

Research Article

Alessi on the Essence of Religion: Philosophical Reflections

Johnson Uchenna Ozioko* 

Faculty of Philosophy, Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome, Italy

Abstract

The primary task of Philosophy of Religion is that of trying to provide answer to the question of the essential meaning of religion: “what is religion?”, “what constitutes the essence of religion?” Through the ages, but especially since the emergence of Philosophy of Religion as an academic discipline in the modern period, numerous thinkers have in different ways proffered answers to this enigmatic question. Perhaps inspired by Aquinas’ definition of religion as “*ordo ad Deum*”, the contemporary Italian philosopher, Adriano Alessi, defines the essence of religion, “*formaliter sumpta*”, as “*religio est essentialiter conscia et recta ordinatio hominis ad divinitatem*”. He argues perspicaciously that this definition captures the complex sense of the term religion as an integral human fact which embraces within itself the human being’s radical openness to the divine, his conscious experience of the divine, as well as the plexus of his expressions of his relationship with the divine in history. Though acknowledging that his is not a perfect definition of the essence of religion, and so is subject to ulterior modifications of perfecting, he is however convinced of its correctness in defining the essence of religion. This essay wishes to analyse Alessi’s innovative definition of the essence of religion, examine the fresh insight he brings to the appreciation the Aquinas’ seminal doctrine on the essence of religion, the shed some light on the relevance of his contribution to the contemporary philosophical search for the essential meaning of religion.

Keywords

Religion, Philosophy, Alessi, Aquinas, Essence

1. Introduction

Confronted with the question of the definition of time, the Christian luminary, St. Augustine wittily affirmed that “If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not” [1]. Perhaps, the same could be said of religion: a household word, at first glance, we think we know what religion is, because we understand each other well when we talk about it; but when you try to explain its nature, you realize how difficult it is to define it. One might ask, for instance, what makes the difference between a crowd of people

gathered in an adoration ground and glued to a round object at the centre of the altar and another crowd of people gathered in a stadium and glued to a round object at the centre of the field? Why is the activity of those in the first group regarded as a practice of religion while that of the latter is not? What is it that makes a particular phenomenon a religion or a religious phenomenon and renders a particular act an act of religion? [2] In other words, what is religion? What constitutes the essence of religion? What defines religion essential-

*Corresponding author: uchesonzy@yahoo.com (Johnson Uchenna Ozioko)

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ly? Generally defined as rational reflection on religion, the primary task of Philosophy of Religion is that of trying to provide answer to these questions [3]. Of course, in the history of human thought, there have been opinions which, for various reasons, tend to deny the existence of any common essence which unites different religious phenomena. While for some thinkers the different phenomena are merely single, unrelated, and incommensurable phenomena, for some others, the adjective “religious” is nothing but a mere label invented by some researchers to denominate different phenomena, but which essentially does not refer to any reality. There are as well others who, though admitting the existence of some common essence of religion, which undergirds different religious phenomena, think that it is impossible for the human mind to know such an essence. There is nevertheless a huge array of thinkers throughout the ages who are convinced of the existence of a common, knowable essence of religion and, consequently, have committed considerable intellectual energy to reflecting on this essence, but have however not been able to arrive at consensus on what really defines religion, essentially. In our time, one of those strongly convinced of the existence of a common essence of religion and has also attempted providing a luminous insight in the definition of this essence is the Salesian philosopher, Adriano Alessi.

Born in Omegna in Italy in 1941, Adriano Alessi, was full professor emeritus at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome. He studied philosophy and theology first at the Salesian Pontifical University and, later, at the Pontifical Gregorian University where he received his doctorate in philosophy in 1974 with a dissertation entitled “The atheism of Ludwig Feuerbach. Metaphysical foundations”. He taught courses in theoretical philosophy for many years, Philosophy of religion, Philosophy of knowledge, as well as Seminars on the thought of L. Feuerbach. He was dean of the Faculty of Philosophy of the Salesian Pontifical University for nine years. His research areas concern both the sector of theoretical philosophy, with particular reference to the metaphysical and epistemological sphere, both the problems concerning the philosophy of religion and the questions about the essence of matter and of the human being. Alessi’s thought on the essence of religion is condensed in his work, *Sui sentieri del sacro. Introduzione alla filosofia della religione* (On the Paths of the Sacred: Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion), Published in Italian in 2016 by the Libreria Ateneo Salesiano. The fundamental thesis which he espouses in this work is that all religions need salvation; they all reveal values, and we can learn from all of them. With all of them we can undertake a common conversion itinerary which, leading on the paths of the sacred, open humanity to new ideals of communion and brotherhood [4]. The aim of the present paper is to philosophically reflect on Alessi’s innovative contribution in defining the essence of religion and to shed some light on the relevance of his contribution to the contemporary philosophical search for the

essential meaning of religion.

2. On the Essential Meaning of Religion

To arrive at his essential definition of religion, Alessi adopts a *via negativa* approach, beginning by telling us what religion is not. He decries various attempts throughout the history, but especially beginning from the Enlightenment, which, with the singular intention of unmasking what they consider the intrinsic hypocrisy of religion, and denouncing its substantially alienating nature, give substantially negative evaluations of the sacral phenomenon and restrict religion to a set of elements that are ultimately not religious. Alessi categorizes all such currents as reductionisms, since, in his thinking, they are conceptions which tend, in an often explicit and radical form, to trace the experience of God, however it presents itself, to factors of a multiple nature aimed at misrecognizing the positive significance of religion. In concrete terms, both jointly or separately, they refuse, on the quidditative level, that openness to the sacred enjoys originality and autonomous specificity; on the ontological level, they deny that it is endowed with objective truth; and on the axiological plane, they negate its being a bearer of values for the history of man [5]. Such reductionist tendencies include, for example, the anthropological reductionism, as evidenced in the efforts of such thinkers as Feuerbach and Nietzsche to reduce all religious phenomena to mere product of a more or less conscious projection of the constitutive richness of the human being; psychological reductionism as encapsulated in the teaching of thinkers like Freud and Jung, who reduce all religious instances to the product of man’s psyche, that is, to pure artificial construction of the self or sublimation of particular psychological data; sociological reductionism as seen in the teachings of Durkheim and Karl Marx who reduce the structure of religious experience to the product of human social experience; moral reductionism as seen in the teaching of Emmanuel Kant who not only affirms the radical autonomy of ethics from religion, but also subordinated the entire phenomenon of religion to human moral activity. Besides, we have rationalistic reductionism, which interprets religious phenomenon on the basis of purely rational order, that is, on the basis of parameters that find in human thought the ultimate and insurmountable criterion of legitimacy, as paradigmatically represented in the idealism of Hegel; relativistic reductionism which reduces all the experiences of the sacred to salvific events, perspectives of faith and practices of life having transitory and contingent value, relative to times and places, to circumstances and cultures that have from time to time expressed them. A contemporary representative of such relativistic tendencies is found in the weak thought espoused by the Italian, Vattimo [6].

Of course, Alessi acknowledges the great difficulty which arises when we want to offer an essential definition of religion. This difficulty, according to him, is rooted both in the extreme complexity of the phenomenon in question and on

the dispersant number of definitions, and consequently, of the different perspectives proposed by different authors. Moreover, the difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that the term religion embraces multiple elements that need to be adequately distinguished. In fact, at the level of its interacting dimensions, religion connotes both the congenital attitude that enables man to encounter the divine, and the conscientious experience resulting from the impact with the sacred, and the complex of expressions that on the level of concrete, individual and collective conduct, follows the irruption of the divine into the history of man. At the level of actuality, religion encompasses both the complex of what is experienced *hic et nunc* by the believing soul (*religio in actu exercito*), and the historical sedimentation, empirically detectable, that the sum of sacral experiences has generated over the course of the centuries (*religio in actu signato*). Often, the divergencies in the definitions proffered by different thinkers arise from the accentuation of one or other of the plurality of dimensions of religion. But going beyond all the reductionisms and the inherent difficulty in finding an essential definition of religion, Alessi is strongly convinced that the complexity of the problem does not nullify the possibility of a definition, which, notwithstanding the difficulty, would prove objectively founded.

Thus, Alessi defines religion in the following terms: “*religio est essentialiter conscia et recta ordinatio hominis ad divinitatem*” [7]. One might object that this definition sounds vague, as it describes a fundamentally rational experience and its corresponding consequences which may not be very obvious, especially for many lay people. But Alessi personally clears its obscurity, as he goes ahead himself to explicate the implications of his innovative definition. First of all, in his thinking, it is a definition of religion “*formaliter sumpta*”, by which he means that religion is defined from the perspective of a complex human experience which finds its realization in the human being. For Alessi, this definition captures religion in its complexity, that is, in the sense of an integral human fact which excludes neither the radical opening up to the divine (religious attitude) nor the intra-consciousness experience (religious experience) nor its expression in history (religious conduct and its sedimentations). By saying *religio est essentialiter*, Alessi means to say that the definition he offers captures religious experience in its structural *eidos*, in its profound essence. In other words, religion is identified not only in some of its qualifying aspects, as we may find in some definitions which refer religion eminently to a complex of beliefs regarding divinity, the world and man, or in some others which limit religion to the set of practices, objects and places relating to religious worship, or even to other definitions which refer only to a series of moral precepts or to certain institutions or religious communities. It is rather a definition which identifies religion in its constitutive elements, in its most specific dimensions, those very elements and dimensions that characterize it and distinguish it from any other experiential forms. In defining religion essen-

tially as *ordinatio*, Alessi affirms the correlation between two interlocutors implied in religion. He highlights that “this relationship turns out to be congenital both on a structural level and on pure potentiality (religious attitude) and on an interior level (religious experience) and on an operative level (religious conduct)”. It is the correlation of the human being with the divine – *hominis ad divinitatem*. This is to show that it is only the rational creature that can enter dialogue with the divine; every other reality of inferior order is incapable of religion. We can never talk of the religion of animals or trees or stones, but only with respect to human beings. This correlation of the human being is not just with himself or with anything human or profane, but with a reality that ontologically transcends man, with the divine – *ad divinitatem*. Alessi thinks that it is not even sufficient to talk of religion as correlation with the sacred in a generic sense. Of course, we know that following the insight offered in Rudolf Otto’s epoch-making masterpiece, *Das Heilige*, the notion of the sacred or the holy gained unprecedented diffusion and acceptance in contemporary reflections on the object of religion, especially among the representatives of the phenomenology of religion. Convinced that it covers a wider semantic area than the more popular notion of God, they found in the notion of the sacred a category which embraces even those forms of religion, like some forms of Buddhism, with no explicit reference to God or to the gods as powerful personal realities that transcend the world and human life [8]. But Alessi thinks that even the notion of the sacred is not sufficient in the definition of religion, since for him, the term sacred as contradistinguished from the profane is problematic if not understood as a synonym of the kingdom of the divinity. Defining religion as *conscia et recta ordinatio*, Alessi recognizes the fact that every contingent being is ontologically related to the divine; so, religion is essentially defined, not just as man’s simple relationship with the divine but a conscious correlation. Moreover, the conscious relationship must be correct because even an ungodly soul can be consciously bound to the transcendent without thereby cancelling the irreligious value of his attitude. This correctness can either be objective or subjective. It is subjective when it is considered correct by the believing subject but may be inadequate with respect to the nature of the reality with whom the believer is related; it is objective when the relationship is objectively respectful of the reality of the two interlocutors, that is, the human reality and the divine reality [9].

3. Indebtedness to Thomas Aquinas

One can hardly deny the insightfulness of Alessi’s attempt at arriving at an essential definition of religion. Giovanni Filoramo had underscored the need and usefulness of a minimal definition of religion, that is, one having characteristics of simplicity and essentiality, which aims to capture not *x* traits, which can be extended at will, but some key elements considered characteristics of religion [10]. Alessi’s definition,

in my thinking, effectively satisfies this need of a simple, modest, essential definition of religion. Of course, Alessi himself acknowledges that it is not a perfect definition, since it remains open to ulterior integrations and insights, but that does not diminish its correctness and perspicuity. His formulation presents itself not only as a functional description, but as an authentic quidditative definition. It does not limit itself to grasping the reality of religion tangentially, indirectly, obliquely, through the identification of the function exercised. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it reveals the quiddity or essence of the religious fact in its constitutive features. My interest, however, is not so much on critically scrutinizing Alessi's definition to expose its imperfections, but rather on highlighting the indebtedness of his definition to the insight earlier offered by Thomas Aquinas. For, even though he does not fully acknowledge it, Alessi's essential definition of religion draws inspiration from the essential definition of religion offered by the great medieval luminary in his *Summa Theologiae*. Going back to and synthesizing the etymological derivations of the term religion – *relegere*, which goes back to Cicero; *re-elegere* which goes back to St. Augustine, and *religare* which goes back to Latanzio through Augustine – Aquinas had struck what for him constitutes the essence of religion. In the words of Aquinas, “Now, whether ‘*religio*’ derives from frequent consideration (*relegere*), or from a renewed election (*re-elegere*), or from a renewed bond (*religare*), this virtue properly it says *order to God*. He is in fact the one to whom we must primarily bind ourselves as to an indefectible principle and towards which we must continually direct our choice, as the ultimate end, and again it is the one we lose with the neglect of sin, and that we must recover by believing and lending our faith” [11]. In other words, from whatever direction or derivation we may think of religion, what is essential is that it bespeaks the human being's fundamental ordering towards God. Therefore, what essentially defines *religio*, in the thought of Aquinas, is that it is properly “*ordo ad Deum*”. Whereas Aquinas uses *ordo*, Alessi uses *ordinatio*, but what is central in both expressions is the relationship between two interlocutors. *Ordo* is a term very dear to Aquinas which he uses in different senses in his writings. However, the fundamental sense of “*ordo*”, in Aquinas' thinking, is that it is always connected to some principle, for, as he wrote elsewhere, “Order always has reference to some principle” [12]; thus “wherever there is a principle, there must needs be also order of some kind” [13]. In defining religion as *Ordo ad Deum*, Aquinas means that religion orders man to God in so far as God is the first principle of man and of all that exists. It is in the sense of man's ontological dependence on God as the transcendent principle of human existence that he defines religion as essentially implying *Ordo ad Deum*. Granted the fact that Aquinas does not explicitly state that the *Ordo* is of men (*hominis*) to God, as explicitly found in Alessi's definition, but that the human dimension of religion is highlighted by Aquinas is the fact that he considers this *Ordo ad Deum* a human virtue annexed

to the cardinal virtue of justice: it regards all human beings and concerns their correct relationship with that which everybody (though with different names) calls God. Of course, we can only talk of virtue with respect to human beings and not with respect to stones, trees or animals. Aquinas justifies the virtuous character of religion, asserting fundamentally that the appropriate way of man's being is being ordered to God made manifest in giving due honour to him. Implied also in the virtuous character of religion are the consciousness and the correctness of the *Ordo ad Deum* which are explicit in Alessi's definition. Ordinarily, an unconscious act is a non-moral act and so can neither be considered virtuous nor non-virtuous. Regarding the correctness of man's ordering to God, already in an earlier work, *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boetius*, Aquinas maintaining that “religion consists in an operation by which man honors God by submitting to Him”, affirmed explicitly that “this operation ought to be in harmony with Him who is honored, and with the one offering homage” [14]. In other words, man's *Ordo ad Deum* has to be respectful of the reality of God and the reality of man. Of utmost significance in Alessi's definition is that he replaces *Deum* in Aquinas with *Divinitatem*. This is because of the problem which, for several scientists and historians of religions, is raised in the consideration of God as the object towards which man's religious acts are directed. The first difficulty, in Alessi's thinking, emerges from the semantic and philological analysis of the term God which does not seem to offer many clues, since it appears to be a common name, even if in religions and cultures it is originally and properly used as a proper name. He observes that, from a historical point of view, the term God seems rather dry and is as well linked to a less divine divinity like *Zeus*. The noun God is in fact the alteration of the Greek name *Zeus*, *Δις*. It is on account of this that Van der Leeuw affirms that “When we say that God is the object of lived religious experience, we must keep in mind that God is often a very imprecise notion” [15]. Alessi points out that from an etymological point of view, there are indications that the word God refers to an Indo-European root *deiwo*s (sky or daylight, as in the Latin *dies*) from which the nouns *deus* (Latin), *deva* (Sanskrit), *div* (Iranian), *diawas* (Lithuanian), *tivar* (ancient Germanic) derive. The word God (English) or *Gott* (German) seems related to *hud* (to worship). In his thinking, therefore, it can be seen that the concept of God is connected to light and celestial sacredness to express transcendence and the idea of sovereignty. The etymology of the Greek *θεός* seems to have the same root but instead refers to the radical sense that indicates the soul or spirit of the dead, as evidenced by the Lithuanian *dwesiu* (to breathe) or the ancient Slavic *duch* (breathing) and *dusa* (soul). Another difficulty consists in the fact that there are religions, as is evident in some forms of Buddhism, where the notion of “God” does not seem to play any explicit role. In fact, for Alessi “a conception of religion that explicitly refers to the term God (understood as a transcendent and personal reality) risks excluding from the sacred

sphere experiences (such as Buddhism and other forms of pantheistic religiosity) whose religious value is difficult to contest” [16]. It is precisely on account of these difficulties with the term “God” that the sacred gained more currency among phenomenologists of religion. But as we have seen, Alessi has reservations even with the utilization of the term “sacred” and prefers to use the term “divinity” or “divine”.

4. Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it appears clear that Alessi’s definition of religion is an expansion of the definition already offered by Aquinas. It does not discard the insight of Aquinas, rather it builds on it, making more explicit certain ideas implicit in Aquinas’ definition and, with reason, substituting concepts which the progress in human thought has found less appropriate with ones considered more appropriate. What are the implications of this for contemporary philosophical reflection on religion? Apart from the fresh insight Alessi’s contribution brings to the understanding of the essence of religion, his efforts at borrowing from and expanding Aquinas’ legacy appear instructive for contemporary Philosophy of religion. There seems little doubt that, for different reasons, Aquinas’ thoughts on religion have often been neglected and not sufficiently valued and appreciated in contemporary Philosophy of Religion. In fact, for many contemporary thinkers, his time is very much distant from ours and his meaning of religion different from what is meant when we talk of religion in our time. Consequently, they consider his thinking on religion somewhat antiquated and not relevant for contemporary philosophical reflections on religion. However, the indebtedness of Alessi’s definition to the insight provided by Aquinas, as evidenced in our analysis, proves the contrary, as it may be hard to ignore or deny the enduring validity of Aquinas’ doctrine. Contemporary Philosophy of Religion ignores Aquinas at its own risk and to its own disadvantage. Progress in scholarship does not necessarily imply the jettisoning of past intellectual heritage. Rather, it entails that we appropriate and valorise the distilled wisdom of our intellectual predecessors, amplifying and integrating them with our own original and penetrating insights, to produce innovative bodies of knowledge. It is such deepening and integrations that constitute the fecund womb of beneficial growth, evolution, and consolidation of human intellectual patrimony.

Author Contributions

Johnson Uchenna Ozioko is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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