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FROM COMPARATIVE RELIGION TO HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

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The history of religions is replacing the search for an essential religion. For a long time the bias involved in identifying religion with some particular revelation made comparative religion a new form of apologetics. With the rise of the idea of social evolution there began the effort to discover, by the comparative method, the law of religious evolution and the nature of religion. For many reasons the comparative method proved unsatisfactory. The present interest is to appreciate the unique significance of each individual religion with the consequence that scientific history of religions takes primary place.

Perhaps no branch of study has struggled under so many burdening presuppositions and the handicap of so much vagueness as that which attempts to interpret the religions of mankind. A religion is sacred, involving things of unspeakable value to a human group; religions are universal, common to all races of men in all ages, and yet, after more than half a century of laborious study of this precious and universal phase of human behavior, scholars have not been able to agree upon a definition of religion. There are hundreds of definitions, ranging from some so narrow as to be exclusive to others so broad as to be empty of definite signification. The theological presuppositions inherited by Christian, Jewish, and Moslem writers often color their definitions as in India the bias is likely to be toward a philosophical or mystical emphasis. Some definitions are stiff with dogmatic self-righteousness, some are contemptuous, some prejudiced, and many partial. This fog of confusion has made uncertain sailing for the religious sciences; but a compensation now emerges in that the effort of comparative religion or hierology to string the religions of the planet on the thread of a definition or a law of religious development and to evaluate them in relation to a selected standard is giving way to a new emphasis upon the humbler

task of tracing the historic development of individual religions. To be sure, history of religions has always held an important position in the science of religion, but a position often preparatory to that of comparative religion which made use of its materials in the quest for the law of religious evolution and an interpretation of religion in general. Development, growth, and change were never taken radically with the result that the search for religion obscured the unique individuality of religions.

This presupposition of a fundamental religion appeared in several forms. The most natural was in the work of the apologist who assumed that his own religion embodied the truth of man's relation to the supernatural toward which all religions were blindly striving or from which they had fallen away. Again, it was philosophical and sought in the drift of cosmic history to trace the temporal manifestation of a universal spirit. Or it was psychological, overemphasizing the "psychological unity of the race" and finding in this unity the clue to the process of religious development. Finally, among men more cordial to evolutionary theory, there was the effort to arrange religious data so as to show the stages of the development of religion from primitive origins to the highest forms of culture religions. Whatever the emphasis, however, theological, philosophical, psychological, or anthropological, the comparative method was the tool and servant of all. Now comes the era of pluralism; and particular religions, even the individual forms and ideas of particular religions, demand that they be evaluated and understood in their own unique and peculiar significance, and not distorted to fit into a mythical concept of religion in general. This means, in a word, that the thoroughgoing application of the historical method in the treatment of religions has begun.

Critical, objective interpretation of the religions of the world is one of the new fruits of modern scholarship. Only students of this last generation use the terms "religious sciences" and

"science of religion" without a sense of strangeness. Previous to the middle of the nineteenth century any unbiased and open-minded appreciation of all religions was impossible for the majority of men. The reason lay in the ancient understanding of religion as a way of salvation revealed by a transcendent God, embodied in sacred books and mediated by special spiritual means to mankind. The true religion was designated by the revelation. There could be no easy tolerance of false religions. During the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, each confident of its own revelation, faced each other at the Mediterranean in dogmatic defiance. The touch of the Greek spirit in the New Learning brought no softening of religious dogmatism and the Reformation with its warfare of Christian sects held small hope of sympathy for foreign faiths. Yet the new sciences, the new philosophy, the new commerce, political changes, explorations revealing new lands and religions, could not fail to influence thinking men. Historic thought forms became too narrow to contain the new world-spirit. The writings of Alexander Ross, the Deists, Dupuis, De Brosses, Hume, Herder, and Lessing indicate a new attitude toward the non-Christian peoples. Until the opening of the nineteenth century, however, strict theological circles held firmly to the theory of revelation yielding to the new knowledge of other faiths only to the extent of admitting the possibility of a primitive revelation to all peoples which had been lost or obscured among the heathen.

The middle of the nineteenth century marks the beginning of a new era in the study of religions. In the first place, materials were available to act as a check upon dogmatism and a priori, philosophic speculation. The sacred texts of other religions were being translated; archaeology had begun to yield its precious records; traders, explorers, travelers, and scientists furnished reports at first hand from unknown territories. The very mass of materials was a challenge to research. More important perhaps than the availability of documents and

data was the growing popularity of the Darwinian hypothesis in biology which was being taken over by anthropologists and ethnologists and soon began to appear in theories of social evolution. Then flowered the comparative method by which facts were gathered from the ends of the earth and from all ages and levels of culture, classified under catchwords and used to demonstrate some chosen theory of development. In the midst of this intensive study of culture it was inevitable that religion should be included in the survey. Comparative religion was born and in the hands of Max Müller, Tiele, de la Saussaye, and Albert Réville claimed a place among the empirical sciences.

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that, with the advent of the new science, the traditional theory of a divine revelation was abandoned. It was too deeply imbedded in Christian theology and in social tradition to be so easily shaken. Yet in the works of the late nineteenth century a new attitude appears. Omitting the solid conservatives who thrust aside the materials of comparative religion with the contemptuous remark, "There is no comparison," there were some who made selective use of them to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity, and others who became advocates of a theory of revelation in a new form. Accepting with perfect frankness the history of religions and the idea of development and change, they maintain that the whole process takes place under divine guidance and control. Accepted as a philosophy of religion the theory retains the values of revelation and yet claims to give complete freedom to the study and appreciation of the historic development of all religions. This point of view is much more common than is generally supposed among writers of the last thirty years. A philosophy of religion formulated on the basis of religious facts and experience and growing out of them is one thing; an a priori philosophy of religion continuing in new form an inherited tradition is quite another. The tendency of the latter is to color, distort, or sanctify historic facts.

In the hands of a man like Réville the search for the leadership of the divine Spirit added a glow to his scholarly treatment of the history of religions. In the hands of others it becomes too frequently a source of blindness and prejudice. This theory has made it possible for Judaism to see in the experiences of Israel the special path of God in history. It has inclined Moslem and Christian writers to localize the divine interposition and guidance in certain great personages and events and to make it extremely difficult to deal objectively with these sacred personages, records, and events. In a word, it tends to erect some particular religion as a standard and to judge others in relation to the selected norm. The result is apologetics rather than the empirical study of religions.

Apologetics has its own value and justification. No one may deny the right of the Christian apologist to use the history and thought-forms of other religions in order to demonstrate the superiority of his own faith. The unfortunate thing is that these writers do not call it apologetics but comparative religion. *A Handbook of Comparative Religion* by Dr. S. H. Kellogg, an American pioneer in the study of religions, asserts that all religions other than that of Christ must be regarded as false. By a comparative study of doctrines,[1] Canon Macculloch comes to the conclusion that, while there was a real preparation for Christian doctrine in every pagan religion, Christianity is the final and normative faith. In a handbook prepared for the Anglican church under the title *Comparative Religion* by Dr. W. St. Clair Tisdall the reader is given the assurance of the divine authority of Christianity, its unquestionable pre-eminence, and its ultimate complete triumph over its foes. The Hartford-Lamson Lectures of 1907 were delivered by Dr. F. R. Jevons under the title "An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Religion." As an anthropologist he speaks of the evolution of religion but claims that the task of comparative religion is to demonstrate that Christianity is the

[1] Canon J. A. Macculloch, *Comparative Theology*.

highest manifestation of the religious spirit. All these works are apologetics and should be frankly so named. Scholars who have been working to win a place for comparative religion among the empirical sciences have a just cause of complaint against this appropriation of the name.

Parallel to this group, often antagonistic to it and inclined increasingly to pass over into anthropology and sociology was that formidable array of scholars who labored to establish an evolutionary theory of religious development. They abandoned all speculative and theological presuppositions and sought to discover the origin of religion and the law of its development on the basis of the facts furnished by the study of religions. The titles of the Hibbert Lectures illustrate this point of view. They read, for example, "The Origin and Development of Religion: Illustrated by the Religions of India"; "by the Religion of Ancient Egypt"; "by the History of Indian Buddhism"; "by Celtic Heathendom"; "by the Religions of Mexico and Peru." The quest was for an understanding of religion. Individual religions were merely sources of data to reveal the law of religious evolution. The great instrument was the comparative method coupled with some theory as to the psychic nature of man such as "a faculty of faith," "the sense of the infinite," "the psychological unity of the race," "religious instinct," or "a religious consciousness." Vast stores of material were at hand and labeled under such terms as "fetishism," "magic," "taboo," "animism," "totemism," "shamanism," "sacrifice," and the rest. It remained only for the scholar to arrange the materials to fit his hypothesis in order to present a very plausible sketch of the development of religion.

But the case rested upon three assumptions. First, that religion is a certain basic thing in all religions and that phenomena are therefore similar everywhere leaving to the investigator only the task of discovering the order of their arrangement. Second, that human nature is a unit producing similar

forms when brought into contact with external nature. Third, that religious ideas and forms are capable of being gathered under universal terms owing to that similarity. The effort to set forth the law of development resulted in confusion and conflict among the investigators. It was soon evident that the selected order of development might be entirely subjective and that the demonstration was achieved by arbitrary choice of a beginning of religion and careful selection from the mass of materials to fit the plan. There followed a period of controversy among the advocates of the various theories. First, as to point of origin. Was fetishism the first stage of religion? Or did it begin in an awed respect for the great powers of nature? Was shamanism the earliest form of religious control or does taboo mark the first stage? Was animism the starting-point of supernatural dualism or did it begin in reverence for the souls of the dead or in the combination of soul and demon or spirit? Or must we push back to a pre-animism or animatism or even to an original manaism, an awed attitude toward the mysterious powers active in nature and in living things? Does magic precede religion in the arrangement or is religion prior and magic a degradation and later development? All theories found advocates and all could be subjectively justified by a judicious use of the endless data.

A second source of difficulty was psychological. The rapid development of psychology greatly reduced the significance of "the psychological unity of man" and discredited such concepts as "a faculty of faith," a "religious instinct," and a "religious consciousness" as original endowments of human nature. This cut under the old confidence that there must be a uniform manner of religious development and directly attacked the uncriticized use of comparative data since forms, apparently similar, might arise from different psychic causes and be really different.

Slowly the comparative method broke down. The classification of materials in pigeonholes of general terms became

impossible with more intensive research. Fetishism was no longer one thing but many. Totemism had no significance unless it was very carefully specified what, when, and where. Ancestor worship had its own peculiar meanings in different social settings. The same thing was found to be true of other phases of religious activity and thought. It was seen to be a fallacy to group phenomena together under a general term when an examination of them in their own cultural environment might show them to be different. And, because they seemed to the observer to be similar, to extract them from their own milieu where they had their peculiar individuality and make them march with others in the line of a scholar's theory was to compound the fallacy. Moreover it was pointed out that a phenomenon at one stage might not have the same psychic significance in its later functioning even in the same society; borrowed by another group it might have almost none of its old meaning and to treat it uncritically as the same thing was to miss an important distinction. The arrangement of materials in a line of development became a most dubious undertaking. Since all races of men have lived a long time on the earth it seemed quite possible that the various elements of early religions might not represent stages of development in relation to each other but might be the accumulated technique of ages and exist side by side at the dawn of history. The comparative method hoped to draw general laws on the basis of widely scattered data apparently similar. It now appeared that similar things could not be taken as the same thing when they were different. If scientific accuracy demanded that every religious idea and form be interpreted with all the thick meaning it carried in its own cultural and genetic setting the comparative method was robbed, if not stripped, of value.[1] Its worth, as a source of suggestion as to possible developments and contacts, when individual religions were under survey, would depend upon a careful, critical appraisal of the local

[1] For a searching critic of method see Frederick Schleiter, *Religion and Culture.*

significance of the data. This cautious and restricted use of the comparative method is well illustrated by Dr. L. R. Farnell in his studies of the development of the Greek religion.[1]

The failure of the comparative method was first evident to the anthropologists. Comparative religion still held its ground. After the bad lands of origins were abandoned there were still the broad areas of the history of culture religions. Professor J. E. Carpenter writes:

> The study of comparative religion assumes that religion is already in existence. It deals with actual usages which it places side by side to see what light they can throw upon each other. . . . . It is not concerned with origins. . . . . Just as the general theory of evolution includes the unity of bodily structure and mental faculty, so it will vindicate what may be called the unity of the religious consciousness. The old classifications based on the idea that religions consisted of a body of doctrines which must be true or false, reached by natural reflection or imparted by supernatural revelation disappear before the wider view. Theologies may be many but religion is one.[2]

Thus is maintained the old quest to find religion under the manifold manifestations of religious thought and activity through the ages. A variant of the quest is found in the work of George Foucart[3] who selected the religion of Egypt, owing to its antiquity, its long untroubled development and abundant materials, as the ideal basis of comparison. With this all others are compared. Here apologetics is abandoned and the exaltation of one religion to the supreme place is not the goal. The search is seriously made for the meaning of religion and the laws underlying its development. The most tireless modern champion of comparative religion, Mr. L. H. Jordan,[4] is especially vigorous in his repudiation of the misuse

[1] *The Cults of the Greek States;* cf. also his "Inaugural Lecture of the Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion," p. 9.

[2] *Comparative Religion*, pp. 30, 31, 34.

[3] *La Méthode Comparative dans l'histoire des Religions.*

[4] See *Comparative Religion, Its Genesis and Growth; Comparative Religion, Its Method and Scope*, etc.

of the study in the service of apologetics. But the more one becomes detached from bias and from special admiration of one religion, the more objectively the data of religions are studied, the more it appears impossible to draw them into a neat generalization. To appreciate them truly is to see them in their peculiar individuality. To set them side by side with others in order to look at them serves only to make them more distinctly different. Comparative religion loses meaning unless one has already some preconceived idea as to the standard of religious excellence or some philosophical presupposition as to a single cosmic power at work under all the forms. As an instrument for discovering the law of religious evolution the comparative method is hopelessly inadequate. The comparison of data is meaningless unless some connection can be shown. If the effort is to secure an appreciation of the many religions of the world that result can be achieved more perfectly by the history of religions. If the desire is to explain why certain ideas and forms arise under certain conditions that task falls under the scope of psychology of religion. If one seeks to show how interaction and borrowing have taken place the history of the religions concerned will reveal it. If religion, after all, is not one but many, a valid religious science will devote itself to the conscientious interpretation of each one of the multitude.

When the comparative method fell into disfavor there still remained the hope that the law of religious evolution might be discovered by another method, namely, by selecting an isolated group and making an intensive study of a single development. This Durkheim attempted for Australia. No generalization in regard to religion as a racial product seems possible from this method. Even though the data were certain and all contacts with other groups assuredly absent what is achieved may be the history of a unique and individual religious development. This in itself is a very valuable result but no inference may safely be drawn from it as to the early stages of any other single religion.

What remains then is the study of religions in all their vast variety. History of religions assumes a new dignity. Its task is to deal not with religion but religions, each of them the product of the life of a human group and claiming to be interpreted in all the richness of its individuality. The given thing is human life seeking satisfaction in a specific environment. The story of this co-operative quest for the good life in relation to varying natural surroundings is the story of the religion in its early stages. There are certain basic needs and desires. The geographic situation presents advantages, dangers, and problems. The slowly expanding appreciation of the cosmic powers with which men deal, the slowly developing technique of control from rudimentary forms of magic word and rite to the sciences, the enlarging conception of the good life from fundamental physical needs to the higher spiritual values all enter into the story. And each religious development has its own distinct individuality not to be lost or obscured by any preconceived idea of religion as ideally represented in any other group or as formulated by a comparative study of many. This demands a sincere and thoroughgoing use of the historical method in the treatment of every particular religion and of the ideas and forms of every religion and an appreciation of their unique significance to the people who use them. If this great labor can be carried through it holds out the hope of a sympathetic understanding of all religions as products of human groups rooted in the earth and striving, not always successfully, to achieve a worthful life. Not only will it give an authentic vision of the varied gropings of the families of mankind for the higher values of life but it will make possible an appreciative knowledge of the distinctive religious attitudes, heritages, and attainments of the races now intermingling in a narrowed world and so, perhaps, open a pathway for the coming of a religion of humanity as the co-operative quest of the good life of the race.