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## THE PLACE OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGION IN A THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINE<sup>1</sup>

THERE are differences of opinion as to the value of the History of Religions in a theological discipline, and the reasons for taking this subject into the curriculum are disputed.

To begin with, the History of Religion is comparatively a new science. So young in fact that, like all infants, it has yet to rise out of its cradle, get rid of its swaddling-clothes, become independent of its mother and stand on its own feet.

Whereas the science of missions is as old as the Book of Acts, for scarcely two generations have scholars spoken of a Science of Religion as distinct from Apologetics, and truly independent and conscious of its aim.

Its cradle was philosophy, which took care of it for over one hundred years. At present, we recall without much enthusiasm those first attempts at a Science of Religion in the Rationalistic period of Voltaire and in the later period of Schelling and Hegel. Bunsen and Max Muller were enthusiastic pupils of Schelling and through them Romantic philosophy gave impulse to studies that were a decisive factor in the study of the History of Religion.<sup>2</sup> Because the science was so new and arose at a time when Rationalism was the vogue in philosophy, Christian theologians as well as the Christian public were at first unwilling to give it a place. Many felt with Principal Fairbairn (although he spoke of anthropology) that "There is no field where competent interpreters are so few and so rare, where unlearned authorities are so many and so rash, and whose testimonies are so contradictory, or so apt to dissolve under analysis into airy nothings."<sup>3</sup>

Archbishop Söderblom and others have sought to draw a distinction between the History of *Religion* and the History of *Religions*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Inaugural address, with omission of the introduction, delivered on the occasion of Dr. Zwemer's installation as Professor of the History of Religion and Christian Missions in Princeton Theological Seminary on October 1st, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *The Evolution of the History of Religion*. By Edward Lehmann in the *Revue d'Histoire et de Phil. religieuses*. Vol. IX, No. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in the *Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. XIX, p. 704.

<sup>4</sup> *Manuel d'Histoire des Religions*, Paris, 1925, p. 2.

The *History of Religion*, they say, proposes to show the essential unity of the psychological phenomena called religion and it makes research for the reasons of this unity, which manifests itself under such varied forms in the course of ages among different races and different peoples ; and because the History of Religion presupposes a unity in such development, it, generally speaking, accepts the evolutionary hypothesis and denies the unique character of the Revelation of God in the Old and New Testament Scriptures.

On the contrary, the *History of Religions*, they say, traces the development of each religion to its own sources. These sources are often borrowed, one from the other, and the various religions show degeneration and deterioration as well as progressive cultural development. This proposed distinction in the use of the singular and plural noun is, however, largely academic. Both terms are used indiscriminately by good authorities. In the literature on the subject, the titles "History of Religion" and "History of Religions" cover the same general ground. The Science of Religion in its widest sense may conveniently be divided into three main divisions or departments and these chronologically stated are as follows : The History of Religions, The Comparison of Religions, The Philosophy of Religion. The first collects and classifies the facts ; the second compares the data and the third draws conclusions in the realm of philosophy. The History of Religion in its widest significance, therefore, includes all three. It is "an account of the origin, development, and characteristic features of all religions from those of the lowest savage tribes to those of the most cultivated nations."<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is impossible for a Christian to approach this subject with an empty mind and without any preconceptions. "If the Gospel is a revelation of the Eternal, through facts of time, it cannot be treated simply as one religion among others. Given the revelation of God, Comparative Religion may help to show us how the forms of human nature clothed it with religions of men ; but the application of Comparative Religion to the Revelation itself is a fundamental error."<sup>2</sup>

The history of Islam is not the evolution of a people from animism to monotheism, but of a people, once monotheistic, under the influence of a new religion (which was nevertheless old),

<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff, *Theological Propaedeutic*, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Henry M. Gwatkin, *Early Church History*, Vol. I, pp. 2-3.

and which borrowed elements from Christianity and Judaism as well as from Arabian Paganism.

But the right of the History of Religions thus defined to a place in a theological discipline has been disputed on both theoretical and practical grounds.

In 1901 the late Dr. Adolph von Harnack gave a memorial address at the University of Berlin in which he opposed the establishment of a chair in the Theological Faculty for the Study of the History of Religions. (*Die Aufgabe der Theologischen Facultaten und die Allgemeine Religionsgeschichte*: 20 pp. Berlin 1901.) His reasons can be summarised as follows:

“There is only one religion, which was revealed from God. Mohammedanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Brahmanism and other so-called religions are the inventions of men. One has come down from heaven; the others are of the earth, earthly. One is a divine revelation from the Creator of the Universe, the others are moral philosophy. The theological department of this University was established by the government to train men for the ministry. The Bible, the inspired word of God, is the only necessary textbook. It contains enough of truth and knowledge to employ students during their lifetime, and it would be better for them to stick to it rather than waste their strength and time in the study of other creeds which can be of no use whatever to them. If theologians or students have curiosity to know what has been taught by imposters and the inventors of false religions, they can do so in connection with the department of history or philosophy.”

Nevertheless, Dr. Harnack in the same address expressed the hope “that no theologian shall ever leave the university without a thorough knowledge of at least one of the non-Christian religions” and that “special lecturers be secured from time to time for the Theological Faculty on the great non-Christian systems of philosophy and ethics.”

Theodore Parker disliked the very terminology of the new science when he declared—“*There are comparative religions, but Christianity is not one of them.*”

Dr. Abraham Kuyper took up the question in his *Encyclopedia* (Vol. III. p. 563-577). In dealing with what he calls “elenctics” (apologetics) he had already pointed out that in the Apologetic Department of Dogmatics a knowledge of the

Pseudo-Religions is taken for granted. The Christian religious life has its antithesis. Even as in ethics we speak of the holy and the sinful, or in æsthetics of the beautiful and the ugly, so in the realm of religion there must be the antithesis of the true. It is the false. The fact is that both in the Christian Religion and in the non-Christian religions there are two developments proceeding from the self-same principle, namely, the original knowledge of God. In the one case this principle is corrupted through sin, but by God's grace restored again; in the other it proceeds on the line of degeneration. But even so, we can discover *something* of the innate knowledge of God in all races. Hence, a two-fold task is before us. First, the study of the Pseudo-Religions, and second, to utilise the results obtained to discover a relationship of these religions to the innate knowledge of God. In this two-fold investigation, the History of Religions belongs not to the theological but to the literary faculty; that is, the ethnological group. The second part only belongs to the theological faculty under the head of elenctics (apologetics). Theology has the greatest interest in this investigation, for only through it can missions receive the right guidance. Entirely apart from its utility on practical lines the study of non-Christian religions has its value. Because the theologian is concerned with the arena of religious thought, he must have a view of the whole arena and not only of the Christian religion.

So far we have summarised his argument. Then, Dr. Kuyper actually goes on to say: "Even if the result of these investigations should sometimes lead a single student to become a pervert to Buddhism, Islam or Judaism, this loss would be minor compared with the gain to the science of theology in presenting the inadequacy and falsehood of the Pseudo-religions over against the absoluteness and purity of the Christian faith."<sup>1</sup> Dr. Kuyper argues against both terms, History of Religion and of Religions. He prefers the term the History of Pseudo-Religions. But it is of interest to add that this year steps are being taken to establish a chair of missions and the History of Religions in the Netherlands and that the professorship is to be shared by the Free University of Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup>

The value of the study of the non-Christian systems has also been disputed on practical grounds. Some say the field is too

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, Vol. III, p. 564.

<sup>2</sup> *Tijdschrift der Zendings Wetenschap*, 1930, pp. 176-177.

large by far to attempt to cover it in a crowded curriculum of preparation for the ministry. Others oppose it as unnecessary. We are to preach Christ and not other Saviours. We are to devote all our intellect and energies to understand as far as we may the unsearchable riches of the Bible and can afford to neglect utterly the Sacred Books of the non-Christian world. It is not only a matter of expediency, but of actual living values. The bacteriologist, they say, does not study dead germs; the physician deals with living tissue; why should students spend time in the study of dead or dying religions? This latter argument is indeed more plausible now than it would have been forty years ago. In a recent letter William Hung of Yenching University, China, affirmed:

“It seems to me that we have arrived at the state in the history of missions when it is no longer worth while for missionary leaders to study the Christian approaches to Buddhism, Confucianism, etc.; the scientific study of these non-Christian religions will have historical and academic interest, but it has ceased to have the same practical importance in missionary work it used to have up to twenty or even ten years ago. We must realise that the frontier of our missionary enterprise has changed and with it we must also change the old tactics. It is partly due to the educational activity of the Christian movement that the other religions are losing the grip they had in non-Christian lands. While Christianity is making inroads into these religions from one side these religions are suffering a great deal more in the rear, from a group of new enemies who have advanced so far into their territory, that, for all practical purposes, Christianity must ignore the incapacitated older religions and think of its frontier work in terms of what it will have to do with new forces, scientific agnosticism, material determinism, political fascism, and moral iconoclasm.”<sup>1</sup>

Even in the case of Islam there are those who believe that the battle is over and it would be futile to forge new weapons or burnish old ones in a conflict already decided. A British statesman, thoroughly familiar with the Near East, wrote to me last year: “Islam, as you and I in our respective paths knew it, is dead in Turkey; it is dying in Persia; it has ceased to carry real weight in Egypt; it may survive for a few generations in Arabia

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Dr. Robert E. Speer in his discussion at the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council, 1928, Vol. I, p. 344 (London edition).

and elsewhere, but the basic truths of Christianity will in the long run even there prevail."

Now these views are so evidently one-sided that they scarcely need refutation. Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism and Islam are, it is true, disintegrating, but they are themselves conscious of this fact and are therefore everywhere making attempts to hold fast their age-long heritage by adapting themselves to new conditions, by adopting Christian thought or vocabulary, by carrying on active propaganda even in Western lands, by using nationalism as a last defence, and, with their back to the wall, making a final struggle to hold their age-long and world-wide possessions.

If ever the Church needed to know the non-Christian religions and philosophies, it is now. If ever the History of Religions deserved a place in a theological curriculum it is today, and that for at least three reasons :

I. *This subject should be taught in the theological seminary because only a Christian theologian can rightly understand and interpret the history and character of the other religions.* The tragedy of this branch of learning is that it has been too exclusively cultivated and taught by those who were not theologians or at least not such as bowed before the authority of the Scriptures and accepted their testimony regarding the absolute and final character of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

What has been the history of the History of Religions ? It is a long story, for we agree with Brünner that the heart of the history of humanity is the history of religions.<sup>1</sup> All the ancient civilisations revealed by archæology found their root in religious beliefs. If we define religion as "the ensemble of beliefs, obligations and practices by which man recognises the supernatural world, performs his duties toward it and asks help from it " then religion is as old as the oldest records and remains of man.<sup>2</sup> "No one any longer believes," says Reinach, "that even quaternary man was ignorant of religion ; unless we admit the gratuitous and puerile hypothesis of a primitive revelation we must seek the origin of religions in the psychology of man, not of civilised man, but of man the farthest removed."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *La Philosophie de la Religion de M. Brünner* by Philippe Bridel in *Revue de Theol. et de Philos.*, March, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Le Roy, *Religion of the Primitives*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Cults, Myths and Religions*, p. 30.

*That* is the issue clearly stated by a representative of the rationalist and evolutionary school. Revelation or evolution; God or man; supernaturalism or naturalism. Alas, in the writing of the *History of Religions*, unbelief and rationalism have had the largest share and, especially during the past century, "this Science seems to have been conducted in a deliberately anti-Christian spirit."<sup>1</sup>

We are indebted to Dr. Lehmann of the University of Lund for an excellent summary of the history of this branch of learning.<sup>2</sup> Centuries before Christ Herodotus (481 B.C.) and Plutarch, not to speak of Berossos (280 B.C.), gave sketches of the history of various religions and described the customs of foreign nations. Strabo, about the time of Christ, is the first critical writer who deals with the religions of the Orient. He was followed by Varro and Tacitus.

When we turn to Christian writers, the first important name is that of Augustine. In his book the *City of God* he considers the heathen religions to be the work of the devil, nevertheless he quotes from non-Christian writers, especially from those who represent Rome and Manicheism. Among mediæval writers only the Scandinavian, Saxo (1220) and the Icelander, Snorri (1241) are remarkable for their contributions on the religions of Northern Europe.

Roger Bacon (1294) wrote a large work on Pagan Religions and Islam. About the time of Bacon, Mangu Khan in Mongolia and the Emperor Akbar (1542-1605) in India held congresses of religion in which Jews, Moslems, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, etc., took part. These were the precursors of the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago.

It is interesting to note that among the earliest histories of religion are those written by Mohammedans in their books on geography and general history. The outstanding name is that of Mohhamed Abdulkarim Shahrastani of Khorasan, Persia, whose well-known work (A.D. 1153) was translated into German and English and is the first real *History of Religions* in world literature. Written from the Moslem standpoint he divides all religions as follows: Moslems; People of the Book (Jews and Christians); those who have a revelation but are not included in class two; and

<sup>1</sup> Le Roy, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Zur Geschichte der Religions Geschichte*, in the 4th edition of Chantepie de la Saussaye's *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, Vol. 1, pp. 1-22.



lastly, free-thinkers and philosophers.<sup>1</sup> Similar works appeared in India in the fourteenth century, but they are inferior in character.

Marco Polo, who visited Central Asia in 1271 and spent seventeen years in his travels, added much to the knowledge of Oriental Religions in Europe in his day.

Meanwhile, Spanish and Portuguese writers also described the religions of Mexico and Peru at the time of their conquests.

A Dutch traveller, Bosman, lifted the veil of paganism on the Guinea coast (1708) and the Frenchman, Charles Bosses, wrote the first book on Fetishism in 1760.

At the time of the Reformation and the Renaissance, Erasmus wrote on the heathen origin of certain elements in the Catholic cult and teaching, and John Toland wrote on the same subject (1696) in his book *Christianity Not Mysterious*. Along this path rationalism then began its theory of the origin of religion (in opposition to the statements of Paul in Romans, and that of the Church Fathers), by denying an original revelation. David Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757) and Voltaire's *Essay* (1780) are typical. German rationalism is represented by Müllers and Creuzer at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were followed by Schelling and Hegel.

The second period (before we speak of the real founder of the modern Science, Max Müller, 1823-1900), is marked by a new phase of historical investigation on the part of Orientalists who specialised in one or more aspects of the subject, namely : Duperron on the Parsis ; William Jones on Sanskrit ; Champollion on Ancient Egypt ; Rask, the Dane, on Persia and India ; and Niebuhr, Botta, Layard and others on the Babylonian cult. It was Ernest Renan (1822-1892) who invented the term " Comparative study of religions."<sup>2</sup>

But in a real sense the life of Max Müller and his work marked the beginning of this new science of the History of Religions. Max Müller, born in Germany (1823), studied in Paris, and taught in London. He wrote many books, among which *Chips from a German Workshop* is best known. Finally he edited his great monument and life-work, a series of *The Sacred Books of the East*. His theory of the origin of Religion was that the so-called original Henotheistic Nature Worship,

<sup>1</sup> Translated by W. Cureton (2 vols., London, 1846), under the title *Book of Religions and Philosophical sects (Al Millal wa'l nabal)*. German translation of Haarbrücker Halle (1850).

<sup>2</sup> According to Father Weiss, *Le Peril Religieux*. Quoted as footnote, p. 7 in Le Roy's *The Religion of the Primitives*.

degenerated into Polytheism, sank into Fetichism, and then rose in some cases to new forms of Pantheism or Theism.

Max Müller's colleague at Oxford, Tylor, followed by Andrew Lang, criticised this theory. Tylor published his book *Primitive Culture* (1871) in which he emphasised Animism as the source of all religious beliefs. This evolutionary hypothesis was eagerly welcomed by Herbert Spencer in his *Principles of Sociology* (London, 1877). Parallel with these theories Totemism came to the front. This word was first used by J. Long (1791) in reference to the beliefs of the American Indians. Frazer and Lang (for a time) followed this hypothesis and even Robertson Smith in his *Religion of the Semites* (1889) made Totemism the most important factor in early religion. Others became their disciples, among whom were Lubbock and Jevons. This particular theory, however, did not meet with universal acceptance. A group of Dutch scholars led by Tiele (1830-1902) prepared the middle ground between the Evolution and the Revelation schools. Tiele's *Gifford Lectures on the Science of Religion* (Edinburgh, 1896) marked the new epoch. He was followed by another Hollander, P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848-1920) and by the Swiss Orelli (1911). Neither of these writers accepted the evolutionary view; Orelli especially emphasises the fact of primitive monotheism among all nations. The latest textbook on the History of Religions, and that which is considered the best in Germany, is based upon the work of Chantepie. The fourth edition, revised, appeared in 1925. (2 vols. by Bertholet and Lehmann, Tübingen.)

Meanwhile, in France we find the important names of Réville, who founded a *Review of the History of Religions*; Darmesteter, the translator of the *Avesta*; Barth; Maspero; and Reinach. Another group of sociologists who made special study of the History of Religions, was led by Durkheim. Their quarterly publications are interesting as they frequently contain criticism of the positions taken by Tylor, Robertson Smith, etc.

The present status of the History of Religions, even among those who reject Revelation, is that neither the theory of evolution nor that of degeneration is wholly accepted other than as an hypothesis. The tendency is to deal, not with the theory of origins, but with the history of development. "Primitive Culture" no longer signifies the original condition of humanity. One hears less and less of "the noble primitive faith" of savages

in their pristine innocence, because the real character of Fetishism, Magic, and Totemism is now better known. A greater emphasis was put on earlier monotheistic ideas, especially by Andrew Lang in his book *The Making of Religion* and by Howitt on *The Native Tribes of Southern Australia* (London, 1904).

Alkema and Bezemer of the University of Utrecht in their recent book *Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch Indie* have a special chapter on the origin of the Nature religions and do not accept the evolutionary theory at all (pp. 126-204) (Haarlem, 1928.)

They say: "The study of primitive religion has been altogether too much swayed by the evolutionary hypothesis and those who wrote on the subject approached it with pre-judgments." They give as instances, Max Müller, Hegel, and Darwin, but especially Tylor (*Primitive Culture*, 1871). Wilken too, followed the latter, but both were assailed by later scholarship. Many contested the conclusions reached by Tylor on the animistic origin of religion. The following are mentioned: Mauss of Paris, Van Gennepe of Neuchatel, etc., and especially Prensz of Berlin, Kruijt of Java, and Schmidt.

Their conclusion is that not animistic thought but pre-animistic thought is the oldest religious conception.

"The fact is," we quote again, "that the evolutionary theory as explanation of the history of human thought is more and more being abandoned. After all, it is only a theory and has raised more difficulties than it has explained. Even as a working hypothesis it is to be condemned." Professor Dr. J. Huizenga recently gave an address at Utrecht on the history of civilisation in which he defended this thesis: "The Evolution-theory has been a liability and not an asset in the scientific treatment of the history of civilisation."<sup>1</sup>

The degeneration-theory, on the other hand, is gaining adherents among ethnologists as well as among theologians, among them is R. R. Marett, who speaks of ups and downs in the history of religion.

Professor Le Roy, after twenty years among the tribes of Africa, states that "when you have lived with primitives a long time, when you have come to be accepted as one of them, entering into their life and mentality, and are acquainted with their language, practices and beliefs, you reach the conclusion

<sup>1</sup> Alkema en Benzemer, *Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch Indie*, p. 134. Cf. Joseph Bricout, *Ou est l'Histoire des Religions* ? Paris, 1912; also Joseph Hugby, *Manuel d'Histoire des Religions*, Paris, 1912.

that behind what is called their naturism, animism or fetichism, everywhere there rises up real and living, though often more or less veiled, the notion of a higher God, above men, manes, spirits and all the forces of nature. Other beliefs are variable, like the ceremonies attached to them, but this one is universal and fundamental."<sup>1</sup>

Schmidt and Le Roy have found disciples. In the valuable *Bibliothèque Catholique des Sciences Religieuses* a volume has just appeared on Polytheism and Fetishism written by a Roman Catholic missionary in West Africa, it closes with a chapter on primitive revelation. The religion of primitive tribes in West Africa, the author says, always includes five elements, all of which are impossible to explain without accepting the fact that *God has spoken* (Heb. i. 1). These five elements are: An organised family life; a name for a supreme, unseen Power, sovereign and benevolent; a moral sense, namely of truth, justice, shame and a knowledge that there is good and evil; the idea of "soul" in every African language and the universal belief that this soul does not die with the death of the body; and, finally, communion with the unseen supreme Power by prayer and sacrificial rites. "Devant ces considerations l'hypothèse de la Revelation primitive prend bien de la vraisemblance."<sup>2</sup> Before such considerations the hypothesis of a Primitive revelation takes on every appearance of truth.

It is encouraging to note that the tide has turned and that we have, especially on the Continent, outstanding scholars in this field who hold fast to supernaturalism and are opposed to the evolutionary hypothesis as the sole key to the history of religion. Among them we may mention Archbishop Söderblom,<sup>3</sup> Alfred Bertholet and Edward Lehman,<sup>4</sup> Alfred Blum-Ernst,<sup>5</sup> Le Roy,<sup>6</sup> Albert C. Kruijt,<sup>7</sup> but especially P. Wilhelm Schmidt, founder of the anthropological review *Anthropos* and professor of ethnology and philology in the University of Vienna.<sup>8</sup> The exhaustive

<sup>1</sup> *Religion of the Primitives*. Cf. Paul Radin, *Monotheism among Primitive Peoples*, London, 1924, pp. 65-67, and R. E. Dennett, *At the Back of the Black Man's Mind*, London, 1906, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> R. P. M. Briault, *Polytheisme et Fetichisme*, Paris, 1929, pp. 191-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Manuel d'Histoire des Religions*, Paris, 1925.

<sup>4</sup> *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (Chantepie de la Saussaye), 4th revised edition, 2 vols., Tübingen, 1925.

<sup>5</sup> Wurm's *Handbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, Stuttgart, 1929.

<sup>6</sup> *The Religion of the Primitives* (translated), New York, 1922.

<sup>7</sup> *Het Animisme*, The Hague, 1906.

<sup>8</sup> *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, 3 vols., Münster, 1926-30. Cf. also Philo L. Mills, *Prehistoric Religion*, Washington, 1918, p. 4. "It is the All-Father belief which precedes the Totemic or Animistic cult by indefinite ages. Primitive man believed in God and only in later times was the belief corrupted."

work of this Roman Catholic savant on the Origin of the Idea of God is to be completed in four volumes. In the three which have already appeared, he weighs in the balance the various old theories of Lubbock, Spencer, Tylor, Andrew Lang, Frazer, etc., and finds them all wanting. The idea of God, he concludes, did not come by evolution but by revelation. Anthropology and ethnology are also swinging away from the old evolutionary concept as regards primitive races. Dr. Robert H. Lowie of the American Museum of Natural History, in his recent important study on Primitive Society, says, "The time has come for eschewing the all-embracing and baseless theories of yore and to settle down to sober historical research. The Africans did not pass from a Stone Age to an Age of Copper and Bronze and then to an Iron Age . . . they passed directly from stone tools to the manufacture of iron tools." (13th Edition N. Y., pp. 436, 437.) And he concludes "that neither morphologically nor dynamically can social life be said to have progressed from a stage of savagery to a stage of enlightenment."

Moreover, the evolutionary hypothesis in religion is very seriously embarrassed, whenever it grapples with the problems of sin—its universality, and the universality of its correlate in subjective reality namely conscience. No less is the evolutionary theory of the origin of religion contradicted by the accumulating evidence of early monotheistic ideas among the least culturally developed races.<sup>1</sup> (Jordan, *Comp. Rel., its Genesis and Growth*, pp. 237-247.)

Even in our own land and from unexpected quarters there are voices warning us that in the study of the History of Religions we must not neglect our principal source-book, namely, the Holy Scriptures. Professor Irving F. Wood of Smith College wrote a valuable paper on "The Contribution of the Bible to the History of Religion."<sup>2</sup> His words are suggestive and make us hope for the day when Christian scholars will regard the Scriptures not only as a source-book but as "the infallible rule of faith and practice" in the comparative study of religion. Professor Wood says :

"The History of Religion is the profoundest attempt to understand the inner life, the thoughts and intents of the heart, of all the peoples of the earth, ever made in the field of scholarship.

<sup>1</sup> Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, Vol. I, pp. 632-700,

<sup>2</sup> In *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 47, 1928.

The result of this has been that the Bible takes its place beside other sacred literatures as only one of the great documents in the religious evolution of mankind. Moreover, since a knowledge of the Biblical religions is often assumed—how mistakenly we all know—to be the common possession of intelligent people, the emphasis of students of the history of religion is often thrown upon those Oriental religions which require much explanation if they are to be understood by Occidentals; or even upon the religious ideas and practices of primitive races.”

“So far has the pendulum swung in this direction that the student of the Bible sometimes seems to be the acolyte at a minor shrine in the great temple where are placed the altars of the religions of the world. It is time for the pendulum to swing back somewhat. Bible students may well claim the supremacy of the Bible among the literary sources of the History of Religion; not on the old ground that it presents the true religion and all the rest are false, but on the ground that it is the literature of greatest importance. It presents much material in better form than any other literature; and it presents some supremely important elements not presented at all elsewhere.” Professor Wood does not go far enough and yet we are grateful. He gives as reasons for his position that: (a) Other Sacred Scriptures are detached from history while the Bible is embedded in history; (b) for the most part the literature of the great Oriental religions is in a social vacuum but the Bible gives the religious biography of a nation; (c) the Bible is the one book where we can clearly trace the growth of an ethical monotheism. And he concludes:

“The Bible does not philosophise, yet the most important contributions in that field will come, I am confident, from the familiar pages of the Bible. Biblical scholarship will yet bear the leading part in the history of religion.”

If this be true, it is evident that only a Biblical theologian can rightly understand and interpret the history of Religion.

II. *The History of Religion deserves a place in the Discipline of a Theological Seminary because it lies at the basis of “elenctics” or the apologetic of Christianity over against the non-Christian world.* We cannot give a right apologetic unless we know the history of the religious struggles and aspirations, the religious failures and degenerations of the non-Christian world. The missionary enterprise is to make disciples of all nations; to win

out-and-out converts to Christ, not merely to share our own experiences with those of other faiths. The Jerusalem message asserted unequivocally and without compromise the finality and absoluteness of Jesus Christ and at the same time insisted that we are to find avenues of approach and points of contact with those of other faiths by a thorough and sympathetic study of what is best in their creeds and conduct. Only by such scholarly effort and painstaking approach can we learn the values of the non-Christian religions and the value of those values.<sup>1</sup>

The knowledge of other religions undoubtedly is valuable to the missionary who is anxious to find points of contact between himself and the heathen world, valuable for comparative purposes, to show wherein Christianity excels all other religions, valuable also as showing that these religions were providential anticipations of a wider and more important truth; but most of all valuable because it creates a spirit of sympathy and "compassion for the ignorant and those that are out of the way." This is indispensable to every missionary who would have the heart and mind of Jesus Christ.

For, as Dr. Oesterly points out: "The study of Comparative Religion will in the future become one of the greatest dangers to the Christian religion, or else—its handmaiden. If the former, then Christian Apologetics will have to find new defensive armour; but if the latter, then its offensive armour will have become stronger than ever."<sup>2</sup> His own books are an illustration of this danger.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, this branch of learning is of use not only to the future missionary, but to every theological student because the eye that has been sharpened through a comparative study of religions can better realise the religious content of Christianity itself; and the history of Christianity can be rightly understood only when one has studied the non-Christian religions which have borrowed so much and from which Christianity has borrowed so little; and above all, to which it stands in sharp contrast as the religion of Revelation and Redemption.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Jerusalem Meeting*, Vol. I, pp. 341-459.

<sup>2</sup> L. H. Jordan, *Comparative Religion, a survey of its literature*, London, 1920, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Hebrew Religion, Its Origin and Development*, Pt. I, N.Y., 1930.

<sup>4</sup> "We must strive to understand and explain the other religions from the standpoint of Christianity. Too often the reverse has been the case. While it is true that the natural is first and then the spiritual, it is also true, as Paul says, that the spiritual man discerneth all things." (*Chantepie de la Saussaye, Die Vergleichende Religions-forschung und der Religiöse Glaube*, Freiburg, 1898, p. 25.)

No one can longer ignore the science of the History of Religions. It is found in popular form in our best magazines and in all sorts of handbooks (some of them superficial and some of them supercilious) that profess to introduce the West to the philosophies of the East. In any case, for better or for worse, the comparative study of religion and the history of religion is now carried on in our colleges and universities, not to speak of high schools, and the problems that it raises must be solved by facing them squarely, not by ignoring them. The depreciation of the Old Testament and the exaltation of the Sacred Books of other faiths have gone hand in hand. Christ's words, "I came not to destroy but to fulfill" have been wrested out of their context and made to mean that He came to fulfill the Bhagavad-gita, the Analects of Confucius, and even the Koran! while the Old Testament is designated mere folklore and goes by the board. It is highly encouraging that, in contrast to this easy-going anti-supernaturalistic tendency, we have the works of Andrew Lang,<sup>1</sup> von Orelli,<sup>2</sup> S. H. Kellogg,<sup>3</sup> St. Clair Tisdall, Moulton, Jevons and others already mentioned. At the conclusion of his study of the Religion of the Primitives, Le Roy comes to this sober and conservative general value-judgment.

"In this great question (of the origin of Religion) as it presents itself to us, the human species migrated from the original spot where it first appeared, at a period which science is powerless to determine in a precise manner. There had been put into its possession a fund of religious and moral truths, with the elements of a worship, the whole rooted in the very nature of man, and there conserved along with the family, developing with society. Each race according to its particular mentalities, its intellectual tendency, and the special conditions of its life, gradually established those superficially varied but fundamentally identical forms that we call religions. Everywhere and from the beginning, there were attached to these religions, myths, superstitions, and magics which vitiated and disfigured them, and turned them from their object."<sup>4</sup>

Such a conclusion is in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures. Here we have the basis of the true science of Religion. The Bible is therefore the most important missionary

<sup>1</sup> *The Making of Religion.*

<sup>2</sup> *Allgemeine Religionsgeschichte.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Genesis and Growth of Religion.*

<sup>4</sup> *The Religion of the Primitives*, p. 319.



textbook. It reveals the ground, the motive, the method, and the goal of an enterprise planned from all eternity, namely, the revelation of the Father's love to a lost world<sup>1</sup> (Ephesians iii. 8-11).

Because in many circles this Biblical basis has been abandoned or considered of secondary importance, men are asking Whither bound in Foreign Missions? A sympathetic appreciation and interpretation of all the spiritual values in whatever faith they may be found is not sufficient. It is a great advance on the evolutionary school which refuses to see any generic distinction between religions and finds their common origin in the primitive cult of a caveman. But will such appraisal of values, with its proper labels for all religions in the religious market-place of the world really further the missionary task? No. It is not enough to present evidence for the superiority of the Christian religion—we must proclaim its unique and final message of redemption.

We agree with Dr. Julius Richter of Berlin, who expressed his surprise that so much of the work done in preparation for the meeting of the International Missionary Council at Jerusalem was a re-valuation of heathenism and states his belief that this was largely due to the influence of the Ritschlian theology. "The inward attitude of the missionary," he says, "must not be that he has something better to offer the heathen than previously they possessed . . . he comes rather as the ambassador of the God of heaven and earth and in His name offers divine salvation. If he be uncertain of this, he should leave missions alone."<sup>2</sup> We must follow Paul. The Epistle to the Romans is a profound but also a lucid missionary document. Heathenism in whatever form (even the neo-paganism of America) is a unified antagonism, a defection from God and a defection which in the last resort is guilty. The non-Christian world when it faces Calvary can only confess its utter bankruptcy, no less than the individual does :

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to Thy Cross I cling ;  
Naked come to Thee for dress ;  
Helpless look to Thee for grace.

All human righteousness is as filthy rags before God's holiness ;  
and any other conception of the Revelation of Christ to humanity

<sup>1</sup> Cf. William Owen Carver, *Missions in the Plan of the Ages*, Chapter III and Meinertz, *Jesus und die Heidenmission*, pp. 114-173.

<sup>2</sup> *Das Heidentum als Missions Problem*. Gütersloh, 1928.

would make Christianity a Round Table for the exchange of ideas instead of a narrow way for surrender and the bearing of a cross.

At home also, in the midst of the confusion of tongues occasioned by new cults and new philosophies which increasingly make inroads on the Christian Church, we need to understand these new religions, for the defence and furtherance of the Gospel. The church is not merely "a philanthropic benevolent Society" although it has its social obligations—but the pillar and ground of the truth. Our land is overrun with false messiahs; their propaganda fills the press and their voices are heard on the radio. Who can defend the faith against the new American cults, Spiritualism, Christian Science, Russellism, Humanism, Theosophy, Bahacism, and the vagaries of all the Oriental Swamis and Yogis, without some accurate knowledge of their anti-Christian origin and background? When a graduate of a theological seminary finds this confusion of tongues in his own parish, his thorough knowledge of Hebrew and New Testament Greek will scarcely suffice. On one occasion a friend said to Hudson Taylor, "Would you not be glad if someone could give you the gift of tongues for your missionaries?" He replied, "I should decline it. We need all the time it takes us to learn the Chinese language so that we may learn to think as they think and to feel about things as they feel. If we had the language *at once* we should make a hundred serious mistakes due to our ignorance of the Chinese mind, Chinese manners and customs." What is true of the foreign field is true in a measure also at home. A pastor in the suburbs of Chicago told me he was compelled to study "Comparative Religion" anew to meet the seventeen different "isms" in his own parish! It is the knowledge of the History of Religion that will enable such apologetic at home and abroad to be effective.

III. *The study of the non-Christian religions and the application of the Holy Scriptures to that study will lead to a deeper understanding of the distinctive doctrines and spirit of Christianity and a conviction that Christ is the only hope of the world—that Christianity therefore is the final and absolute religion.*

An example of this kind of a study, as reverent as it is scholarly and thorough, is the recent volume by Friedrich Heiler on Prayer.<sup>1</sup> He calls it "an investigation, historical and

<sup>1</sup> Das Gebet, *Eine Religionsgeschichtliche und Religionspsychologische Untersuchung*, pp. 622, München, 1923.

psychological, of the history of prayer " and one closes the book (which deals with prayer among all nations and all religions) with the deep conviction that :

Far and wide, though all-unknowing,  
Pants for Thee each human breast ;  
Human tears for Thee are flowing  
Human hearts in Thee would rest ;  
Thirsting as for dews of even,  
As the new-mown grass for rain,  
Thee they seek as God of heaven,  
Thee as man for sinners slain.

The prayer-life of the non-Christian world studied in such fashion becomes a mighty motive and incentive to the missionary enterprise. " O Thou that hearest prayer, unto Thee shall all flesh come ! " For prayer is the central phenomenon in all religions, the index of their spiritual content, and the thermometer of the soul's temperature in its search for God.

Four of the great non-Christian religions today are Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The strength of these systems of thought lies not in their bad qualities or tendencies, but in their good ; not in their erroneous teachings, but in their truths and half-truths. To study them with sympathy, therefore, we must seek to know where their strength lies and give full credit to all the elements of truth and beauty we discover : in order that we may with greater joy and boldness preach Jesus Christ, who is altogether strength and beauty, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge because in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

Now the central affirmation of *Hinduism* is in its pantheistic formula, " *Thou art that* " <sup>1</sup> ; the personal becomes the impersonal, and the denial of personality in God and man issues in a pantheism in which moral distinctions tend completely to disappear by an over-emphasis of the truth of God's immanence. The central affirmation of *Buddhism* is that the renunciation of desire, even the desire to live, is the way of escape from the misery of existence. It is an over-emphasis of the truths of death to self and of man's nothingness. The central affirmation of *Mohammedanism* is the absolute unity of God and His sovereignty, the Pantheism of Force, an over-emphasis of God's transcendence and a denial of His Incarnation. The central thought of *Judaism* is the holiness

<sup>1</sup> " The whole doctrine of the Vedanta is summed up in two Upanishadic phrases : *Verily One without second*, and *Thou art that*. There exists nothing but absolute thought, Self, Brahma."—Barnett's *Bhagavad-gita*, p. 37.

of God and His covenant faithfulness to a chosen people. But the rejection of the Messiah resulted in an arrested development and confined the programme of the race to Zionism.

The central affirmation of the Christian religion is that God, who is eternally both transcendent and immanent, became incarnate in Christ, taking sinful man back into His favour and that by His death and resurrection we have redemption through His blood and receive, by grace alone, forgiveness of sin and eternal life and joy—and are translated from bondage into the glorious liberty of the sons of God, to share with Him the unspeakable privilege of extending His kingdom among men.

Now in trying to present this unique message, contact with non-Christian thought and life often sheds light on the vital elements of Christianity, deepens our conceptions of its truths and brings out forgotten or under-estimated doctrines. Against the darkness or twilight-shadows of heathenism and Islam, Christian beliefs and ideas are thrown into bold relief, like a sunlit face in one of Rembrandt's paintings.

This applies to such doctrines as Inspiration and Revelation when compared with the Islamic idea ; the Virgin-birth when compared with so-called parallels in other religions ; the Trinity ; the Atonement ; Predestination according to Paul and according to Islamic theology ; the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body in contrast with the Hindu belief in metempsychosis or an infinite series of incarnations ; the life of the believer hid in Christ with the Hindu doctrine of Bhakti.

The life and history of Islam, for example, afford the strongest psychological argument and historical proof of the irrepressible yearning of the heart for a divine-human mediator. For the religion that came to stamp out the deification of Christ ended in an apotheosis of its own prophet, Mohammed, and in almost universal saint-worship. Gottfried Simon testifies that his study of Islam in Sumatra deepened his appreciation of vital Christianity. "Certain aspects of Christian doctrine which seemed to me not fundamental for my own religious life, have been shown by comparison with Islam to be indispensable and constructive elements."<sup>1</sup> And Canon Geoffrey Dale of Zanzibar says that, in contact with Islam, Christians are compelled to think through the exact meaning of their belief in the unity of God and forced to apprehend more clearly the idea of

<sup>1</sup> *Vital Forces of Christianity and Islam*, p. 121.

the transcendence of God. "They have been startled into self-examination by the *in sha Allah* and the *alhamdu 'lillah* of the Moslem."<sup>1</sup>

Also, face to face with non-Christians, we will learn to use simpler and less confusing spiritual terminology and see to it that the Christian message is clad in a garb that will do it no discredit. At some of the conferences we held in South India in 1928, it was resolved that "the Indian Church should set apart some of its members for definite Christian work among Moslems, for this would help to clarify and crystallise the theology and strengthen the life of the South Indian Church." It was a Moslem theologian, Ibn-al-Arabi, who said "that the error of Christianity does not lie in making Christ God, but that it lies in making God Christ."<sup>2</sup> What did he mean? The depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God as revealed in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity becomes more real and precious when we are compelled by Moslem thought to take it out of the category of mere dogma into the realm of vital Christian experience. When we see an intellectual stumbling-block become a stepping-stone to faith and joy and the abundant life in Moslem converts, then we realise that the Trinity is the very heart of Christian theism.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, as the late Canon Gairdner reminded us, "The unity of God needs to be emphasised afresh. Some presentations of the Atonement that were distressingly suggestive of Tritheism, even to the extent of asserting the existence of differences of ethical character within the Godhead may be henceforth buried, surely un lamented."<sup>4</sup>

The greatest gain of all from a true theological study of the History of Religion will be the conviction and the proclamation of the finality and sufficiency of Christ. This is foreshadowed in the Old Testament. It is remarkable how many of the ancient heathen religions are referred to in the Bible. Every careful reader of the Old Testament notices the number and variety of the forms of idolatry with which Israel came into contact, Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Phœnician, Moabite, Ammonite, Hittite, Philistinian, Greek and Roman cults and deities—"gods many and lords many." Yet in the midst of such an environment the universal mission and message of Israel

<sup>1</sup> *Vital Forces of Christianity and Islam*, p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> *Vital Forces of Christianity and Islam*, p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God*, pp. 107-120.

*Vital Forces of Christianity and Islam*, p. 38.

to the nations was never lost from sight. The unity of the race, the fatherhood of God, the promise of blessing to Noah, and for all nations of the earth through Abraham's seed in the fullness of time; the prophecies of Isaiah, Amos, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Haggai and Malachi concerning the Messiah, all proclaim that the name of Jehovah "shall be great from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same" and that this knowledge shall once "cover the whole earth as the waters cover the sea." Only one Saviour, only one Servant of Jehovah, only one name exalted above every name, only one Messiah, only one Son-of-man sitting on the throne of judgment, only one kingdom that is to be established for ever when the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ.

The New Testament has the same universal outlook and the same emphasis on one, only Saviour. Our Lord Himself and His apostles were conscious of a world-mission. Although He was sent primarily to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, He is the Good Shepherd who has other sheep among all nations. Although von Harnack (in a chapter which Dr. James Moffatt characterised as the most controversial and the least convincing of his great work on the Mission and Expansion of Christendom) concludes that Jesus was *not* conscious of a universal mission and that the great commission as recorded is *not* genuine; yet, in that very chapter Harnack admits that the fourth gospel is saturated with statements of a directly universalistic character. And he concludes that "Christ shattered Judaism and brought out the kernel of the Religion of Israel, thereby, and by His own death, founded the universal religion."<sup>1</sup>

The universality and finality of the Christian Revelation of God in Christ has been maintained on various grounds, scriptural, ethical, philosophical, or for missionary, that is to say, pragmatic reasons. Dr. Heinrich Frick argued that "we do not need a new interpretation of Christian missions, but rather a revival of their most ancient form based on the consciousness of the final and absolute superiority of the Gospel over all the other religious messages of the world."<sup>2</sup> A thoughtful writer of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, Chapter IV. Cf. the very able reply of Max Meinertz—*Jesus and die Heidenmission*, Münster, 1925. I am greatly indebted to Prof. Vos for calling my attention to this important R.C. contribution to the science of missions.

<sup>2</sup> Article in *International Review of Missions*: "Is a conviction of the superiority of his message essential to the missionary?"

Anglican Church based a strong argument for the finality and absoluteness of Christianity on the sole fact of the Incarnation and its implications.<sup>1</sup> Troeltsch once believed he had discovered the ultimate and universal validity of Christianity, but later he abandoned that position and publicly repudiated the missionary idea, saying of the ethnic religions in relation to Christianity: "There can be no conversion or transformation of one into the other, but only a measure of agreement and mutual understanding." He has many disciples in our day.

If this be so, we must be content to see the missionary enterprise dwindle away; and the most statesmanlike proposal would be to organise a League of Religions similar to the League of Nations, followed by a spiritual disarmament conference! This cannot be.

Evidence from every mission field, on the contrary, proves that to hold fast the absoluteness of the Christian revelation is a vital necessity. In the words of Dr. H. R. Mackintosh of Edinburgh, "The problem of its own absoluteness is to Christianity one of life and death. Either we have in Christ something less than complete certainty of God which means the readjustment of all our religious estimates, or it is actually complete certainty that we do have; therefore, Christianity is the final faith."<sup>2</sup>

The missionary enterprise fears neither criticism, nor opposition, nor competition. God's promise stands. His Spirit controls. Christ Himself is with us and *He* cannot be defeated, nor will He share dominion with any rival. Christianity is to be triumphant, our enemies themselves being the judges. The British Rationalist Press declared it in their Annual for 1919: "The survival of Christianity in the realistic atmosphere of the West is an amazing and impressive phenomenon. Defences it has none; its last bastions were pulverised at least a generation ago. But still it rears its head, serene, arrogant, undismayed. It is just here that we find ourselves face to face with the miracle. Discredited beyond expression—historically, intellectually, morally bankrupt—Christianity is nevertheless as prosperous to all appearances as ever it was."<sup>3</sup> Yes, Christianity is as prosperous as it ever was!

<sup>1</sup> "The Incarnation and Christian Missions," by Rev. J. K. Mozley in *The Church Overseas*, January, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> *The Originality of the Christian Message*, p. 189. Cf. also the series of articles by J. Witte, "Das Christentum und die andere Religionen der Erde," in the *A.M.Z.*, Feb., Mar., and Apr., 1930.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from A. C. Bouquet in "Is Christianity the Final Religion?" in S. P. T. Prideaux, *Man and His Religion* (1930), p. 228.

The miracle of History, the miracle above all miracles, is Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin, who died on the Cross and who is alive for ever more. Those who have experienced His love and forgiveness never doubt that He is the only and sufficient Saviour. For them the two eternities, past and future, and the whole period lying in between are united and controlled by one purpose, redemption through Christ. He is the Alpha and the Omega. In all things He has the pre-eminence. He will yet reconcile all things unto Himself, whether things upon the earth or things in the Heavens. He will restore the lost harmony of the universe, because to Him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. This is the glorious and certain goal of the long history of religions and of the yet unfinished task of missions.

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