

PROLEGOMENA TO THE PHILOSOPHIC DISCUSSION OF RELIGION*

Just as there are differing motives in seeking to compare the great religions of the world, so are there also different levels of discussion. Some engage in comparison with a view to resolving tensions and contrasts in religions and others operate with the intention, however obscured, of showing that after the comparisons have been made, their own particular faith will be seen as the true one. It is difficult to be openly fair-minded about comparing religions and it is difficult to avoid the feeling that the religion that one has been committed to for years will be seen, when the contrasting is over, to be the summit of wisdom. It is about as difficult to survey the great world religions without having any beliefs of one's own as it is to compare the eating habits of the peoples of the world without ever having eaten anything. Accordingly, those who engage in the study of comparative religions are usually religious persons to begin with and their zeal for their own faith prompts them to try to understand equally zealous persons of quite other beliefs. The results of dialogues and interchanges have been and continue to be mutually enriching. In his Young-husband Lecture sponsored by the World Congress of Faiths and delivered in May of 1977, in London, John Hick concludes:

I am not going to end with any ringing statement of confidence that mankind will succeed in overcoming its immense problems... But what can be said with assurance is that each of the great streams of faith within which human life is lived can learn from the others; and that any hope for the

* An earlier version of part of this paper was presented in a lecture before the Department of Philosophy at Banaras Hindu University on January 27, 1978.

future lies largely in the world ecumenical dialogue which is taking place in so many ways and at so many levels.¹

While inquiry and discussion among religious thinkers has gone on for decades, there has not really been much straightforward effort on the part of philosophers to engage in the problems of comparing religions. It is my thesis that skilled philosophical examination of the problems can be especially rewarding if certain prerequisites are thoughtfully considered. Each of those mentioned below is itself discussable, and each seeks to isolate the kind of questions that philosophers should tend to.

1. In the first place, the view that religious beliefs by nature are irrational and thus not subject to philosophical investigation must be rejected. To assert that beliefs are irrational is to deny *a priori* the thoughtful consideration philosophers themselves have given to religion ever since the sixth century before our common era.

2. Similarly, philosophers must avoid the temptation to reduce religious phenomena simplistically to one formula or to see it as the result of but one primary cause. It is an impetuous mind that views all religion as the product of some psychological aberration or sees it merely as the result of some group's vain desire. While Critias may have been partially correct in claiming that religion is the invention of crafty statesmen to retain their power, his view hardly fits the facts of religions as they have evolved and grown since Plato's day. The personalities of irreligious persons are no less devoid of psychological anxieties than those favouring religion. Furthermore, if one were to argue today that religious faith is without meaning or value because it originated in magic or superstition, he would need to be reminded that that would make chemistry of no value either because it had its origins in alchemy.

3. To inquire into comparative religions philosophically, one must acquire a fresh awareness of the basic traits and distinguishing features of the eleven major faiths. He should not automatically regard them as fundamentally alike or as striving for the same goal. The metaphysics of Jainism, realistic pluralism,

1. John Hick in *World Faiths* (Journal of the World Congress of Faiths) Number 103 (Autumn 1977), p. 19.

is hardly like the unqualified metaphysical monism of Advaita Vedanta. One must study closely the treatises that have come from the pens of the philosophic devotees of the respective religions. Chinese philosophers have sought to explicate Confucianism; Pakistanis have aimed at clarifying Islam; Punjabi thinkers have made their doctrines of the Sikh faith available in languages that often outsiders can understand, and the same is true of other religions. One does not have to be an expert in comparative religion or a master of all the available sacred scriptures. He *should*, however, read what his philosophical colleagues of other persuasions have written in the last several decades. That is not beyond the ability of a serious thinker.

4. In the fourth place, a philosophic discussion of religion presupposes the need to recognize that within each of the major faiths there are significant internal differences of both doctrine and practice. One does not do justice to the teaching of the *Tao Teh Ching* or the writings of Chuang Chou by limiting his interests to the popular Taoism of the eleventh century. Nor is he fair to Islam if he does not distinguish Sufi from Sunni. The acknowledgement of such internal distinctions enables one to avoid the straw-man tactics of criticism that are common place. Thus, it is easy to criticize a weak form of a religion while ignoring its loftier and stronger manifestations. The essence of Christianity is not discovered by examining the snake-handling cults of the Kentucky mountains.

5. It is likewise of moment to admit that the major world religions represent traditions of very long standing, the depositories in some cases, of many generations of devotees and thinkers. Gandhiji once spoke of the transformed lives of an unbroken line of saints stretching across the ages. While many errors are thousands of years old, one must consider that almost every religious tradition contains serious-minded scientists, learned sages and skilled political and social leaders. Philosophers have not given due attention to the testimony and witness of actual believers. They should at least, says H.H. Price, "take the testimony of religious people seriously, thinking that there might conceivably be 'something in it'".² The actual impact of great spiritual leaders on

2. H.H. Price, *Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 69.

human culture has often been revolutionary. Not only have calendars been changed, there have been profound alterations in social practices. Whitehead once remarked that it was the work of John Wesley that led to the overthrow of slavery in Great Britain in the 18th century.³ Other social pioneers like Kagawa, Leo Bæck, Vinoba Bhave and Martin Luther King come quickly to mind in this connection.

6. It is very necessary, moreover, to be cognizant of the fact that within the major traditions there has been some development, even evolution of doctrines, to say nothing of internal or self-criticisms. One can readily note marked changes from earlier teachings to later ones, as for example, in the case of Judaism. In the Hebrew Scriptures one notes a gradual growth of the idea of individual responsibility, commencing first with the position that if a man erred, his whole family would have to suffer, and leading to the view enunciated by the prophet Ezekiel that an individual alone had to pay for his own sins and no one else. Similarly, the view of the nature of the deity changed from early Judaism to later times. The God of battles becomes the God of mercy and forgiving love.⁴ It is instructive to realize that most religions have earnestly sought to overcome tendencies to anthropomorphism from the earliest times. One thinks of Xenophanes in the sixth century B.C. and Maimonides in the twelfth century A.D.

7. Philosophers need also to evaluate and consider religions from an ethical perspective. When this is done, it will be found that there has been and continues to be a conflict between the ceremonial emphasis and the moral one, between ritual and conscience, between the sacerdotal and the prophetic. Accordingly, we find leaders like Sankara and Ramanuja critical of certain ritualistic practices in medieval Hinduism. In Judaism, one finds the clash between the eighth century prophets and their priestly contemporaries. Their unparalleled stress on social righteousness

3. In his *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), Whitehead observes that Methodists "produced the final wave of popular feeling which drove the anti-slavery movement to success." p. 28.

4. There are some present-day writers who deny this, urging that their faith has been the same since its origin, but it does not take much to show that this is empirically indefensible.

(and even economic justice) is a feature regularly overlooked by Marxist critics of all religion.

8. One needs to become aware of the tension and even the struggle one finds between individualism and the social emphasis which prevails in so many religions. There is a similar tension between tendencies towards mere nationalism and universalism. Whereas Zen Buddhism seems to stress individual peace of mind, Buddhists of South-East Asia emphasize compassion for all living creatures. The move from nationalism to universalism has occurred in most religions, but the philosopher Hegel did not recognize it in Judaism and unfairly criticized that religion for a view its own history repudiated.⁵

9. A ninth prerequisite for a fructifying discussion of comparative religion is the need to distinguish the views of careful religious thinkers from the beliefs of ordinary though untutored, sincere laymen. Whereas the thoughtful theologian may make certain adjustments in his developed faith regarding, for example, the relic of a saint, the pious layman may participate in practices which border on the superstitious without realizing that the doctrines implied have been superseded by the broader, more reasoned interpretations of others. Sometimes such alterations can be explained by noting the distinction between poetry and science or myth and history, while the major thrust of the religion may remain quite intact. Professor N.S.S. Raman's recent article in the journal "The Language of Myth in Religion"⁶, opens up this sort of question in a fresh way. However one might well differ from his view that symbols which deal with the ultimate "cannot be subjected to any rational or empirical analysis." (p. 380) The problem is to determine what is properly to be regarded as a symbol and what is a claim to authenticity. Philosophers surely can deal with the latter if they have clearly discriminated the former.

10. The philosopher must be on his guard to watch out for subtle efforts to provide simple formulas which claim to bring all divergent views under one canopy of unity. There are still some who like to come forward and reveal once for all the hidden unity

5. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (tr. Speirs & Sanderson, London, 1895), Hegel says that there is not the slightest trace in Judaism that God acted for other nations. Surely Hegel was utterly ignorant of Amos 9:7, which says that God helped other nations as well as Israel.

6. *Journal of Dharma* (October 1977), pp. 372-381.

that underlies diverse religious experiences. One appreciates very much indeed the sincere purposes of so gifted and scholarly an observer as Huston Smith, but a careful reading of his recent book, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition*, neither convinces one that there is a primordial tradition nor that Professor Smith has found it.⁷ Decades of study by many serious minds have proved quite the opposite. While there are many surface similarities and striking instances of accord, there remain such fundamental metaphysical and epistemological differences specifically pointed out by philosophical representatives of the faiths under study,⁸ that any unity achieved would either be so general as to be unconstructive or would require the sacrifice of rational integrity. The point is that there are glaring contradictions among some religious faiths at the very deepest level and there is no use denying it. It is more productive philosophically to recognize real differences than to ignore or suppress them.⁹

11. Our last observation concerns the question of truth. In the past few years some philosophers have tried to deal with diverse religious ideas by announcing that religion itself is non-cognitive, that it symbolizes moods or affective states which have practical psychological and social value but in no way tell us anything about man and reality. While it seems sometimes to be the case that religious language is no more intelligible than glossolalia and seems to have little intrinsic meaning at times, the fact is that most religious persons across the ages and at present really regard their basic beliefs as true and those of their opponents as false. Philosophic minds must thus treat the sundry teachings of

7. Published by Harper & Row, New York, 1976. In correspondence dated August 19, 1977, Professor Smith calls my attention to a view similar to his in Frithjof Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, and adds that he recognizes how one might be opposed to his view.

8. For an example of a sympathetically minded book which nevertheless accentuates sharp differences between religious views, see Geoffrey Parrinder's *Avatar and Incarnation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) Chapter Sixteen is entitled "Theophany: Differences between Krishna and Christ."

9. Some Vedantins like to repeat "Truth is one but men know it by different names". However, the simple fact is that the *names* designate diverse and even contradictory truths, if we are to believe those who use the different names.

the various religions as *competing claims* which need to be confirmed or denied. One cannot rule out certain topics for discussion by announcing that they are merely linguistic fuddlements or pettifoggery. When a Buddhist emphasizes the doctrine of *anatta* and "extinction without remainder", he is talking about the nature of the self and its destiny. He cannot be put off by glib psychological talk. The issues of what the self is and what its destiny may be need to be openly debated and pitted against divergent views of other religions, not obfuscated by sophisticated jargon. There are similar issues which philosophers can detect as basic to their enterprise.

It is their task to separate the pseudo-issues from the real ones and distil out the underlying problems. The topics introduced by serious religious faiths are very often the same problems that philosophers normally consider,—the nature of the real, the goal of human life, the meaning of history, the nature of time, the character of the ideal person, and so on. And when such topics are ventilated, more technical issues in epistemology and logic quickly emerge.

Frank admission of the fact that at the heart of all religions are some philosophical problems that baffle the mind can produce at once a thoughtful regard for those with differing views and an earnest desire to sort out the differences with the goal of mutual understanding and respect. Even the official opponents of all religions can participate in such discussion and add their critical insights. Nothing but gain can result if an open attitude is adopted and a willingness to listen seriously to others is cultivated. The millennium may not come, but human respect will be furthered and understanding enriched.