

Reflecting on the plurality of religions

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This article consists of the full text of an opening lecture for a conference organized by the International Interfaith Centre, at Westminster College, Oxford, England UK, on 19th and 20th April 1995. A shorter version of the text appeared in the journal *World Faiths Encounter* 14 (July 1996) pp. 3-11 (published by the World Congress of Faiths). The academic study of religions and dialogue between religions or "interfaith" activities are by no means the same thing. Yet they share one rather fundamental perception, namely that religions are plural in number. The article reflects on the tensions and relations between the two perspectives on the basis of this shared presupposition. It also calls for a rewriting of the history of the comparative study of religions, taking account in particular of the political and ideological background.

1) Tensions

The academic study of religions and the activity of cultivating good relations and dialogue between religions, or faiths, share one profoundly important presupposition, namely the recognition that human culture in fact knows a plurality of religions. Hence the final title of this paper: reflecting on the plurality of religions. This deep-seated recognition underlies the very establishment of the International Interfaith Centre in Oxford, which seeks to correlate interfaith activity with an appropriate programme of academic research and exchange. The question posed by the present conference however is whether these two activities can really be fitted together. Does or can the study of religions, pursued in an academic manner, really promote good interfaith relations? Or does it just upset religious people by disturbing the basis of their faith, and thereby have a negative effect on the positive dialogue they might otherwise achieve if left to their own devices?

Even when the de facto plurality of religions is recognised, there are markedly divergent ways of dealing with it which all have their own intellectual and motivational strengths and weaknesses. The arguments and the psychology are often mixed. Negatively appraised, they range, for example, from an exclusivism which is sharp-witted but essentially self-protective, to an inclusivism which is undiscerning, patronising and in the last analysis self-advancing.

Positively appraised, we may note philosophically sophisticated accounts of an underlying coherence between religious traditions. Even those espousing such positions in their capacity as "academics" have usually arrived at them as a result of important personal experience and observation, as in the interesting case of John Hick¹.

Also in positive vein, we may note the generous spirit emanating from a good number of religious groups which, among their other activities, make a point of promoting positive relations between religions in their plurality. This generous spirit in many cases derives from the freely ranging far-sightedness of religious leaders and founders such as Guru Nanak, Sotoesan or Niwano Nikkyo, or from the indirect influence of particular individuals such as Thomas Merton or Masao Abe. In both

¹ As explained in his words in *Disputed Questions*, London 1993, pp. 139 ff.

cases long lists could be adduced here. There are indeed many good things among human beings, especially when they are open to the perspectives offered by their religious experience. And it is good to find ways of celebrating this in ways appropriate to the radically interdependent, one world of today. Those active in interreligious activities have played an important role here.

It seems natural to expect the reflective study of religion, carried on "academically", to contribute on the positive side to this extremely important intercultural development. Yet there may be a slight hesitation on the part of many, simply because of the inconvenient questions which sometimes arise and might be thought to hold up the progress of interfaith relations. After all there has been a long history, at least since the time of the European Enlightenment, of reflective, and more or less critical studies creating a religious disturbance.

Most simply, this disturbance occurs at the level of historical fact. Many statements made by religious people contain assertions about matters of historical fact which, on independent enquiry, turn out not to be the case. Some of the epistles of the Apostle Paul were not written by the Apostle Paul. The Gospel According to Saint Matthew was not written before the Gospel According to Saint Mark, but after it. The texts "discovered" by the Mormon founder Joseph Smith were not written in Egyptian. The Shroud of Turin does not bear the imprint of the face of the historical Jesus. The sutras of Mahayana Buddhism were not uttered by the historical Buddha but came into being at earliest some five hundred years later. Indeed it is hard to find a religion in which there are no statements about some favoured text or an object of reverence which turn out not to be true. This even applies to Zen Buddhism, which claims not to depend on statements at all but whose promoters constantly peddle tales about Bodhidharma and Hui Neng which are historically worthless.

It might be argued that it does not matter if religious people like to cherish favoured beliefs which dull historians know not to be factual. However, difficulties may arise when specialists in religion are drawn into religious activities and enterprises, especially those with an interfaith dimension. Permit me to adduce a personal example. Recently I contributed an article entitled "The Lotus Sutra and the essence of Mahayana" to a widely ranging series entitled "World Spirituality, An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest", the purpose of which, according to the publishers (Crossroad, New York), lies in "presenting the spiritual wisdom of the human race in its historical unfolding, from prehistoric times, through the great religions to the meeting of traditions at the present". In fact, approximately nothing is known about the "spiritual wisdom" of the human race in prehistoric times. We can only hope that at least some of our distant ancestors, hardly now correlatable with specific generations, in fact found some spiritual wisdom to cope with the labours and dangers with which they had to cope. My own article ("The Lotus Sutra and the Essence of Mahayana") sought to bring out something of the meaning of early Mahayana Buddhism in terms of the editors' concept of "spirituality". This seemed to be a viable and worthwhile task. It will be recalled that the Lotus Sutra, composed some hundreds of years after the death of the Buddha, is mythically said to have been preached by him at Vulture Peak, in India. In their enthusiasm the publishers decided to accompany the piece with an aerial photograph of Vulture Peak and a close-up of the vulture-shaped rock from which it takes its name! It does not seem to have occurred to them that the very literalism suggested by these photographs itself compromises the historical integrity of

the presentation and thereby detracts from its meaning. The point is that coordinated activities in exploring the meaning of our religious traditions can actually suffer if critical scholarship is not taken seriously. Here the word "critical" does not of course mean "critical of religion as such" but "critically alert".

It is a commonplace that history is not just a collection of facts. More importantly, it is a way, or a collection of competing ways, of viewing and interpreting the past. But it is still possible to be wrong about the facts. It may be regarded as most impolite to refer to such matters in the context of interfaith dialogue. But can the world of religious dialogue afford to take all religious statements from all quarters at their face value? Is the polite acceptance of self-delusion, or the delusion of others, the best basis for a joint enterprise in search of the truth?

The academic study of religion is not only historical. It is also comparative and analytical. In this sense it includes morphological and typological studies which arise out of phenomenological investigations. It also includes explanatory analyses of a sociological or psychological kind. All of these studies, not just those which are sociological or psychological, are likely at some point to run into conflict with the self-understanding of the believers themselves. This point needs further elucidation.

The initial account of a religious system made by the academic (or "scientific") student of religion should normally be non-controversial. The criterion here is that it should indeed be in tune with the self-understanding of the believer or practitioner. The recognition of the need for the application of this criterion in actual studies is the valuable inheritance of the "phenomenological school". Since the application of this criterion is not as straightforward as it might appear, I prefer to define the initial task in the academic study of religion as that of "characterization". The procedure has "fuzzy" edges, but the intention is to be true to what the religious system considers itself to be about, in its own terms. Such a characterization must always be related in principle to an identifiable set of believers. It may not be quite appropriate to a different, though related set of believers. To put it another way, field work always takes place in a field, which requires definition.

For example, the Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai of the sixties, in Japan, was an exclusivist religious organization which sought new members through forceful conversion techniques known as *shakubuku*. This (very brief) characterization is not a criticism. It is "phenomenologically" correct in terms of the self-understanding of the members in Japan at the time. In later years this approach to conversion has given way to other more gentle modes of propagation, so that a later characterization has to be a little different. Disputes between the Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shoshu have led to a separation between them, so that once again the field has changed. Believers overseas provide yet another, though related set of data.

Once the step of characterization has been taken, individual phenomena need to be set in relation to each other, that is, historically and comparatively, and in many cases it is at this point that the stress with relation to the self-understanding of the believers begins to arise. People are often prepared to believe in miracles in the context of their own religion, while regarding them as fraudulent in the context of others. But the comparativist will be evenly interested in the nature of belief in miracle in both cases. The whole range of bridging abstractions used in comparative religion leads into this

difficult area. To give just one other example, religious people are often unsure about the propriety of correlating different examples of intensive religious experiences, some of which are referred to as "mystical". The comparative approach might seem to jeopardise the relative status or value of some part of their own religious system. Thus, crucial though the "phenomenological" stage of characterization is, it is quickly overtaken by further analyses which may seem controversial to religious people.

The situation is aggravated when the student or analyst moves into the area of sociological or psychological investigation. Here the expectation is that he or she will be able to set religious phenomena into relation with other factors in an explanatory manner. However, religious believers themselves usually maintain their own religious explanations with respect to the situation in which they find themselves. Hence a conflict of interest is more or less inevitable at an early stage. For example, while the sociologist may point out the impact of economic stress on church mergers, the believers may regard reunion as a practical presentation of the unity of the Body of Christ.

In the exploratory, reflective analysis of religions there are yet further questions which do not necessarily involve matters of historical fact, or questions of comparative analysis, or questions of sociological or psychological explanation. The philosopher of religion will be interested, rather, in questions of coherence in a belief system, in questions of knowability, and in the end, questions of truth. Not all academic philosophers of religion will feel compelled to agree with all religious statements which entail a claim to coherence and to truth. Indeed this would be unacceptable on rational grounds for the simple reason that the majority of religious statements are mutually contradictory. The academic philosophers might be dismissed urgently by the religious parties at this point. While some of the best philosophers have been profoundly religious, there are also various convenient religious ways of marginalizing philosophers. The most common one is to suggest that religious truth is simply on a higher plane than that of rational argument. But does this in itself resolve the questions of knowability and compatibility? Even if the arguments in this realm are suppressed or ignored, they do not really go away.

In today's world there is, further, a wide range of extremely important ethical questions which affect us all. Indeed this is probably the most urgent area in which religious leaders and indeed whole religious communities need to share their underlying beliefs and current appraisals. In this context, issue-related academic enquiry may also have a significant role to play. It is possible and probably desirable for academics with a professional knowledge of religions to mediate in high-level dialogues between religious parties. Such mediation consists in part in being cultural interpreters. Should it also consist in making a contribution to the setting of the agenda itself, and in proposing new ethical directions in our rapidly changing global situation? Here too the academics are likely to cut across the received positions of particular religious authorities, particularly where these are relatively clear-cut as in the case of the main Islamic authorities, the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelical Protestantism.

In spite of all the opportunities for tension, I would like to return to the fact that the academic study of religions and interfaith dialogue do share one important presupposition, namely the sheer recognition of the fact that religions are more than one in number. Naturally enough, there then

occurs a divergence. In the case of the academic study of religions the recognition of this plurality has led to the reflective and critically alert study of religions. In the case of interfaith relations, the recognition of plurality leads to the launching of programmes to cope with it religiously. These two trends have often overlapped each other, providing mutual stimulation, assistance and it must be said, in some cases, confusion. But where does the presupposition come from? After all, this simple recognition was not, and indeed still is not always present in all minds.

I believe it is possible to discern long-term threads in the general history of religions which help to clarify the matrix both of the academic study of religions, world-wide, and of the various attempts to spur good relations between religions which, at least superficially, are different. In particular, there seems to be an organic relationship between religious innovation, religious pluralism, and considered reflection on religion. To use other terminology, there is a relationship between religious change (which involves innovation as well as decay), religious encounter and religious studies! These are very long-term matters, and their history can be viewed and told in various ways. If time permitted it would be interesting to draw a detailed comparison between the emergence of reflection on the plurality of religion in Europe on the one hand and in the leading cultures of Asia on the other hand. Here, only the briefest of suggestions can be offered.

2) Asian angles

Allow me to develop the argument by making some points on the development of reflection on religious pluralism in Asia, with special reference to China and Japan. Contemporary scholarship in the study of religion is currently quite active in most Asian countries, but I am not seeking to review it here. Rather I wish to point out a few aspects in the development of thought about religious pluralism which predate extensive intellectual interaction with the western world. The autonomous intellectual development in this regard is frequently underestimated in Europe and America.

In one sense reflection on religious pluralism began with the emergence of religious diversity in ancient India and ancient China. Time will only permit the briefest reference here to the relation between the emergence of Buddhism as a "critical" religion, the development of religious diversity in India and the way in which religious diversity has been handled from the perspective of modern Hinduism.

One way of reading the history of Jainism and Buddhism is to see these religions as an innovatory challenge to the Brahmanism which existed at the time of their emergence. Because of the state of the sources it is easier to pursue the details with respect to early Buddhism. One of the important features of the impact of Jainism and Buddhism was their renunciation of the normal patterns of everyday life, as regulated by the religion of the day. This created, irreversibly for India, the possibility of intellectual distance in matters of religion.

In terms of the morphology of religion, use may be made here of the distinction between "primal religion", which regulates and interprets the life of a natural society, and "critical religion", which is a matter of personal decision and stands in some tension to natural society and primal religion. Critical religion explicitly or at least implicitly criticizes natural society and primal religion. This in turn draws counter-criticism. Thus the new religion, Buddhism, was regarded as a challenge to

Brahmanism in that it drew young men away from family life at a time when they had family functions to fulfil. As to pluralism, it is clear from the early Buddhist texts that a more or less polemical relationship existed between Brahmanism on the one hand and Jainism and Buddhism on the other hand. The recognition of this diversity was the direct result of the innovations in religious life which had occurred.

As to "Hinduism" it is arguable that this is really a later invention (in the sense used in Hobsbawm and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*). Indeed, one might say that "Hinduism" has been invented many times. That is, while the religious realities of India have existed literally since time immemorial, later generations have retrospectively shaped the tradition to meet new needs and provide new emphases. This is all quite normal in the history of religions. One particular reading might see the invention of Hinduism as taking place with the rise to prominence of the Bhagavad-gita. This text displays a serious level of reflection on ethical questions and an attempt to answer scruples by setting them in a more comprehensive framework. Later on, Hinduism addressed the perceived problem of the plurality of religions within India, and eventually worldwide, by adopting an integrationist approach consistent with the general attitude of the Bhagavad-gita.

In the meantime, another context for reflection on the plurality of religions was seen in the innovatory thrust of Sikhism. At its inception, Sikhism was a "critical" religion with a universal message. Political circumstances, and in their train the poor relationships between the rival religions of India, forced the Sikhs to concentrate on their own identity, so that in many respects the religion has taken on the features of a primal religion for a specific ethnos. This is an example of what I call a "crossover". Similarly, but in the other direction, Hinduism in India and Shinto in Japan have thrown up universalist teachings which seek to dispense with the ethnic base.

In India, as far as I am aware, the connections between innovation in religion and the consequent recognition of the plurality of religions led to religious reflection on these matters but not, traditionally, to generalized reflection about religions from an independent standpoint. Even today the study of religions, or religious studies, as understood in India, continues to have a strong religious motivation and to reflect the integrationist approach characteristic of modern Hinduism. In China, Korea and Japan the situation is similar in some respects but interestingly different in others, for reasons to which I will now turn in a little more detail.

What then of China?² The concept of "three teachings" indicates a frame of reference which has characterised Chinese views of religion for centuries and which has greatly influenced neighbouring countries such as Korea and Japan. In the last century or two we have got used to religions in East Asia being counted differently, and not necessarily as "three". On the other hand it is difficult to go back to a time in Chinese history when it was not consciously recognized that there were at least two religions. Moreover the *relationship* between the various teachings has been a matter of discussion ever since Buddhism was introduced into China, and it is in this context that the concept of "three teachings" arose. While *jiao*, unlike *dao*, admittedly suggests "teaching", rather than "way"

2 The following section on the "three teachings" is abbreviated from a paper entitled "Three teachings (sanjiao) theory and modern reflection of religion" in Dai Kangsheng, Zhang Xinying and Pye, Michael (eds.) under the title *Religion and Modernisation in China, Proceedings of the Regional Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions held in Beijing, China, April 1992*, Cambridge 1995.

or "practice", it should be remembered that it is after all a Chinese term and not a foreign one. Moreover a particular *jiao* can easily be understood to have a behavioural, a self-disciplinary or a mystical dimension.

It is important to notice that giving prominence to the concept of "three teachings" does not necessarily imply a particular standpoint or decision about *how* these teachings are, or were, related. "Three teachings" is an interesting frame of reference precisely because it has been interpreted in various ways. Often it has been used to support a synthesist view of religion. This leads to statements such as "the three teachings are one". However it may also imply a critical recognition of the plurality of religions. The direction in which it is taken depends on which author one reads, and how one reads. The suggestion made here is that the concept of "three teachings" be regarded as summing up a frame of reference which, at its best, gives rise to critical reflection on religions in their plurality. If so, may it not be seen as one of the starting points for the modern study of religion in a Chinese perspective?

It appears that the very short "Treatise on the three teachings" (*San jiao lun*) by the first Ming Emperor (reigned 1368 - 1398) was particularly influential in setting this the frame of reference³. Needless to say, he adopted a concept which had already had a considerable history. However his views on the nature and place of religion in the empire may be compared in their importance to those of Asoka (c.268 - 239 BC) for India and of Constantine (280? - 337 AD) for Europe. In each case the pragmatic, political interest is evident. The Chinese Emperor's sympathies for Daoism (or Taoism) and apparently to a lesser degree, Buddhism, were set in the context of a then inevitable acceptance of the Confucian social and ethical perspective. But it was his politically motivated integration of the three teachings, allowing popular beliefs but excluding other organised religions, which reinforced this concept as a framework for reflection on religion in China and beyond, especially in Japan. The text of the *San jiao lun* makes the nature of Ming Tai Zu's interest quite clear. He realised that Buddhism and Daoism were both subject to misunderstanding, and indeed to misuse for commercial ends. However he wanted them to be correctly understood because there might otherwise be those among them who would cause trouble for the state. Buddhism and Daoism were useful, he thought, in that they complemented the laws and institutions defined by Confucianism.

It is my contention that because of his interest in social organisation and the functions of religion in the state which he ruled, Ming Tai Zu entered into the process of reflection about religions in their plurality. That religions exist in plurality is one of the characteristic features of Chinese religious history. This had been noticed at latest since the arrival of Buddhism in China, leading in particular to the questions about its relation to Taoism. However the earlier forms of reflection on this plurality had mainly been developed from a religious point of view. The position taken in the *San jiao lun* does not seem to reflect strongly any particular religious allegiance. On the contrary, the religions are regarded dispassionately as systems to be evaluated. This means that by the time this

3 The text of the *Sanjiao-lun* was consulted in the *Ming T'ai-tsu Yü-chih Wen-chi* in an edition held in the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin. The English translation by Romeyn Taylor was an essential key, see: "An imperial endorsement of syncretism, Ming T'ai Tsu's essay on the three teachings, translation and commentary", *Ming Studies* 16 (Spring 1983) 31-49. Also helpful, by the same author, is "Ming T'ai Tsu and the gods of walls and moats", *Ming Studies* 3 (Spring 1977) 31-49.

short treatise came to be written "three teachings" does not so much mean "the three teachings (which are one)" (although this is not denied) as rather "on religions (being several)". In other words the expression "three teachings" is a cypher for what in English today might be called "religions in their plurality". In spite of its great positive interest, it must not be overlooked that the concept of "three teachings" as used in China tended to contribute to the marginalization of yet other teachings which were usually regarded as deviant and subversive.

The "three teachings" concept had a later development in the critical works of the Japanese writer Tominaga Nakamoto (Tominaga being the family name). Since Tominaga lived during the first half of the eighteenth century he was a contemporary of the European "Enlightenment" figures such as Lessing, although he (and the Europeans) were quite unaware of each other. Tominaga argued against a synthesist view of the three teachings, and questioned the restriction of a positive interpretation of religious meaning to three religions only. Why should one not consider more than three, he argued. It is important to note that when he used the term "three teachings" as a chapter heading to indicate his subject matter, what he meant was something like "religions in their plurality and in their interrelationships". Thus we see in his writings the beginnings of what is referred to in some European languages as a "science of religion". In this case it is framed by the long-established concept of "three teachings", but it is *not* determined by a religious point of view.⁴

In some descriptions of Chinese religion there is a tendency to emphasize the practical harmony which has often existed between the various religions in their plurality in China. However the main point being made here is a little different. I do not necessarily seek to emphasise the practical harmony of "three teachings". Rather I am suggesting that recognition of religions in their plurality is a fundamental frame of reference in terms of which the study of religion can be carried out. This is different from, for example, a frame of reference which conceives of the study of "other" religions (i.e. "other" than the dominant one) or of the study of "popular" religion (rather than the official one). These latter frames of reference are common in Europe and in Latin America respectively.

3) European angles

The history of how and why "comparative religion" arose in Europe cannot, of course, be pursued in detail here. There is a wealth of description and discussion in well known works by writers such as Eric Sharpe (see above) and Jacques Waardenburg. However a few comments upon it are needed to complement the Asian angles referred to already. The question is part of a wider question as to how the study of religion in general, or the "science of religion" (*Religionswissenschaft*) has arisen and developed. In the western world this may be regarded, *very* broadly as arising from a combination of (a) the historical and philosophical critiques of Christianity, which have partly taken place within theology itself, (b) the extensive additional knowledge made available by the growth of oriental studies (c) the impact of the social sciences: social anthropology, sociology, psychology and social psychology.

4 Tominaga's works are available in English translation by the present writer under the title Emerging from Meditation (London and Honolulu 1990). As the book is currently out of print, any enquiries should be addressed to the present writer. The specific point made here is further discussed in my article "Tominaga Nakamoto (1715-1746) and religious pluralism" in G. Daniels (ed.) Europe Interprets Japan (select proceedings of the den Haag conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies 1982) (Tenterden, England 1984).

It is important to note that there are alternative views of intellectual history as affecting the development of comparative religion. Eric Sharpe regards the advent of Darwinism or evolutionism as the major trigger for the development of comparative religion⁵ and Max Müller as the "father" of this subject⁶. Peter Harrison however, I think rightly, sees the emergence of the "science of religion" as occurring substantially in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, i.e. with Deism and the Enlightenment⁷.

While there is something to be said for both of these views, for much turns on definitions, it is notable that *both* are entirely eurocentric. The truth is, as has been seen above, that comparative religion also appeared in a certain way in East Asia. This took place with particular clarity in eighteenth century Japan, where it continued to develop, if fitfully, through to present times. Currently the academic study of religions is well established, with variations relating to the current situation, in China, Korea and Japan.

It should also be noted that the development of comparative religion (or more generally, the study of religion) in Europe and America has not only been an aspect of the history of ideas. The subject has been and still is determined by the socio-political environment. This aspect really requires to be thoroughly reviewed under the following headings:

1. discovery and colonialism
2. missionary activity
3. exoticism and orientalism
4. the cold war and the end of the cold war
5. oil
6. social needs in pluralist societies.

Of these the best documented and most widely discussed are the missionary phase, and exoticism and orientalism. Discovery and colonialism are the common presupposition for these. The history of the oil factor and of the endlessly elaborate social needs of pluralist societies both predate the end of the cold war and continue after it. Indeed, in various transformed ways, all of the above headings continue to be relevant to the socio-epistemological location of the subject. Here there is only space for a few additional comments.

The factors mentioned above may be interlocked. Thus colonialism and missionary activity have often gone hand in hand. However this has not always been so. For example, Catholic missionary accounts of Tibetan religion *preceded* the images which arrived on the heels of the British Younghusband expedition. Or again, the immense success of Mircea Eliade's work may be regarded both as a function of the need for exoticism and as having been assisted by the cold war. Both of these factors tend to encourage comparative work, which accordingly plays a strong role in his writing. On the other hand, recent growth in Islamic studies has seen little tendency for the study of Islam to be incorporated into comparative studies as such. Why? This may be because it results from the combined effect of (i) the perception of a need to study the religious ideology of countries

5 Comparative Religion, A History, London 1975, Chapter 2.

6 Ibidem, p.35.

7 Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment, London 1990.

heavily involved in the oil business and (ii) the perception of a need to study the religion of specific minority communities in pluralistic societies. Being politically and religiously programmatic, neither of these needs must necessarily require *comparative* work as such; if anything they inhibit it. Positively, any attention to religions in their plurality may be regarded as helpful in the long run, but it does not necessarily lead to the emergence of reflective, comparative religious studies in the short term.

Within the wider European field the emergence of the "history of religions", including comparative religion, in Germany, is of particular interest. It may be seen as the result of a dual thrust coming (a) from philological and oriental studies *towards* theology and (b) from theology *towards* the study of various religions. The first thrust (a) led to the "history of religions" school (religionsgeschichtliche Schule), which emphasised the religiously complex origins of both Israelite and Christian religion (from Wrede to Bultmann), and studied these on the basis of uncompromisingly historical presuppositions. In this group Ernst Troeltsch is of particular importance in providing connections with wider questions in theology and the philosophy of history. A second tradition (b) which I propose to call "the German religion and religions" school, runs from Schleiermacher through Otto to Heiler, possibly including others such as Söderblom (who, though Swedish, spent part of his life in Berlin), Wach and Ratschow, diverse though these again are. The linkage between these occurs because of a network of assumptions, namely: that an inward experience is the determining feature of religion, that this experience is known positively in many religions, and that the details, when investigated, show that Christianity is the clearest and ultimately the most valuable form of religion.

The first of these schools, i.e. the "history of religions" school, tended to disrupt the sense of security of protestant Christianity, especially as the implications were drawn out by Troeltsch and by Bultmann. The second on the other hand tended to establish it, for the diversity of religions was embraced positively, but at the same time drawn into the controlling orbit of Christian dogmatics.

To some extent these two trends are found again in French studies of religion, themselves contextualised by the Catholic religion and its critique. Important early figures here are Chateaubriand, Alfred Loisy (a Catholic modernist sparring partner for Harnack) and Ernest Renan, after whom is named the French association for the history of religions. These figures have been regarded as threats to Christianity. Ugo Bianchi has pointedly argued that studies of religion by specialists remaining loyal to Catholic theology benefit (as compared with much protestantism) from the assumption that truths of reason and hence natural theology may be present in non-Christian religions. These are thought by such researchers to be worthy of exploration if only as a clarification of the ground for evangelism. At the same time the Catholic faith itself is preserved from unwelcome attention, he suggests, since it is fenced around with the category of revelation.⁸

Returning to the two Protestant schools mentioned above, it is ironic that the representatives of the "religion and religions" school such as Otto, Heiler and Ratschow, in spite of the generous perspective which they display, tend in the last analysis to be less useful for the interfaith dialogue of today. This is because, in the end, they draw everything back into their own religious perspective.

⁸ Set out in his article "the study of religion in the context of Catholic culture", in M. Pye (ed.) Marburg Revisited. Institutions and Strategies in the Study of Religion, Marburg 1989, pp. 49-53.

The "history of religions school", on the other hand, though in the eyes of many Christians more threatening to the religious faith of their own tradition, goes further in providing a secure basis for interfaith explorations of religion. While those who set store by the "religion and religions" school still continue even today to pose their questions about "other religions", the line of thought emanating from the "history of religions" school sees all religious traditions as equally available in human cultural history from the start. Incidentally, the challenge of this line of thought was first addressed to Christian theology, but it is just as relevant to representatives of other religions who continue to approach questions about the relations between religions on the basis of the prior, or final superiority of their own religion.

4) Conclusions

As has been seen, any attempts to view religions *in their plurality*, in a conspectual frame of reference, involves the intellectual act of comparison. The academic study of religion, or more loosely, Religious Studies, cannot avoid the question of comparison. Even if not approached consciously, it will creep back in somehow. Comparison, or comparisons, depend partly on the detail of specific studies; but as we have also seen, the frame of reference can be culturally varied and is of great importance. Unfortunately the work of refining an interculturally based frame of reference is still in progress. Indeed, it is still in its infancy. A relevant perspective from the Chinese cultural area was adduced above, but there are contributory perspectives to be derived from other important parts of the world, for example from Latin America and from Africa. Correlating these perspectives is not the same as simply imposing one of them. There is a complex, shared endeavour to be undertaken here.

Those who engage in the academic study of religions, that is, the historical and comparative study of religions and all that flows from it, can make common cause with those who, in the interest of developing interfaith relations, are prepared to accept the critically open analysis of religious traditions as these have in fact developed. If this is the basis of our work, there is no inherent reason why one of these two lines of endeavour should be thought to threaten the other. On the other hand, admittedly, they may jointly threaten some of the entrenched religious positions which prefer to remain intellectually closed. In other words, there will be questions; but at their best, the academic study of religions and interfaith activities may be viewed as non-contradictory and complementary. I therefore conclude by asserting the importance of (i) the multi-focal and multi-cultural derivation of the comparative study of religion, and (ii) clarity in the relations between study or research on the one hand and encounter or dialogue on the other hand. If these are kept in mind, our common attention to religions in their plurality can be both critically aware and constructive in effect.

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