

# Problems of defining religion

Syed Hussein Alatas

## The distinctive traits of religion

Since the eighteenth century, when the first rudimentary beginning was made in the study of religion in a scientific manner, scholars have been confronted by the problem of definition, which became more complicated with the rise of a philosophical humanism in Western Europe that denied the notion of the supernatural. Secular humanism has gained a considerable following in the West and consequently spread amongst scholars, some of whom redefined religion so as to include philosophical humanism. It is my contention here that such inclusion of non-religion under the concept of religion is to retrograde from the viewpoints of scientific principle and the proper classification of phenomena.

A basic requirement for truly scientific investigation is to select its subject-matter according to the degree of relevance it possesses not only to human needs but also to the clarification, if not the solution, of philosophical and religious problems which have engaged the assiduous attention of mankind since time immemorial. Human beings, by the nature of what is given, have only two choices in their orientation and organization of life: an organization of life not extending beyond the secular, or one with reference to non-secular goals, embracing what is termed as the spiritual and supernatural. While the secular outlook does not exclude interest in matters transcending the purely utilitarian, the non-secular orientation is also not devoid of concern for the mundane and secular aspects of life. There is no third alternative, although there are degrees of approximation to either one of them: one cannot be neither religious nor secular simultaneously.

The overwhelming majority of mankind has opted for a fundamentally trans-secular orientation which, as exhibited in societies and their institutions and in its individual manifestations, is called the religious way of life. The influence of religion

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*Syed Hussein Alatas is professor of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore and this Journal's correspondent. He has published books and articles on developmental questions, corruption and modernization, including The Myth of the Lazy Native (1976), Intellectuals in Developing Societies (1976) and two articles on development and 'the captive mind' in this Journal, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, 1972, and Vol. XXVI, No. 4, 1974.*

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