

TRUTH OR TEMPERAMENT

A Fresh Approach to the Study of the Comparative Religion

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It is now almost a century since the inception of the comparative study of religion. As the data on religion from all parts of the world continues to be collected and collated, the suggestion has been made that one might now speak of the religion of man/woman in the singular rather than of the religions of man/woman in the plural. In any case, the data on the religious life of man/woman is capable of being viewed as a single entity when it comes to academic study of religion.

II

This aggregation of data, however, is so enormous that its further analysis requires some framework for its preliminary organization. Three such frameworks seem to be in vogue in the current study of religion. The first and the most popular method is to make the initial presentation in terms of the various religious traditions of mankind. Thus a book or a textbook on comparative religion is typically organized *according to tradition*. Thus the immensely popular *The Religions of Man* (now *The World's Religions*) by Huston Smith introduces the material tradition-wise—the traditions covered being Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, in that order.

III

A second approach has been to layout the data not according to traditions but according to themes. Thus one of the early works on comparative religion, that of E.O. James,¹ dealt with the material topic-wise rather than tradition-wise. This approach to the data of religion also distinguishes such well-known works in the field of comparative religion

¹See Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1986) p. 246.

as those by W.B. Kristensen² and T. and G. van der Leeuw.³ This approach devoted to a single theme such as, kingship. Thus just as these could be single treatise on a tradition, such as Hinduism or Islam, there could be single treatise on a topic or theme, as well.

IV

A third approach towards the initial presentation of data can also be identified. This consists of presenting the material neither through traditions or through topics but a time period. Thus one could present the data in terms of the 6th century B.C., 5th century B.C. or 17th century A.D. etc. The manifestations of religious activity all over the globe during a particular period are thus detailed.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that a fourth way of presenting the data on the religious life of man/woman. This would present the material not in terms of a tradition, a theme or a time-period but in terms of temperament. One could, for instance, use the four-fold classification of the psyche used by Jung for the human personality and use theme as the four salient for organizing the data, or alternatively, one could take to the cue from the fact that:

The number of the basic spiritual personality types, by Hindu count, is four. (Carl Jung built this typology on the Indian model, while modifying it in certain respects.) Some people are primarily reflective. Others are basically emotional. Still others are essentially active. Finally, some are experimentally inclined. For each of these personality types Hinduism prescribes a distinct *yoga* that is designed to capitalize on the type's distinctive strength. The types are not sealed in watertight compartments, for every human being possess all

²W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, trans. John B. Carman (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960).

³G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J.E. Turner (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

four talents to some degree, just as most hands of cards contain all four suits. But it makes sense to lead with the suit that is strongest.⁴

The Yogas, of course, are Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Hatha Yoga. In other words, the religious data can be organized in accordance with these four yogas.

At this point the question arises: what does one hope to gain by such a procedure? Any reorganization of data on fresh lives usually holds the promise of yielding new insights. What precisely these insights are going to be like if it is not always possible to foresee? The insights which the organization of religious data according to themes disclosed is well-known to all students of the phenomenology of religion, even though it might not have been possible to anticipate them when the new approach was first tried. In this particular case, however, at least a part of the benefits may be foreseeable. When data are organized according to the yogas then one likely result is going to be a deepened and broadened understanding of a particular yoga. This will have the effect of allying the academic study of religion with the active pursuit of religious life in the same manner in which science is allied to technology. The gulf between the academic study of religion and the practice of religion could be thus partially bridged.

An actual example will help clarify the point. Under which rubric will most of Confucianism be placed in the schema of the four Yogas? A little reflection will show that, out of four, the most appropriate place for it would be under Karma Yoga. For Karma Yoga covers the fields of social and ritual activity. Yet the very act of placing Confucianism under Karma Yoga becomes immensely consequential for the nature of Karma Yoga itself- at least in two ways. Firstly, the general understanding of Karma Yoga till now has primarily been in (1) ritual (as with the Mimamsakas) or (2) ethical (the performance of one's duty as with the Gita) without thought of terms. Now although Confucianism has elements of ritual, it is primarily as a system of social relationships that it lays claim on our attention. Thus Karma Yoga now obtains a more clear-cut social dimension than it has hitherto had. One may not how this now ties back with the emphasis in the Gita on doing one's varna duties. Yet this is not

⁴Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991) p. 29.

whether the emphasis per se lies in the Gita – it is on the non-attachment to the rewards of the action performed. But Confucianism places the emphasis on the social duty itself and thus lights it up as a full facet of Karma Yoga. This emphasis in turn will not be entirely sterile in its impact on Karma Yogins in modern India.

It is therefore suggested that a fourth approach to the initial presentation of religious data may be espoused. To date this data has been presented to tradition, or theme, or time-period. It was suggested in this paper that its presentation according to temperament or types may also be possible and desirable.