

Religion and the Newer Forms of Consciousness

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The trouble begins because we all use the word "religion" without any clear idea either of what we mean by it or of how whatever it is functions in our lives. "Religion," as most people use the term, most of the time, means an organization, an institution, an establishment—a church, a synagogue, a mosque, an ashram. The kinds of organization vary greatly. Some involve a relatively simple coming-together of equals for mutual support, like the classical type of Quaker meeting, while others entail the maintenance of a vast bureaucracy and a real-estate empire, like the Roman Catholic Church. Some are focused inwardly, on the spiritual state of their own members, like the Pentecostal churches, while others are focused outwardly, on the moral condition of the environing society, like the so-called mainline Protestant Christian communions. Some emphasize ritual correctness; others stress right belief; still others subordinate both to right living. Some exercise rigorous control over their adherents and the helpless children of their adherents from womb to tomb, while others make very modest demands on their members. Whatever the form, however great or small the obligation, the organization provides a means of identification, and hence of security, for its followers. In a world of incessant physical mobility, occupational mobility, social mobility, economic mobility—a world in which anonymity is hard to avoid, where in fact most of us struggle most of the time to maintain our anonymity, not to get involved with others as whole persons but only to carry on necessary functional relations with others as fragmentary beings—the institutions of religion may constitute a glorious exception.

We need roots. We moderns need, as Simone Weil pointed out nearly a quarter of a century ago, to grow new roots to replace those that we have lost. Uprootedness has become a central phenomenon of the spirit in the modern world. Rerooting cannot take place by the simplistic expedient of merely returning to the land, for although uprootedness may originally have been a development of urban life, by now it is a *malaise* prevalent in the countryside as well. And so the two processions pass each other—the uprooted and alienated populations of the cities naively seeking to find roots by returning to the land—the uprooted and alienated populations of the countryside seeking to find roots by moving to the cities. Both are naive because human roots grow not in the soil but in the soul.

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The institutional meaning is not the only meaning of the word "religion." Sometimes, when we use the word, we refer to that which is most personal, most central to the life

