



Shrine at Qixian Monastery, China (photo Harvey Whitehouse)

Over dinner the other evening, it struck me that religion is rather like ratatouille. People disagree about the ingredients of both but in fact there is no such thing as the one true recipe for either. The concepts 'religion' and 'ratatouille' are elastic and contested, and will almost certainly undergo further modification in the future. Foody fundamentalists tell us that real ratatouille is an Occitan dish originating in France but are divided into factions claiming descent from Provence (Provença ratatolha) and Nice (Niça ratatolha). According to [Wikipedia](#) (which apparently is rude to consult at the dinner table), there are four main kinds of ratatouille. Let us count the main types of religion.

Type 1 Religion is best understood as a kind of sacred party. What matters to most of the party-goers are not the ostensible reasons for celebrating but the dancing, singing, and dressing up, and the collective effervescence thereby produced. The bells and smells, the sensory pageantry and the collective euphoria conspire to bind participants together even if most revellers have only a fuzzy idea of why the party was organized in the first place.

Type 2 Religion is more like therapy. Patients present with maladies of the body, heart, and soul, stories of disease, ruination, and sexual jealousy, and (for a suitable fee) the therapist dispenses cures: sorcery, surgery, strokes, and sympathy. Some of these cures can be administered on a do-it-yourself basis. Aside from professional therapists (whose livelihood depends upon convincing displays of expertise) nobody is very curious about the history and meaning of particular ritual

procedures and artefacts, but all take a keen interest in whether they work.

Type 3 Religion is more like a quest, an act of exploration into the mysteries of what lies beyond our familiar experience and immediate environment. This way of being religious prizes unusual or especially salient experiences, moments of insight or revelation, and the discovery of esoteric mysteries. Quests of this kind tend to prompt (and are prompted by) a passionate concern with the intentions, emotions, and judgments of supernatural agents. Rituals are a means of enmeshing the mystic into complex webs of relations with other-worldly beings, in contrast with the quasi-technical procedures of therapists and healers.

Type 4 Religion is more like a school. What matters most is the teaching of an authoritative creed, such that everybody sings literally and metaphorically from the same hymn sheet. Adherents are like pupils, endlessly lectured and tested. In performing rituals, what matters above all is what (by the lights of orthodox canon) they mean, express, and accomplish.

Four types of religion. Four types of ratatouille.... A coincidence? Alas, I have pushed the analogy too far. Too much table wine perhaps. If there really are only four varieties of ratatouille (and it doesn't exactly claim this on Wikipedia - sorry) this would no doubt be an accident of history (including classificatory conventions), probably unique and certainly transient. Unlike a recipe which consists of potentially unbounded variations on a general theme by cultural diffusion, the four types of religion seem to have been independently invented many times over, forever coalescing into just one of four types, or only one of a limited number of combinations of the four types. Why is that? Answers please on a serviette...