

Religious Genius—An Overview

2.1 INTRODUCING THE AREA OF STUDY

All religions recognize there are outstanding individuals whose spiritual insight, presence and power by far surpass those of others. These individuals help create, define, drive, reform and inspire their traditions. To a large extent, they are the models that provide the basis for emulation for others, and they are the ideal of the tradition in its concrete manifestation in the lives of humans.

Historically, most religions have tended to appreciate only those exceptional individuals who have contributed to their own traditions' formation. While on the popular level there has often been some mix of cults, in seeking blessings from individuals who belong to other traditions, the fuller appreciation of special religious individuals has been limited to members of one's own tradition.

The present essay seeks to consider these special individuals from a perspective that is broader than just the individual faith perspective. In part, this is informed by the recognition that in an interreligious age, we must be open to study and to be inspired by the finest models that other traditions can provide. Without such openness, we are missing out on true appreciation of what other religious traditions are and what they have to offer. From a different perspective, the study of such individuals is important because it allows us to approach them as part of the study of the meaning of the fullness of being human and of human potential. From this perspective we are invited to consider what such unique

individuals are, how they function and what they contribute to society in a way that cuts across the different religious traditions and draws on them all. Thus, both for purposes of our knowledge and understanding of what it means to be human and for purposes of advancing relations between religions in today's world, the study of exceptional individuals in the field of religion holds great promise.

2.2 REVISITING "SAINTS," INTRODUCING "RELIGIOUS GENIUS"

Throughout history and throughout the literature, the individuals under discussion have been known by many names and titles, reflecting their various offices. The categories overlap, and their use is usually neither exclusive nor rigorous. The names by which these individuals have been known or referred to include: prophets, founders, mystics, saints, heroes, religious virtuosos and more. Categories vary, either in accordance with a tradition's internal structures or theological conceptualization, or in accordance with the scientific theory that provides the framework for viewing these individuals. Categories are to a large degree a matter of convention, and their significance is ultimately a function of the measure to which they are helpful in enhancing understanding and advancing discussion. The present work seeks to put forth a novel category by means of which to appreciate these individuals—"Religious Genius." The test for its usefulness will lie in the degree to which it allows us to revisit existing issues, to offer new perspectives and to provide new approaches to problems that have not been dealt with in the past, adequately or at all.

The category of "Religious Genius" cuts across many of the categories that presently serve in the literature. Nevertheless, by far, most of the potential "inhabitants" of this category presently "occupy" the category of "saints."

2.3 WHAT IS A RELIGIOUS GENIUS?

We may consider the following a working definition of "Religious Genius": Someone who by application of intuition, intellect and a totally engaged or integrated personality brings about new understanding of reality, grounded in awareness of a broader existential dimension, that leads to deep transformation within a religious tradition. The new understanding offered by the Religious Genius provides creative and

constructive solutions for solving religious and spiritual problems, usually within the framework of a particular community or tradition. A Religious Genius will accordingly have high positive output, effectively addressing challenges and issues that are fundamental to a tradition, or more universally: to being religious. A Religious Genius is thus able to accomplish something by means of his or her special capacities. Accordingly, the Religious Genius may be described as having deep comprehension of a field (reality, God, the spiritual life) that results in a transforming discovery or realization that can be shared with others and that has some enduring impact.

According to this definition, a Religious Genius may be considered as someone who is innovative in the field of religion, providing solutions to religious problems, or making the teaching of religion more broadly available to others, through how he or she configures or restates the tradition and its teaching, whether in terms of theory or of practice.

The wisdom of a Religious Genius grows out of a totality of being, a total commitment and a total view of life. A Religious Genius is grounded in a situation of mind and being within broader reality. The wisdom that comes of it should therefore be considered primarily as the outcome of such existential positioning. This means that the Religious Genius' special contribution is not primarily the gaining of knowledge, the refinement of discipline or methodology or the accumulation of facts.¹ Rather, it is founded upon the ground upon which all these activities might take place, and when religious geniuses do help grow knowledge, it is colored in a completely different way than it might be without the particular existential grounding of the Religious Genius. If wisdom is founded upon gaining experience, the experience of the Religious Genius grows from the total existential grounding that characterizes him. An important expression of this positioning is the understanding of connections, the view of the whole in relation to details and the regard of wisdom that ensues from such a view.

The wisdom of the Religious Genius draws heavily on intuition and inspiration. While it may, and frequently does, appeal to reason as it communicates itself and as it checks the validity of its insights and their application, its primary drive often has more to do with other means of knowledge than with reason. It is founded upon attunement to another order of being and the attempt to convey such attunement is the root of wisdom. The intellect provides checks and controls but these often come before or after the core recognition of wisdom. Before—in the training

that the Religious Genius undergoes as part of his or her formation, and that becomes an inseparable part of him or her. After—as a second stage, after the primary revelation, inspiration or intuition has done its work.

“Religious Genius” has cognitive associations, related to knowledge, teaching, understanding and discovery, as these apply to questions that are fundamental to the religious quest and to the historical traditions within which religious geniuses are found and to their canons. Thus, a Religious Genius is a sage-saint. In some way, directly or by example, he or she teaches. One looks to the Religious Genius for understanding, illumination and wisdom of a high order. What distinguishes the Religious Genius from the philosopher is the grounding of wisdom and insight in a higher order of reality and a higher state of consciousness. This contrasts with more common expectations of the saint (who is not a sage), where one looks to the saint for intercession. At times the same personality might provide both functions, but it is often the case that there will be a difference between the in-group of students, who seek the wisdom, and the out-group, that seeks the blessings and intercession.²

Gaining wisdom is to be distinguished from gaining intellectual information. Wisdom is an apprehension of spiritual reality and provides deeper insight into Being itself. Therefore, the constitutive elements of Religious Genius, to be presented in Chap. 4, are not simply character traits or virtues. They are ways of being, and each of them serves an epistemological function. Love is a way of knowing; love-wisdom produces a type of knowledge. Knowledge grounded in humility, in the transcendence of the self, offers perspectives unlike ego-bound knowledge. Various ways of conceptualizing self-transcendence have epistemological correlates. The connection of heaven and earth, the connection of individual and cosmos, the relationship of the individual to society—all these are profound realizations that produce a wisdom, or rather—that are themselves the core wisdom of Religious Genius. The *genius* of religious genius is how to translate these core recognitions in novel ways, how to communicate them and how to make them acceptable and practicable, the basis for social relations and a program for daily living. The core spiritual recognition undergoes a process of translation and herein lies the unique genius of each and every Religious Genius. This translation draws on his or her mental faculties, intelligence, erudition, social situation, religious training, stock of metaphors, life experience, humor and more. The core reality is similar, if not the same. The means of applying and translating it to different situations—religious, social, intellectual—is

where religious geniuses differ from one another, each seeking to articulate his or her vision in conformity with the tools at their disposal and the need they seek to address.

Wisdom is ultimately a statement of how to be in the world and, more particularly, how to be in the world today. Wisdom is therefore active or generative. It is not only the seemingly passive contemplation of eternal truths, but the active application of whatever may be eternal and universal into the concrete and practicable terms of the here and now. Therefore, new social strategies, forms of social organization, action and service in the “real” world, are all manifestations of wisdom. Wisdom recognizes the need and responds to it by providing an appropriate statement, often novel in its application. Therefore, in studying religious geniuses we study both the subjective aspects of spiritual excellence and interior achievements and the outward expressions of transformation and creativity within traditions.

The wealth of the spiritual life is such that its various aspects come together in seemingly endless permutations. These are multiplied as a given religion, society and the world at large undergo sociological and ideological changes from one generation to the other. At every turn, the need arises to state the truths, the vision, the broader meaning, once again, in fresh terms that are suitable either for the audience or the circumstances. It may be a traditional society that works out the meaning of its philosophical challenges and debates or a post-modern society that has lost its faith in God and His saints. Whatever it may be, the Religious Genius is the person who can offer a new statement of meaning, from the platform of existence to which he has reached. The contribution of the Religious Genius may be a creative presentation of the tradition in ways not previously known rather than the discovery of a new truth. Much of what “Religious Genius” is about is vivid realization of aspects of reality or of tradition not previously appreciated. The creativity of the Religious Genius often comes as a response to something problematic. The old ways lose their savor; they no longer work. Conditions change. The creativity of the Religious Genius comes in response to that problematic situation. The problem could be focused intellectually, emotionally or in relation to ritual. Unlike the common saint who ordinarily interprets, according to existing canons, the Religious Genius offers new ways of understanding. When old ways of interpretation no longer work, the Religious Genius may find new means of engaging tradition or the existential issues it addresses.

“Genius” is when there is a creative drive,³ founded upon the spiritual cognitions of the Religious Genius (specified in Chap. 4, with the help of our model), that produces a restatement of the meaning of existence and how it should be lived in the here and now. Whether it is action, service, teaching or relations in the community, the Religious Genius offers a new vision to address some important contemporary challenge.⁴ And his contribution is empowered by more than the goodwill of the ordinary person. It is empowered by the fullness of life and power to which his spiritual life has brought him.

A Religious Genius provides an answer to a question rather than bringing aid to a situation. The question that is answered may be a collective religious problem, specific to the tradition, or a broader question, relating to the meaning of existence. Because a Religious Genius in some way addresses the meaning of reality, the Religious Genius can have appeal across traditions. In fact, recognition of the Religious Genius’ ability to speak across traditions may be considered fundamental to constructing a definition for “Religious Genius.” This point will be explored further in Chap. 6.

Because a Religious Genius addresses a problem that is viewed through a contemporary lens, there will always be some interaction between the being and contribution of the Religious Genius and the historical and sociological context within which he or she is being appreciated. Appreciating a Religious Genius involves us in both an appreciation of the person and being of the Religious Genius and an appreciation of the contribution, innovation and transformation the Religious Genius effects within her community or tradition. This dynamic will be discussed in detail in Chap. 5.

Karl Rahner, the great theologian of the second Vatican Council, says of saints:

They are the imitators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age. They create a new style; they prove that a certain form of life and activity is a really genuine possibility; they show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in ‘this’ way; they make such a type of person believable as a Christian type.⁵

Rahner’s words are true not only of Christian saints and their significance for the Church. They capture the essence of “Religious Genius” as, here proposed, it impacts and finds expression in all world religions.

NOTES

1. In view of the centrality of learning and erudition among figures who might be described as religious geniuses, one might ask to what extent we can identify a propensity for “Religious Genius,” as presented here, among the learned, who contribute to the literary tradition of their religion. Even if they do make significant contributions to the cumulative knowledge of their tradition, the contribution of the Religious Genius is ultimately not to enhance the knowledge of the particular religious tradition but to provide answers to the most fundamental challenges of existence.
2. This has implications for the kinds of materials to be studied. Recognizing that the Religious Genius is the sage-saint, we will be drawn to teachings and to such autobiographical or biographical materials that provide a window unto the unique interior vision of the Religious Genius, as well as to poetry and other ways in which the Religious Genius has been creative. Miracles and intercessory activities are typically expressed in more stereotypical ways in the hagiographical literature and are of lesser interest to the present study.
3. Some have suggested that the life of the saint is itself a creative act, the highest creative act. I resist this definition, in relation to the Religious Genius, for it would make it impossible to distinguish the Religious Genius from the saint, here understood as someone who has perfected his personal life, without broader transformative implications for the tradition.
4. It is worth considering the different types of possible novelties that a Religious Genius brings forth. One may characterize three types of spiritual knowledge and understanding that religious geniuses reveal:
 - i. Gnostic teachings regarding supernal worlds and the divinity.
 - ii. Means and methods of how religious geniuses address contemporary challenges of the spiritual life and of today’s world.
 - iii. “Classical” teachings on proper living, as taught by religious geniuses from all religious cultures at all times.

It is likely that the three types of information presented will exhibit different emphases in terms of novelty. The first, the gnostic dimension, is subject to the greatest degree of originality, creativity and transmutation. It is also the least verifiable; here one must basically rely on the authority of the Religious Genius. The second will exhibit some innovation, but mainly in terms of methods and means, not in terms of substance. The third is the most permanent or stable form of spiritual teaching, least susceptible to changes and novelty, although its practical and spiritual significance nevertheless does bear periodic restatement.
5. Karl Rahner, *The Church of the Saints*, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, Helicon, Baltimore and London, quoted by Richard Kieckhefer, *Sainthood in the Christian Tradition*, in *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, ed. Richard Kieckhefer and George Bond, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 35. (Rahner 1966; Kieckhefer 1988).

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