though His doing so has nothing to do with our practices.) On the other hand, someone who believes that propitiating elves will produce the same meagre benefits does not yet have a religion; for here the supermundane reality is too minor to figure in the satisfaction of substantial human needs.

Yet why should it matter whether our practices are directed at God or elves if the only point is to obtain the same meagre benefits? Suppose we believe that death is extinction and God cares about us only enough to supply small benefits. As the whole point of both elf- and God-directed practices is to get the same goods, and we are interested in God only in so far as He produces them, how can the difference between elves and God make the difference between cult and religion?[11] My response is threefold. First, note that the theory does sort things out intuitively. The God-directed practices do constitute a religion, in fact (albeit an odd one); the elf-directed practices do not. Second, the objection depends upon the assumption that, if there is an important difference between cults and religions in general, there must be one between cults and every religion. Why shouldn't there be some religions (if only merely possible ones) from which practitioners want nothing more than people want from some cults? Third, there is this difference: the religious practices are directed at an appropriate object of intense adoration and devotion, what we might call 'maximal' worship. To worship God is to enter into a fundamentally appropriate relation to Him, one the worshipper believes is of considerable intrinsic value. Hence the object of the God-directed practices can readily (and, given human nature, surely would) ground a practice constitutive of fit. All the raw materials for a 'fitful' religion are present: God, believers, and prayer. We would be daft to worship elves.

Two objections to my earlier paper are worth repeating here. First, John Calvin taught that God has predestined some of us to salvation; the rest of us are predestined to be damned. Now fit, by definition, is a relation that can but needn't obtain between a human creature and an SR. But if salvation is predestined, the saved cannot be damned nor the damned saved. Salvation in Calvinism isn't fit. And if nothing I do can make a difference to whether or not I'm saved, then, even

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if salvation is fit, nothing I do can constitute fit. This objection is fallacious, however. The doctrine of predestination doesn't entail that salvation is a relation that must obtain between God and the elect. For God could have chosen differently: He could have predestined the saved to be damned, and vice versa. So, if I'm saved, I needn't have been. Further, Calvin maintained that the faithful communicant receives with the elements the virtue or power of the body and blood of Christ (though Calvin denied that the bread and wine are changed by consecration). Calvin accepts the Catholic account of the effects of communion; he rejects only the metaphysics.[12] The sacraments constitute fit in Calvinism: the elect will sooner or later partake of the means of grace. Indeed, that someone does so with sincerity indicates that she is elect. Calvinism is a 'fitful' religion.

Second, evangelical Christians believe we are saved only through faith in the shed blood of Christ. Righteous works and religious rituals are useless. Each believer is reconciled to God forever as a one-time event at the moment of coming to faith. I wrote:

> **Many Christians maintain that faith is itself a gift of God, not a work of man. Paul writes: 'For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not by yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast' (Ephesians, 2.8–9) .... Nonetheless Paul and most Evangelicals agree that for some the gift is insufficient: 'Because that, when they knew God they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations and their foolish heart was darkened' (Romans, 1.21) Free-will plays a role: the gift has to be accepted – we must trust in the sufficiency of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Hence an act is required. This is not a 'work' in the sense that is objectionable to Protestants; we hardly earn salvation by accepting it. To perform this action is to enter into salvation, so it constitutes fit.**[13]

Evangelical Christianity is a limiting case of a 'fitful' religion: the only fit-constituting practice is a single action performed just once by each Christian.

Suppose we believe in a pantheon of gods collectively grand enough to satisfy important human needs – if they choose. Unfortunately they are intractably jealous of us, and would obliterate us entirely except that we have discovered magic rites that keep them at bay. This is the entirety of our belief and practice. On my account, this is a 'fitless' religion: our practices produce a relation to the gods (namely, they are at bay) that is of value because it is instrumental to attaining the good of our staying alive. I embrace this conclusion: there are some nasty merely possible religions. Or (to consider an example I take to be actual) suppose we ritually worship Satan, celebrate the Black Mass, and venerate the inverted Cross in order to thumb our noses at the Christian God, whom we view as an arbitrary oppressor. What sort of deity would create free and intelligent creatures just so that they would worship Him on pain of eternal damnation?[14] Our practices constitute a relation to God that we believe to be of considerable intrinsic value, one fundamentally appropriate to the way He is (and we are), namely, rebellion. Hence Satanism is a 'fitful' religion on my account, and Satan is a cult object within it.

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A final objection: according to some versions of Christianity, fit is identified with being united with God in the beatific vision. But fit, thus understood, is available only in the afterlife, so religious practices in this life don't constitute fit. None the less religious practices in this life do constitute intrinsically valuable relations with God; they aren't merely instrumental. But neither are they the *summum bonum*, which is the beatific vision. Nor is their purpose mainly the attaining of merely human goods of the sort described in the Aryan religion example. What, then, is the relation of religious practices to fit? They aren't necessary conditions, for God can grant the beatific vision to humans who don't engage in them. They aren't sufficient conditions, because we cannot earn or merit the beatific vision by performing them. At best, they constitute one way among others to help make us receptive to entering into fit, should God graciously offer us the opportunity to do so in the afterlife. In short, such religions aren't 'fitful' on my account, for they have no practices that constitute fit. Supposing for argument sake that they include no practices instrumental to attaining merely human goods, they aren't religions at all – which is wrong, surely.[15]

Earlier I weakened my account of 'fit' so that standing in a fit-relation to an SR, while a significant intrinsic good according to the RWV, needn't be necessary or sufficient for a good life. This creates an interesting possibility. As 'fit' is any relation of considerable intrinsic worth in which we can but needn't stand to an SR, a religion might involve multiple fit-relations to its SR. Indeed, one of these might be identified as the *summum bonum* (in the attenuated sense outlined in 1), while another is represented as having merely significant intrinsic worth. For instance, a RWV might represent sharing in the life of the risen Christ as a fit-relation constituted by taking the mass, and being united with God in the beatific vision as an incommensurably more valuable fit-relation that is neither constituted nor produced by anything we do. The first relation is of significant intrinsic value; also it has a weak teleological connection to the second one in that it helps make us receptive to entering into the beatific vision, should God offer us the opportunity in the afterlife. As a religion is 'fitful' if it includes practices that constitute fit, the religions described in the objection above are all 'fitful'. In short, my account doesn't require that the fit-relation constituted by practice is the most valuable one in the religion.

To sum up simply: a religion is a system of practices meant to place us in a relation-of-value to a supermundane reality so grand that it can figure centrally in the satisfaction of substantial human needs. It isn't essential to religion, however, that the practices themselves can do us much good.[16]

Notes

1. Jim Stone 'A theory of religion', *Religious Studies*, **27** (1991), 337–351.
2. *Ibid.*, 339.
3. *Ibid.*, 342.

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4. The Aryans also believed that correct behaviour and rituals would enable them to go to *Svarga*, the heaven above the atmosphere where 'all that was best of worldly life would continue'. 'They did not, however, dislike their earthly bodies or long to leave the earth. On the contrary, worshippers often petitioned the gods for life spans of a hundred years and for permanent life in a similar body in an ideal but comparable world. The vedic religious practices were meant to maximize the earthly life, not to replace it with existence on a different level of being'; John Fenton, Norvin Hein, Frank E. Reynolds, Alan L. Miller, Niels C. Nielsen Jr *Religions of Asia*, 2nd edn (New York NY: St Martins Press, 1988), 47.
5. In addition, the Aryans believed the universe is governed by an impersonal principle called *ṛta*. 'Ṛta enables natural bodies to move rhythmically and in balance without undergoing the disorganizing and destructive effect otherwise implicit in motion. Because of ṛta we have a cosmos … that undergoes change without becoming chaos …. In social affairs, ṛta is the propriety that makes harmony possible in the actions of all living beings …. In worship, ṛta is the pattern of correct performance. Right ritual maintains harmony between humanity and the gods, humanity and nature, and one person and another'; Fenton, Hein, Reynolds, Miller, Nielsen Jr *Religions of Asia*, 48.
6. I am indebted to Philip L. Quinn for persuading me of this.
7. Stone, 'A theory of religion', 338.
8. Maurice Walshe (tr.) *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), 349.
9. Imagine yet another people who think the fit-like relation is of little value. Supposing their practices don't satisfy (ii), they don't comprise a religion according to even the revised (B). Is this a counter-instance? Either the supermundane reality they have in mind is made up of elves, gremlins, *et al.*, which is why the relation isn't especially good (in which case they don't have a religion), or it consists of something more grand. Suppose, for instance, they identify the SR with God. They believe their practices constitute an intrinsically good relation between themselves and the Supreme Being, one fundamentally appropriate to His nature; yet they believe that standing in it to Him is of little value. A constraint on merely possible counter-instances is that the people we imagine aren't behaving (or thinking) in ways that are deeply puzzling or that warrant questioning their rationality. A similar problem arises for people who think the *summum bonum* is standing in a fit-like relation to elves.
10. Stone, 'A theory of religion', 342.
11. I owe this objection to William Schonbein.
12. I'm grateful to theologians at Calvin College, especially Richard Mueller, for their efforts to explain Calvinist theology to me.
13. Stone 'A theory of religion', 344.
14. This question about Satanism was brought to my attention by Chase Wrenn.
15. I owe this objection to Philip L. Quinn.
16. Thanks for comments to Lawrence Davis, William Schonbein, Chase Wrenn and to all the participants of the Washington University Philosophy Department 'Works in Progress' Seminar, with special thanks to Judith Crane and to Philip L. Quinn.

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