Editors' Note.

Poland is today a very interesting place to observe the direction that the development of traditional religion will take in modern times. It is a country where there are now strong influences of Western secular mentality, but at the same time, where the traditional church holds a strong control over the populace. Nevertheless, we observe movements toward secularization and a search for a more realistic and pragmatic spirituality. Professor Stanislaw Cieniawa, a graduate from a Catholic seminary and the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, represents such a new intellectual trend. He is probably one of the most prominent philosophers of religion in our time. He took an analytical and comparative view of all traditional religions and came to the realization that all traditional religions are mistaken in looking for their justification and basis in the supernatural, beyond the realm of reality. As a result of his studies, he developed, in numerous articles and in about twenty books, a new concept of a religious attitude to which all humans subscribe – namely, a system of values which we develop through a rational and analytical approach to reality both natural and human.

A disturbing phenomenon, which is not a new one, can be observed in our increasingly globalized societies: more and more thinkers and politicians give up the struggle for a better world and prefer to “tend to their own gardens;” others, on the other hand, while looking for the causes of evil, are lost in the minutiae of the detailed analysis. They do not perceive or are afraid to tackle the forces, which, in their own shortsighted interest, push the world to the edge of the precipice by promoting stupidity, which euphemistically is called irrationalism. They stubbornly fight a variety of social pathologies and like maniacs, they always return to reforming the economy, which is supposed to redress all the deficiencies in the society. But they avoid and do not perceive the root-of-all-evil, which is the denaturation of religion into mythologies and idolatry of traditional religious systems. This mindlessness could somehow be tolerated during the millennia. The modern rapidly developing world, however, brings the question to the fore and makes it an issue of survivability: either we eliminate this den of stupidity, endure the stage of crisis and open the gates to an unimaginable development, or, as the ones who are condemned, we will look for salvation in this that is causing our peril and will perish altogether, just as before us perished numerous civilizations.
What is Religion?

If one looks for the answer to the question what is religion? in the works of scholars of religious studies and philosophers of religion,¹ we will get lost in the definitions and know much less about it than before we started our investigation. The reason for this is that all these learned speculations and theories are concerned with idolatry and mythomania and not with religion. If we want to stand firmly on the ground of solid learning and knowledge and not on such or other mythology, which appeared in large numbers and mercilessly vanished in the dark of things past, we must begin with establishing the cosmology, that the world as we know it began with the Big Bang some 15 billion years ago and it evolves along a traceable path, and we, humans, seem to be the top achievement of the process, if we might narcissistically say so.² It would be megalomania and self-gratification of a buffoon if we claimed to have fathomed all the mysteries; rather, we are at the edge of a fathomable ocean of what is unknown to us. The theory of the Big Bang itself according to which the universe emerged from a microscopic particle vis-à-vis which a grain of sand seems like a giant,³ suggests a justified question: wherefrom came this microscopic particle of an unimaginable mass? Those assertions of scientific inquiry are supplemented by the not less important, our personal experience: we achieve a state of satisfaction and happiness when we perform the role of leaders in a directed path of progress, that is, if yielding to an overwhelming need of idealizing, we recognize and realize that which is, here and now, the highest within the accessible domain of human activities, and by doing this, we not only can reach the limits of available possibilities but we even can go beyond them. Satisfaction or happiness born out of such an activity is the more mysterious and surprising, as this requires overcoming the traditions and habits to which we are accustomed, exposes us to the danger of opposition from the side of conservatists and obscurantists of all sorts, and especially it makes us vulnerable to the ferocious attacks from idolaters and mythomaniacs. The latter, instead of advancing, they direct their energies to idealize their own images from mysterious sources of this idealizing energy by creating anthropomorphic, mystical idols, by imposing on others their myths and cults, the “holy” objects of veneration and worship. This denaturation of the true religion and of the complete human life is as attractive and as powerful as a narcotic.

Thus, in order to answer correctly the question, what is religion, let us not open the old books but let us take in our hand a flower, the bigger the better, and contemplate this wonderful structure. What is the source of this perfection, this beauty? There are scientists and scholars who emphasize that

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³ Ibidem
there is chaos⁴ in the world, but they admit nevertheless, that what dominates is harmony. Albert Einstein clearly took the side of harmony. When in 1929 he was accused of being an atheist he declared: “I believe in the God of Spinoza, the one who is manifested in the harmonious laws of the universe, and not in the God who is preoccupied with the fate and action of humans.”⁵ But let us put aside the pantheism of Spinoza for not everything in the universe is God, just as we ourselves are not exclusively our own fascinating vision, and, in addition, it is better not to use the expression “god” which was usurped and completely washed out of useful meaning by the idolaters. We observe, however, that we are not “thrown into this alien world,” but instead we constitute its integral parts; therefore, these harmonious laws of the universe are also the laws of our nature equally as they are the laws of plants and flowers, which explains their beauty and perfections.

Flowers are beautiful for they are not only faithful products of, but also make visible to us the cosmic laws of harmony – in themselves, within the domain of their possibilities, they tend to the highest level of their beauty. They constitute an avant-garde for the development of the world in this epoch. If a good gardener takes care of them, waters them and fertilizes the soil, they express their gratitude: they become more beautiful and splendid. However, they never direct their energies backward, never worship idolatrously the cosmic laws of harmony, instead, they utilize all the energy for their own flourishing and only in a subjective way do they honor these laws. Such is their true, not denatured religion.

Now, coming to the sphere of humanity, what is it that humans do? Instead of directing all their energies toward improving themselves and the world, they create in their thoughts and imaginations anthropomorphic idols. They construct for them temples and churches where they worship them with deceptive declarations of “utmost love” and with empty gestures, convinced that only in this way can they render due homage. In the temples and churches they please their own senses: sight – with huge buildings and sumptuous interiors; hearing – with organ music and choirs; smell – with odorous incense; and even taste – with various rites of communion and ritual meals. Then they deceive themselves claiming that these sensual and esthetic experiences are the gifts of the idol they worship. Eventually this would not be anything deserving blame if this were not associated with a solemn obligation to accept all the myths and dogmas inherent in a given doctrine and, what is not less important, the obligation and duty to construct and conserve these buildings and provide comfortable and often luxurious living conditions for the priests and those who serve these “houses of God.”

The clergy claim that they live modestly and that they do not interfere with secular affairs and the politics. The facts belie these assertions. Just as indoctrination of children (in the school and in the church) with irrational doctrines destroys their respect for truth and sensitivity to falsehood, so the deceit of these “spiritual masters” undermines the morality of whole societies and teaches falsehood. The extent of the brainwashing of the entire Polish society can be illustrated by one recent example. On the day I wrote this article, a school bus with students going on a pilgrimage to the shrine in Częstochowa to pray before the miraculous image for the successful passing of their graduation examinations, crashed and many students perished in the flames, while others were injured and burned. Nobody noticed, however, any contradiction between this accident and the belief in Providence and the protection of the miraculous Madonna. On the contrary, the clergy arranged immediately solemn worship services and prayers. The symbolic meaning of this event is that the aspiring high school graduates, instead of preparing for the examinations, opted to travel to the sanctuary for the blessing. The real sense in this option, though concealed, is only that the act of pleasing a certain institution could be more helpful than the prayer.

This example illustrates well the contradiction between **subjective cult or authentic religion**, and **objective cult or idolatry**. The high school students described above would give a good example of a subjective cult if they opted for “God’s glory” to prepare themselves and use wisely all the available time. Unfortunately, they evidently were taught to value prayer and devotion more than solid work, so they arranged this fatal pilgrimage which represented a form of objective cult. How many fatal disasters in the history of humanity and in the lives of individuals caused a similar erroneous choice! How many disastrous wars could be avoided if, instead of prayers for victory in churches and mosques, the conflict could be solved by wise and sober diplomacy! Instead, sectarian hatred has instigated and still instigates conflicts. Does not terrorism have a sectarian basis?

To get a full understanding of the concept of true religion, it is useful to mention the fate and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. If the beauty of flowers is a result of the faithfulness to and effect of the cosmic laws of harmony, so the religion of Jesus had a similar character. In humans, as conscious beings, this effect is expressed in the form of **idealizing the intuition of the highest values**. Jesus called this intuition “the will of the Father” and not only was he himself absolutely faithful, but he also demanded the same faithfulness from his followers, saying “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). He was concerned precisely with the subjective cult and disdained the objective cult. That his “will of the Father” was his own “Intuition of the Highest Values” is proven by the following argument. When, in the inaugural Sermon on the Mount, he presented a new more subtle interpretation of the Decalogue, he repeated as a refrain “You have heard that it was said to our forefathers …
But, I say to you …” (Matt. 5). This proves that this “Father” to whom he was absolutely faithful was not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who taught these “forefathers,” but his own Intuition of the Highest Ethical Values, which he inserted in the old formulas of the Decalogue. And somewhat earlier, talking about the so-called “blessings,” he indicated happiness as the infallible result of absolute faithfulness to the thus understood “will of the Father.” Therefore, Jesus’ authentic religion is not idolatry, but a subjective cult being a form of the unhesitant Dependence of Happiness on the Absolute Faithfulness to the Intuition of the Highest Values. Jesus was not a Christian in today’s meaning of the word, but a follower of the religion of Happiness Dependent on the Absolute Faithfulness to the Intuition of the Highest Values. One more proof of this is that when he talked about the Last Judgment, he made salvation conditional on the love of our neighbors and our deeds toward them and not on the temple cults and prayers, which he never mentioned.

His fate was doomed precisely because he discarded the priestly objective cult in favor of the subjective cult. He did not support idolatry openly and just hated idolaters as is proven by the entire chapter 23 of the Gospel according to Matthew. It is clear that precisely for that reason he was sentenced to death on the cross by the idolaters and their leaders, the priests. The culminating triumph of idolatry is the fact that the victim of idolatry functions for millennia as the object of an idolatrous cult – the crucified Jesus, and simultaneously, the second Person of the Holy Trinity.

This triumphant mythomania is opposed by atheism. It is less dangerous to true religion than idolatry, and even stands in its defense because, in accordance with the nature of a subjective cult, it eliminates a belief in myths and dogmas and does not recognize either gods or mythology. However, authentic religion contains more perfect atheism, because for the respect of truth it does not claim that there is no God, and secondly, and what is more important, it knows and consciously implements the central law of human existence – striving for Happiness Dependent on the Absolute Faithfulness to the Intuition of the Highest Values.

Society as the Blooming Plant and its Religion

Flowers are not subject to the disease of idolatry – they do not direct their energies back to the mysterious sources of idealization to which they owe their beauty, but in their own specific way use it for their fullest development. This inner realization of the highest value we might call apotheosis. However, the plant could not bloom at all without leaves that extract energy from solar radiation and necessary substances from the air. This function of the leaves we might call affirmation. Leaves develop and function to the extent that the existing conditions allow, but they have an ancillary function since they do not participate in the process of blooming. Still more ancillary is the function of the stem and branches, and still more that of the roots. Such an increasing ancillary function we might call alienation.
This triple function of religion is reflected quite differently in the life of humans as conscious beings; however, there are clear analogies. The human being who is not affected by fate or by his own subjectivity is capable of apotheosis, that is, he is capable of treating himself as the center of his universe over which nobody has dominion. This thought is reflected well in the following verse:

Do you wish to live wisely and well? Be the center of your world.
Do not let any god or ruler, push you to the edge.
Unite with others for common goals, fraternize with loved ones.
But do not yield the helm of your destiny to anyone.

We may reasonably assume that every human being subconsciously tends to apotheosis and wishes to achieve it. Conditions of life, however, make this tendency and desire absurd, and for that reason one does not admit this desire to oneself and imparting apotheosis by others he considers an insult. “Religions” induce humans to submission and penitence and do not allow the full blooming of one’s personality, which is reflected in fatal behavioral results on the societal scale. Education, which reduces the use of human intelligence, converts them into beasts, and if they do not function as beasts, it is only because of the rule of law and public opinion. What an absurdity: a plant has the right to bloom freely, but the “king of creation,” a human being, is deprived of this right! This is why democratic freedoms are treated by some as an occasion for lawlessness, which makes coexistence in larger agglomerates unbearable.

Just as apotheosis is directing the process of idealization toward one’s “self” for one’s own future state and activity, so affirmation is idealizing something that is worthy of this idealization. Thus a man idealizes a chosen woman, and vice versa. We all idealize some objects and activities, situations and phenomena. The greater our ability is to idealize, the richer, the fuller, and more beautiful is our life even in the face of many disappointments.

If we idealize something that is not worthy of this process we suffer alienation. But even such alienation can be supportable if we become used to it. There are known cases where serfs and peasants ascribed to the land and its owner, and even slaves, refused to be liberated. Precisely, tradition and habits make supportable and even pleasurable the enslavement of masses by “religious” gods, and more precisely, by people and institutions who force others to believe in these gods and to their cult in the churches. The author himself pleasantly recollects processions around the rural church where he used to sing:

Who submits himself to the protection of the Lord
And trusts Him with all his heart
Boldly can say: I have God as my defender
No horrible fright will affect me.

It is well known that even one contrary fact is able to abolish the whole thoroughly constructed theory and the more so – a mythology!
Thus, even if we did not know the human history contradicting the existence of the God of mythmakers and idolaters, the single fact of the tragic accident mentioned previously definitely abrogates all sorts of mythologies. Can one imagine a more terrible fear than that of death by flames?

Such is the triple value of religion from the perspective of an individual. It is different from the perspective of a society considered as a single organism in which individuals consciously choose their social roles. The basic social activity that performs a similar function to that of the root in plants is the material production connected with the exchange of goods and services and consumption. Most theologians and philosophers claim that the value of material goods is lower than that of the spiritual ones. This was even the opinion of a materialist and atheist such as Epicurus. Also, folk wisdom claims: “One does not live in order to eat, but one eats in order to live.” Nevertheless, most people are mostly preoccupied with material production and business. Certainly, this can be classified as a certain alienation and could be explained that masses are burdened with the memory of hunger which was experienced by their ancestors. Wealthy careerists and businessmen still cannot forgo idealization, but they pervert it by striving for the highest sum of riches and displaying, at the same time, the highest level of cleverness in everyday life. Even Jesus was impressed by such a shrewdness in the parable of “shrewd manager”: “And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (Luke 16, 8).

A similar situation exists in the realm of power. In a model society there must be coordination but no dominion of man over man. Jesus very critically judged power: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave” (Matt. 20:25-27). People who are obsessed with the desire for power profane idealization striving for absolute power. In spite of the corruption produced by power, they cannot forgo idealization.

The third essential social process that introduces coordination is the legal and administrative organization at the lowest level of the social structure. Here, too, auto-alienation is possible. But full affirmation and apotheosis or the flourishing of the social life is possible in the fourth process, the process of integration encompassing education, sport, media, and the narrowly considered culture.

The Four Periods in Life and Four Flowers of Religion

Apotheosis should be justified and liberated, and this is possible only when it concerns not one’s own “ego,” but the commonly accepted higher values, which evolve and change according to the changing stages in human life. Accordingly, the types of affirmation or activities confirming values evolve as well.
In childhood and early adolescence we idealize our future conditions of life, therefore, the typical high value of this stage is represented by dreams. They are connected with learning at school and the formation of character, thus, a specific affirmation of these two values are interrelated in a creative process. Unfortunately, pre-school-age children are already indoctrinated with myths and idolatry. Children are coerced to idealize that which is not worthy of being idealized and in this way apotheosis and affirmation is linked to alienation that is profanation of idealization.

Theoreticians of child education warn that what is induced into the minds in this flexible and formative age of child development will remain there for life and will be impossible to remove. It is by no accident that people and institutions interested in spreading mythomania and idolatry strive with a ferocious aggressiveness to gain access to kindergartens and schools.

The high value of the later stage of youth is erotic love. A pair of young people idealize each other and the main proper function of their love, but not the only one, is procreation. Thus, between this love, – apotheosis and procreation, – is affirmation, as well a creative mutuality. Unfortunately, difficulties related to the upbringing of children, their education, economic problems, etc., lessen the matrimonial ties and lead to alienation with a variety of secondary effects which, in turn, may lead to a search for solutions finding a new apotheosis and affirmation.

The high value in the stage of productive adulthood is the recognition of the fulfillment of the social role, for work performed, which is expressed in prestige and, above all, in just pay. In a well-organized society the working person has a feeling of satisfaction for a well-performed obligation, which is appreciated and recognized. This apotheosis is spontaneously affirmed by striving for a still more solid and productive work. In a society where the regular working person does not find proper recognition and finds that what he idealizes is not worthy of it, he profanes his own idealization and becomes alienated. As a result of such a situation an activity worthy of idealization becomes a movement leading to strikes or revolutionary action. The authentic human being is able to place his ideal “ego” over his real “ego” and become fearless and fanatical in his struggle for freedom and dignity, which represent a superior level of apotheosis. In a badly managed society “authentic humans” become a minority and human beings are reduced to passive, shiftless, and mindless individuals. This is precisely the purpose of a “religious” education, presumably for the sake of God, but in fact for the sake of “gods” in ceremonial robes and cassocks.

The higher value in the advanced age is a serene sense of absolute peace with respect to the so-called “final things” and all mysterious “powers.” Whoever conducted his life, consciously or subconsciously, in a manner in accordance with an attitude of Faithfulness to the Intuition of the Highest Values, that is, strove to be faithful to what, in the depth of his heart, he considered to be the truest, the noblest, the best, the highest, and implemented it thoroughly regardless of the vicissitudes of life and obstacles
and pressure from the outside, even against the myth mania and idolatry into which he was indoctrinated in childhood, he can say “I am not afraid of dying, I lived my life worthily.” But if someone idealized and implemented that which in his own deepest sense was not worthy of being idealized though it led to gains, riches, power, influence, fame, sensual pleasure etc., then he lived in alienation and destroyed his ideal “ego,” the only ticket to a happy “eternity.” No help or alleviation will come from any magic rites of the ecclesiastical establishment such as confessions, the last unction, viaticum, or a sumptuous funeral and sepulcher. He lost his humanity, did not fulfill his human call and reached a state of ultimate alienation.

These four flowers of religion or apotheosis, adorned with the leaves of affirmation, constitute a sense of the four stages of life: childhood, youth, adulthood, and advanced age. Whoever takes care of these flowers, will make his life as beautiful as a bouquet arranged from them. Unfortunately, in societies produced so far in human history, the four alienations dominate, which indicates that they do not fulfill their role and do not satisfy human aspirations and destiny. Civilizations arose and disappeared in the course of history; do we want to perish too, to jeopardize our achievements and to begin a new cycle from the stage of the cave man?

Translated by Marian Hillar and Claire S. Stelter.