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## **SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGIONS : SOME METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

The contact of the West with Islam, the revival of classical antiquity in the Renaissance with its aftermath of humanism, and the geographical discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with their subsequent colonial and missionary conquests, gave impetus to the study of religions of other lands and peoples. The discovery of diverse religions was experienced by western Christianity first as a threat to its absolutism and only much later in recent times as an enrichment to its own growth and development. In the beginning comparative studies were always made in terms of one's own religion, which was often taken for a norm or standard. In the second phase during the latter part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, there came a generation of scholars who claimed to be "neutral" or "non-committed" and who wished to make "objective" and "impartial" studies of religions. Some of them picked up isolated parallels arbitrarily from different religions all over the world. Others worked with the evolutionary principle and accordingly classified religions into higher and lower forms and tried to reconstruct the origin and development of religion. Today these "one-track schemes of development" have been discarded by most of the scholars and emphasis has been placed on understanding the uniqueness of each religion and discovering the *basic structures* of the religious phenomena. This clearly manifested the necessity of a convergence of the historical and phenomenological approaches in the study of religions. In this article we do not intend to discuss these different methods or approaches in the study of religions. Our purpose here is to indicate certain guidelines to be observed in any scientific comparative study of religions. What are the rules for comparing religions?

1. Comparison of religions should be done at different levels-comparison of religions as "wholes", comparison between their parts or similar elements or parallels, and comparison between their

historical evolution or development. Each religion is a specific vision of life as well as a way of life. It is a living organism, where the exact meaning of a part may be understood only in relation to the whole. The 'uniqueness' of a religion shows itself in all its parts or elements just as the life-sap of a tree manifests itself from the bottom of its roots to the the top of its remotest leaves. The experience of suffering within a world of change is uniquely expressed in Buddhism and it is manifest with such a consistency in that religion's doctrines, symbols and ethics that an understanding of this fact serves as a key to an otherwise strange appearing world of expressions.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it may be said of Primitive Christianity that the experience of the joy and peace of the Kingdom of God symbolized in the Risen Lord Jesus was uniquely expressed in all its elements. Only a comparison of the "wholes" could reveal this uniqueness or specificity of each religion.

What makes two rituals identical, is not merely the external resemblance but rather its meaning, its vitalizing inner spirit and its motivation or interior attitude. When these factors differ, two rituals are totally diverse, although externally they look the same. We may recall the problem of 'Intercommunion' among the Christian Churches, who disagree with regard to the inner meaning and intention of the Eucharist, though the external rite is similar or the same. The inner meaning and the vitalizing spirit of a ritual can be grasped only in the context of that religion as a "whole" of which the ritual is a part. Comparison of parts, of similar elements and of parallels are, however, an indispensable prerequisite for a comparison of the "wholes", lest that comparison be superficial. Hence the necessity of comparing beliefs, rituals, feelings, founders, saints, reformers, devotees etc. of one religion with those of the other.

The historical evolution or development of religions- the course of changes, the power of influence exerted on its growth and its present tendencies - are also to be compared in order to see whether any common sequence or common phases exist in the process of

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1. Joachim Wach, "The Meaning and Task of the History of Religions" in: J.M. Kitagawa, ed., with the collaboration of Mircea Eliade and Charles H. Long, *The History of Religions: Essays on the Problem of Understanding*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967, pp. 1-17.

the development of religions. A typology of religions may be thus established by discovering their common phases and basic structures as well as their uniqueness.

2. To study the phenomenon of religion, especially with a view to establish a typology of religion, it is more fruitful and illuminating to start with a thorough and comprehensive study of two closely related or similar religions than to make an overall and general comparison of many religions. Between the religions of the same family the similarities are more profound and their differences very significant. Between brothers what is common is more intimate because they derive from the same blood and what is particular is more significant because it is characteristic of the individual. One may take the example of Christianity and Islam. The religious experience of Christ and of Mohammed as prophetic founders are to be compared. The respective attitudes of Christianity and Islam as they crossed their narrow semitic home, their compromise or resistance to the secular powers etc. are to be studied. This will reveal that they have passed the same or similar phases, but have reacted differently to the same stimulus. Such a close comparison will thus achieve two things: "Firstly, greater insight into the *habitus*, the specific character of each individual religion, and secondly, a survey of a chain of phases which had been passed through in each case".<sup>2</sup> However, a scholar shall not stop here. He should proceed to more distant types of religions to compare and contrast them, so that he may be saved from the danger of limitation and hasty generalizations. A wider comparison, including material from all possible religions, is therefore also necessary.

3. The Comparative method should be combined with the historical method, so that every possible dependence is thoroughly examined. Resemblance or identity, however, need not necessarily mean dependence. Uniformity in elementary religious beliefs and practices may be due to the fundamental unity of human nature. C. G. Jung with his theory of *archetypes* helped make this point

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2. Heinrich Frick, *Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft* (1928), (Comparative Religion), from Jacques Waardenburg (ed.), *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion. Aims, Methods and Theories of Research*. Vol. I, *Introduction and Anthology*, Mouton, The Hague, 1973, p. 486.

more clear. There is a collective unconscious besides the personal unconscious, and in this collective unconscious there are some centres of psychical energy, which Jung called archetypes. These archetypes explain the similarities in ideas, beliefs, myths, art and other cultural creations of the different peoples. What Jung gives here is a psychological interpretation of mythology, religious symbolism and beliefs, maintaining their psychic origin and psychic finality. But identity in individual details, like, a *Creation Story of seven days* can only be explained by dependence. However one has to keep in mind that what is borrowed might not maintain the original meaning.

But the fact of resemblance between religions or identity in their elements, does not take away or diminish a religion's originality or transcendence. In a word, originality need not mean complete "newness" and transcendence does not mean the exclusion of the human.

4. Religious institutions, beliefs, and rituals are essentially related to social cultural, racial and psychological factors, so that 'interdisciplinary' studies and methods are absolutely necessary to grasp the concrete religious phenomenon. This point has been sufficiently demonstrated in the study of religion during the last hundred years when historians, anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, phenomenologists and theologians equally were dealing with religion so that the study of religion could no more be called 'one discipline,' but a kind of "area studies", in which the scholars from different disciplines investigate the corresponding aspect of religion. Emile Durkheim explained how the Australian Totemism took its shape from the social structures of the Australian tribes and from their natural environment. Max Weber on the other hand, brought to light the influence of religious beliefs and practices on the economic system and other social institutions. William James showed how religious experience can vary according to temperament, need, and personal history.<sup>3</sup> The Student of religion therefore should be aware of the

3. See, Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, (translated by Joseph Ward Swain), Macmillan, New York, 1915; Free Press, New York, 1965. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (translated by Talcott Parsons), New York, 1930; Scribner, New York, 1958. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans, Green & Co., New York-London, 1907; Collins, London, 1960.

kinds of subjects studied in each discipline, the kinds of evidence used, its proper method, and the hypotheses and theories propounded by each discipline. He must be a master of the material with which he has to work, although others have discovered it for him.

A religion therefore should not be compared in isolation from its cultural and social context. Closely related is the principle that the primitive form of a religion should be compared with the primitive form of the other, modern form with the modern, the educated view with the educated and the popular view with the popular. Undoubtedly, Max Müller is the founder of the comparative religion and he insisted that in order to compare two religions, one has to arrive at their most primitive forms, just as in the case of comparative linguistics.

5. Although the contributions from other sciences are indispensable to understand the religious phenomenon, one should constantly, be on guard against 'reductionism'. To reduce the religious phenomenon to one of its facets is an error constantly repeated in the 'scientific' study of religion. For Durkheim, 'all man's gods were man-made symbols of society', namely, religious life was just an 'epiphenomenon of social structure'. Freud reduced religion to a psychological projection of certain unfulfilled desires. "The confusion starts, when only one aspect of religious life is accepted as primary and meaningful, and the other aspects or functions are regarded as secondary or even illusory".<sup>4</sup> In fact, the theologian has to point out here that the positive sciences are unable to grasp the essence of religion, the unique and irreducible in religion, the element of "the sacred".

6. Comparing religions should not be limited to the study of creeds, beliefs or doctrines, and rituals, but one should move from there to the inner core or heart of religion which is the religious

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Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (translated by Talcott Parsons), New York, 1930 ; Scribner, New York, 1958.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans, Green & Co., New York-London, 1907 ; Collins, London, 1960.

4. Mircea Eliade, *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1969, p. 19.

experience. Religion is viewed today very often as a creed or a set of doctrines. Rudolf Otto hit the point when he wrote that "far from keeping the non-rational element in religion alive in the heart of the religious experience, orthodox Christianity manifestly failed to recognize its value and by this failure gave to the idea of God a one-sidedly intellectualistic and rationalistic interpretation".<sup>5</sup> The essence of religion which is the religious experience, cannot be exclusively and exhaustively contained in a series of rational assertions. As experience is dumb, by an inner urge it spontaneously moves towards conceptual expression, which also serves a social function by making the experience communicable. Religious experience or feeling thus spontaneously and inevitably produces or gives shape to myths, creeds, doctrines and theologies. Religious activity (devotions, rituals etc.), however, need not necessarily presuppose conceptual expressions or doctrines as its source. It may directly and spontaneously flow from religious experience or feeling. In fact, many of the doctrines owed their origin to the rituals which they tried to explain or rationalize or legitimate. We would say that religious doctrines and rites develop together as parts of a coherent whole, have a complementary relationship and presuppose religious experience as their source.

Comparative studies of religions should observe these fundamental distinctions of religious experience, rites, and doctrines, and respect the primacy of religious experience. Ecumenical dialogues between the Christian Churches and between the World Religions may find fruitful approaches and new openings, if they focus their attention on the unity of religious experience rather than on hair-splitting of doctrines.

7. Religion therefore is to be studied not in books alone, but much more in living religious personalities and communities in their actual environment and life situations. Each religion should be seen, first and foremost, from the point of view of its own votaries. For, belonging to a religious tradition is an important factor for an integral understanding of that religion, although membership in a religion alone does not automatically lead to an understanding of

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5. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, (translated by J.W. Harvey), Second Edition, Oxford University Press, London, 1950, pp. 3-4.

that religion. It is an evident fact that there are different grades of membership, or different kinds of members in a religion. Dialogue with the Living Religions is, therefore, an indispensable tool for comparative religion and it should be coupled with the historical and phenomenological methods.

8. Finally, personal religious experience on the part of the student of religion or scholar who is engaged in comparative studies is a necessary prerequisite to grasp the essence of religious phenomenon as well, as to discover its basic structures. We cannot expect from a blind man an adequate description of colour! Wilhelm Dilthey's method of *Understanding (Verstehen)*, namely, 'reliving' in our own consciousness the 'inner' life of another person<sup>6</sup>, or, closely related, the psychological method of "empathy" in which psychic phenomena are viewed not as objects to be confronted but as subjective realities to be lived or undergone, is not enough to reveal fully the existential nature or dimension of religious experience.

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6. "This reliving is accomplished by the projection of our own subjective life into the position that would have been occupied by the inner life of another who has passed away in historic time. The internal projection that we carry out enables us to relive the ideas, moods, feelings, goals and values of another as they were actually experienced in the past. Dilthey pronounced this *Verstehen* (Understanding) method the foundation of all historical understanding and of the *Geisteswissenschaft* (human sciences or historical sciences) generally". (Tuttle, H.N., *Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of Historical Understanding, A Critical Analysis*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1969, p. 9)