

# The Importance of Religion for Peirce

Kenneth Laine Ketner (Lubbock)

This essay is a sketch of a proposed answer to these questions: What is the place of Religion in Peirce's works, and what was its importance for him<sup>1</sup>?

First, to find its place, we might well begin by considering his classification of the sciences, for as he stated in 1904, »In order to understand [my] doctrine, which has little in common with those of modern schools, it is necessary to know, first of all, how [I classify] the sciences.« (Ketner, [ed.] 1983, 69) The classification has three broad divisions: Science of Research, Science of Review, and Practical Science. Religion is not found in the last two categories. So we turn to the first one.

Here is an outline of the Sciences of Research:

- I. Mathematics
- II. Philosophy
  - 1. Phaneroscopy
  - 2. Normative Science
    - A. Esthetics
    - B. Ethics
    - C. Semeiotic (Logic)
      - a. Speculative Grammar
      - b. Critic
      - c. Methodeutic
  - 3. Metaphysics
- III. Idioscopy or Special Science  
(Physics and Psychics)

This classification, and related discussions, show that Peirce did indeed have a system, but of science, not of philosophy, as that is now usually understood. In other words, trying to look at Peirce just with the attitudes of contemporary philosophy is an outstanding way to misunderstand him, for (among other considerations) his word ›philosophy‹ stands for but one of many sciences, contrary to our contemporary meaning for that word, which for most persons, calls to mind nonscience.

Do we find Religion situated within the Sciences of Research? Paul Weiss (1935, v) has answered »yes«: »Metaphysics, as the third of the philosophic disciplines, has, according to Peirce, three branches – ontology, religion, and cosmology (see 1.192).« If we look at the paragraph Weiss cited, we don't find the word ›religion‹ there at all. We do find that there is a place for *religious metaphysics*:

Metaphysics may be divided into, i, General Metaphysics, or Ontology; ii, Psychical, or Religious, Metaphysics, concerned chiefly with the questions of 1, God, 2, Freedom, 3, Immortality; and iii, Physical Metaphysics, which discusses the real nature of time, space, laws of nature, matter, etc. (Peirce 1903, in *Collected Papers* 1.192)

However, within Peirce's system, equating ›religious metaphysics‹ with ›religion‹ as Weiss did, is a misidentification. That is true because religious metaphysics is metaphysics, and is thereby a science and not Religion. The place of Religion, in Peirce's work, is outside of Science, a point he mentioned on several occasions<sup>2</sup>. Something that is not a science could not be part of metaphysics, which for Peirce IS a science.

So, now we have some information about the place of Religion for Peirce – it is outside of science. That is a large area: Exactly where in logical space outside of science is Religion to be found, according to Peirce? It is a presupposition of science (which we must remember is basically a method). This is clearly implicit in a draft of his proposed Adirondack Summer School Lectures (1905, MS 1334, published in Stuhr et al. [eds.] 1987, 47).

The men of the third group who are comparatively few cannot conceive at all a life for enjoyment and look down upon a life of action. Their purpose is to worship God in the development of ideas and of truth. These are the men of science.

Peirce gave a reason why Religion is presupposed by science in one of his letters to Lady Welby (1908, published in Hardwick 1977, 75).

Every true man of science, i.e., every man belonging to a social group all the members of which sacrifice all the ordinary motives of life to their desire to make their beliefs concerning one subject conform to verified judgments of perception together with sound reasoning, and who therefore really believes the universe to be governed by reason, or in other words by God, – but who does not explicitly recognize that he believes in God, – has Faith in God, according to my use of the term Faith. For example I knew a scientific man who devoted his last years to reading theology in hopes of coming to a belief in God, but who never could in the least degree come to a consciousness of having the least belief of the sort, yet passionately pursued that very mistaken means of attaining his heart's supreme desire. He, according to me, was a shining example of Faith in God. For to believe in reasoning about phenomena is to believe that they are governed by reason, that is, by God. That to my mind is a high and wholesome belief.

To be a bit more specific, Religion is a part of that set of beliefs Peirce described as Common Sense. This whole collection of beliefs he described as ›original‹ in the sense that all human beings have them, and that they have been developed in the species through long evolution. Such beliefs we cannot discard through false or ›paper‹ doubts. All attempts to doubt them fail – we find that we simply believe them. The collection of common sense beliefs, while not itself science, stands under the method of science which Peirce described in detail as he elaborated his system. And, as philosophy of religion (or religious metaphysics) is the theory of that of which Religion is the living instance, so critical common sense (under critic in Peirce's system) is the theory of the living set of beliefs Peirce called common sense (for Peirce's theory of critical common sense, see Ketner 1972).

But, besides being nonscience, what is Religion like, on his account? He gives rather detailed remarks about that, and from all periods of his career. According to his writings, Religion seems to have at least these properties:

1. In an individual, it is a sort of sentiment, which is
2. an obscure perception of something in the All, with which the individual acknowledges a relationship, to that Absolute, of the individual's self, as a relative being.
3. It is not only an individual matter – like every species of reality, it is essentially a social and public affair.
4. It is the idea of a whole church welding its members together into one organic whole, an idea that grows across generations.
5. This idea claims a supremacy in the determination of all private and public conduct.
6. Only individuals who have had religious experience(s) can fully appreciate the nature of Religion.
7. Religion intensely true to itself, particularly in view of 6, will become animated by the scientific spirit, not as a servant or subservient of science, but as a Religion with a bolder confidence in itself.
8. Theory is NOT Religion; orthodoxy (following formulae) is NOT Religion.
9. Religion is a way of life, motivated by fundamental beliefs, strengthened by religious experience.
10. The Way of Life of Religion is based upon the law of love, which is »love God and love your neighbor«.
11. Following this supreme commandment of the »Buddhisto-Christian« religion, generalize, complete the whole system of Religion, until continuity results, and distinct individuals weld together.
12. In fulfilling this command, man prepares himself for transmutation into a new form of life, the joyful Nirvana in which the discontinuities of his will shall have all but disappeared.

Was Peirce a Christian? Because of his strong antipathy to theology (see Peirce 1931–60.6.: 1–5, for instance), and because of his disregard for orthodoxy<sup>3</sup>, surely he was not. He did make this self-description late in life (MS 318, 09–10 of 1907).

[Pragmatism] ... must honestly acknowledge the uncertainty of metaphysical doctrine, while religion calls for an entire belief of the whole soul. ... I beg leave to say, by the way, that I am myself a miserably unworthy follower of Jesus ...

Christians are a subset of followers of Jesus. Jesus was a notorious enemy of religious orthodoxy (for instance, see Matthew 70: xxiii), and in this respect, very similar to Buddha. I find Peirce's religious practice to resemble closely that of some of the early (second century) followers of Jesus known as Gnostics, especially the disciples of Valentinus (c. A.D. 140), Heracleon (circa A. D. 160) in particular. So perhaps he could be described as a Valentinian Gnostic (see Pagels 1979).

Was Peirce a theist in his religious metaphysics? Potter (1973) and Orange (1984) think he was. It is clear that he was a mystic (see Orange 1984: 45–6 for convincing evidence), and he often referred to Buddha, perhaps never with more admiration than in a letter of March 1879 to his close friend William James (James Papers, Houghton Library, quoted by permission of Mr. Alexander James).

[In the last few years] ... a new world of which I knew nothing ... has been disclosed to me, the world of misery. ... Much have I learned of life and the world, throwing strong lights

upon philosophy in these years. Undoubtedly, its tendency is to make one value the spiritual more, but not an abstract spirituality. ... [It] increases the sense of awe with which one regards Gautama Booda.

My own hypothesis is that Peirce may be better understood as a pantheist and a Buddhist (or Valentian, which comes to about the same thing). This is a vexed question, which cannot be decided here.

What is the importance of Religion for Peirce? I advance the hypothesis that it is extremely important, not simply in a personal sense, but as a key for understanding his whole career. Consider this comment: »I must count it as one of the most fortunate circumstances of life which the study of scientific philosophy in a religious spirit has steeped in its joy, that I was able to know something of the inwardness of the early growth of several of the great ideas of the nineteenth century.« (post-1900 quoted in Fisch 1986, 101) This seems to suggest that he regarded right Religion as even more important than science. Other evidence for its importance is that Peirce was always mentioning some aspect of Religion in almost all contexts. This was a consistent trend throughout his career. One of the noteworthy instances came early when Peirce announced his »new theory of immortality« in 1866 (Peirce 1982, 1:502).

Does Peirce's practice of Religion, and his account of it, have any importance for us? Probably so. His life and work seem to suggest a universalizable approach to Religion which, if it were more widely known, might be in the avant-garde of contemporary practice. It seems to show that Religion is consistent with general scientific attitudes, or the scientific spirit, as Peirce phrased it. That is, Peirce may have worked out, at least in outline form, the nature of the proper relation between science and Religion, a problem that vexes us yet. Perhaps one of the principal features of that relationship would be that the spirit of science-in-the-best-sense and the spirit of Religion-in-the-best-sense are one and the same spirit.

Another important contribution implicit in this matter is to force we who seek a deeper understanding of Peirce's works to consider that we have not fully understood him if we only grasp his system of science, including as it does mathematics and philosophy and all the other sciences. Since Religion is not a science, and Peirce's work includes Religion, we must also comprehend that nonscience. When we have finally understood all of Peirce's work, what will we call his total output? Not science, for it includes more than science – not philosophy, for that is but one of many sciences, and not even the most basic science, a place that was reserved for mathematics. Certainly we could not call his work Religion, for science would thereby be excluded. Perhaps we should refer to his whole output as being a way of wisdom, and refer to Peirce's life not only as an intellectual one or a religious one, but as a kind of spiritual odyssey that includes all of the above, an odyssey that brought Peirce, for about the last third of his life, a more restful maturity, something like the joyful Nirvana of minimum discontinuities mentioned earlier.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A full set of references for this project would occupy too much space, so I will mention only some of the principal sources in Peirce's works. The following essays are generally helpful for this topic: Bishop 1981, Orange 1984, Pfeifer 1979 and 1981, Potter 1973.
- <sup>2</sup> For instance: from 1898 Peirce 1931-60, 1.620, 1.637, 1.642, 1.652-5, 1.665, 1.672, 1.676; from 1908 Hardwick 1977, 73-78; from 1878 Peirce 1931-60, 6.426-7; from 1893 Peirce 1931-60, 6.428-451; from 1866 Peirce 1982, 1: 493; in 1861 Peirce 1982, 1: 62-63; and in 1869 Peirce 1975-79, 1: 28-29. See also references to Peirce in the essays mentioned in note 1 above.
- <sup>3</sup> I understand ›orthodoxy‹ as meaning the practice of religion by following a formula or formulae.

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