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Religion and Methodology: Past and Present

Sir D.J. James Lecture 1988

by

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FOREWORD

I am deeply grateful to the Trustees of the Catherine and Lady Grace James Foundation for inviting me to deliver the Sir D.J. James lecture for 1988, to Mr. Richard Morgan, the Executive Secretary for his unfailing courtesy, to the staff of the John Penry Press for their expertise in the publication of the text of the lecture, and finally to our Departmental Secretary, Mrs. Marlene Ablett, for preparing the typescript with her customary skill.

In the lecture I have sought to show something of the status of the subject, to underline its academic and contemporary significance and to indicate its future potential.

Michaelmas Term 1987 — Islwyn Blythin

ERRATA

p.12 ℓ.37 read 'religion' instead of 'religon'
p.16 ℓ.33 read 'own' instead of 'won'
p.19 ℓ.37 read 'Qur'an' instead of 'Qu'ran'
p.19 ℓ.38 read 'Qur'anic' instead of 'Qu'ranic'
p.20 ℓ. 2 read 'Qur'an' instead of 'Qu'ran'
p.22 ℓ.36 read 'crises' instead of 'crisis'

RELIGION AND METHODOLOGY: PAST AND PRESENT

The general theme of the lecture will be the crucial importance of methodology in the study of religions, that is, critical reflection upon ways of approaching and organizing the subject in the light of the data, both in terms of structuring and understanding this comparatively new academic and theological discipline. I hasten to add, however, that in my view although the subject is closely related to theology it is not identical with it, that it is *about* theology or theologies, an attempt to understand theology as a phenomenon within religion rather than a theological enterprise which proclaims and expresses the spiritual and intellectual truths of a particular tradition.

The lecture will fall into three distinct but related parts. Part I will briefly deal with the rise of the subject with the publication of Friedrich Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* and the ensuing uncertainty about the proper methods and canons as anthropologists, psychologists and other specialists entered the field. Part II will discuss more fully significant research in methodology which revealed the multi-dimensional nature of the subject and the need for a variety of co-ordinated methods. Part III will examine the impact of the growing awareness of the existence and reality of world religions upon Christian theologians, including Karl Rahner, Hans Küng and John Hick, and their theological and philosphical understanding of the changing relationship between Christianity and other world faiths.

The lecture will conclude with a plea for a global perspective which attends to all aspects and dimensions of religion, so that a full-rounded and mature understanding of this profoundly influential human phenomenon may be achieved.

PART I

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century the Western world was largely ignorant of Eastern religions. There was an awareness of the power of Islam which in its early history had extended westwards as far as Spain, but little appreciation of Muslim doctrine. Indian and Chinese religions seemed geographically remote and their philosophies conceptually alien. From the Western standpoint the entire world was reassuringly and crudely divided into Protestants, Catholics and pagans! But towards the late nineteenth century various factors began to change the isolation of the West, slowly at first but later with increasing momentum. We can identify three such factors, trade and travel between East and West, the Christian missionary enterprise and the translation of the scriptures and canonical writings of other religions into European languages. In 1875 Max Müller retired from his Professorship of comparative philology at Oxford, previously he had been Professor of modern European languages, in order to devote himself entirely to the edition of *Sacred Books of the East.* There is little doubt that this series which ran to fifty volumes was decisive in opening up the treasures of Eastern metaphysical speculation, philosophical refinement and mythological profundity for the West. But Müller was more than a mere translator, he was also a methodologist and envisaged the new subject as a comparative study of the major religions based on secure scientific principles.[1] In his approach to the subject Müller was naturally influenced by his previous studies. His prime model was philology, the science of languages with its classification of linguistic structures and grouping of kindred tongues, and he conceived of the science of religion *(Religionswissenschaft)* as a similarly rigorous, objective, comparative and neutral study.

But in his understanding of religion as a mental faculty to apprehend the infinite through nature apart from the senses and reason, Müller was aware of the inner unobservable structure of religion, and he can be said to have anticipated also in a subtle and paradoxical manner the modern empathetic phenomenological approach to the study of religions which aims to allow religions to appear in their own light. The Greek verb *phainō* means 'to show' and the passive *phainomai* 'to appear'. The

aim is easily stated, but the accomplishment is far more difficult. Müller's clarion call, which he borrowed from Goethe, was 'He who knows one, knows none'. Distinguishing between two kinds of knowledge, knowledge related to skill and knowledge allied to the concept of wisdom, he argues that the distinction in German between *können* and *kennen* could be paralleled in English, if the verb still existed, by distinguishing between the old verb *to can*, from which cunning and canny are derived, and *to ken*, to know in the sense of grasping the true nature of religion[2].

The quaint quality of Müller's writing as it appears to us now from this distance, should not blind us to the fact that in grading the epistemology of religion he placed his finger on an issue of immense importance. Understanding religion like understanding art involves degrees and scales and distances, and entails a moral as well as an intellectual struggle. If I may apply to religion some words of Paul Valéry on art, it may be argued that the power of religion lies in its capacity to illuminate with startling clarity those aspects of human existence which are non-essential to our biological survival, but which create 'the need to see again, to hear again, to experience indefinitely'[3]. It is necessary to introduce here the notion of a hierarchy of forms, because we come to see and recognize the mediocre in the light of the better and that which is potentially perfect. A modern scholar, R.D. Baird[4] has analyzed the work of different interpreters of religion to illustrate various levels of understanding; the functional understanding of Malinowski, the phenomenological of Elaide, the personalist of Cantwell-Smith, and the normative of Kraemer, Küng and Radhakrishnan. Distinctions have also been made between different dimensions in the subject-matter of religion itself; religious reality, religious experience and the reality of religion,[5] that is, the outward, observable aspects of religion, the inner unobservable dimensions and the *a priori* transcendental reality whose initiative sets in motion the human response. In the immortal words of Francis Thompson from his great poem 'The Hound of Heaven',

> 'Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
> From the hid battlements of Eternity;
> Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
> Round the half-glimpsèd turrets slowly wash again;'

It may be urged that our understanding of religion is still relatively unformed notwithstanding intensive and illuminating research over the past twenty years on questions of hermeneutics, but for that reason a graded epistemology which points in the direction of excellence is important.

But Müller also distinguished between two kinds of study, a factual, scientific study on the one hand and a theological and philosophical enquiry on the other. The first is concerned with the objective description of religious data while the latter attempted to evaluate their significance. In his methodology, Müller therefore perceived two separate subjects, the Comparative Study of Religion and the Philosophy of Religion. Each discipline was thought to have its own special method and aim, and the two enterprises should in no way be mixed or confused with each other. So one might say that the modern study of religion began with the erection of a kind of 'Berlin' wall, with historians and linguists on one side, and theologians and philosophers on the other. Although Müller is regarded as the 'father' of Comparative Religion by reason of his expertise as a Sanskrit scholar and his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* looked upon as the foundation document of the new subject, it would be quite wrong to think of him as an isolated pelican in the wilderness. He had a number of contemporaries in various European countries including Switzerland, France, Belgium and notably the Netherlands, where a particularly rich phenomenological tradition has emerged during this century, who were sensing the excitement and significance of the academic study of religion as a universal human phenomenon.[6]

A general assumption in the early period of the subject's history was that the new science would demonstrate clearly the essence of religion, and with the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution extending beyond the boundaries of biology, the search for an essence of religion and the search for the origins of religion coincided. Man's religion, like his body, was thought to have evolved from inferior to more advanced forms, and there appeared a great interest in primitive religions which were held to contain the earliest religious aspirations of mankind. The anthropologist here enters the stage accompanied by the sociologist and psychologist, and the study of religion became divided into a

number of separate disciplines each with its special interests and standpoint. Darwin's legacy was manifestly evident. Frazer's untenable view that human culture has evolved through three ages, Magic, Religion and Science was matched by Freud's interpretation of the progress of human intellectual development through three phases, the animistic, religious and scientific. The positivistic trend in European thought, deriving from Comte, also predominated, and consequently religion was subject to a reductionist approach, the projection-theory of Freud or Durkheim's thesis that religion represents society's idealistic view of itself. God as an ontological reality was banished, and the human father or society took his place. The methodology was highly suspect both in its unbalanced emphasis on primitive religion, and its superimposition of prior judgements and presuppositions on the field of study. Such was the fascination of science that the notion of an unbiased scientific study of religion had deteriorated to become that of a rigid Procrustean scientific paradigm.[7] I should add, perhaps, that my criticisms of Freud refer only to his methodology as historian of religion. His work in psychoanalysis, despite extensive modification, is still of great importance, and deserves close study by both moral philosophers and theologians. Nor do I wish to deny the validity of Durkheim's insight that religion, like the physical world, precedes and succeeds the individual. Whatever shortcomings the early sociologists may have had, they did clearly understand this easily overlooked point that religion has a kind of independent objective reality and an inescapable social authority. Again, I must qualify my remarks because the quantum principle of modern physics is progressively showing that there is a sense in which the physical reality of the universe is intrinsically related to human observers, and indeed in some profoundly strange manner dependent upon the act of observation, so too the living developing reality of religion is tied to human participants. In both science and religion the notion of a rigid dichotomy between subject and object is giving way to the concept of a fluid wholeness which embraces both subjective and objective aspects as complementary parts of a single meaning.

PART II

The accumulation of fresh religious material and data in the post-war years led to increased interest in questions of methodology. Indeed a regional study-conference held at Turku, Finland in 1973 was entirely devoted to this particular theme. It became apparent that religion assumes a great variety of forms and the multi-dimensional character of the subject which called for a plurality of methods began to emerge. There has since been growing specialisation both in terms of diversifying the approaches to the study of religion and of analyzing the nature of each approach. For the sake of convenience and clarity, I shall select from the welter of publications two articles, the second of which is closely related to the first, which have a direct bearing on methodological issues and discuss some elements in their content. The first is from the pen of Ninian Smart, to whom major status as an interpreter of religion and mysticism can no longer be begrudged, and entitled 'What is Comparative Religion?'[8] The second, written in response to Professor Smart's article, is my own publication and entitled 'The problem of unfamiliarity in the study of religions'.[9]

The uncertainity about the structure of the subject was reflected in the use of different titles for the discipline, and in the implementation of diverse aims in teaching and research. Professor Smart's question 'What is Comparative Religion?' is therefore apposite. He draws distinctions between theological study, historical study and comparative study. It is the last which strictly belongs within the category of Comparative Religion, although the other pursuits, he thinks, are legitimate within different contexts. Professor Smart remarks that the theologian will wish to give an account of other religions and discuss the question of the truth-content of their doctrines. As examples he gives R.C. Zaehner's *At Sundry Times,* George Appleton's *On the Eightfold Path* and Raymond Hammer's *Japan's Religious Ferment.* Such works contain useful factual material but they tend to look at other faiths from a religiously committed point of view, that is from an explicitly Christian perspective. The weakness of this method is evident when one considers that its logic allows a member of another religon to interpret Christianity from his own

particular religious standpoint. This has indeed been done by Radhakrishnan. Professor Smart adds that the history of missions and the dialogue between religions also involve presuppositions and are essentially theological. I am doubtful whether a theology of other faiths *in this sense* is academically legitimate, because it seems to lead to a distortion of, at least, some of the facts, and as C.P. Scott of the Manchester Guardian once said, 'Fact is sacred, comment is free'. As an illustration of the vulnerability of this theological and philosophical approach, I will offer a parody.

In the volume *World Religions: Meeting Points and Major Issues* [10] to which he contributed, Professor H.D. Lewis writes, 'But Hinduism has never had much reluctance to thinking in terms of divine incarnations. Indeed the belief in the recurring *avatar,* of God coming down in human form as need arises is a very prominent feature of Hinduism. But this is none the less a very different notion of incarnation to the one we find in Christianity — and a much more restricted one. The differences may not be easy to indicate, indeed it is an exceptionally difficult task to do so properly, but this is the point above all on which true understanding of Christianity turns . . . In the Christian religion the intensified sense of distinctness and ultimacy of persons carries with it a sense of the personal character of God being intimately and firmly known in the dealings of an essentially transcendent Being with men in the substance of developing personal experience.

This means also that there is a restricted qualified character to the notion of incarnation in Hinduism. As an Indian writer (S. Kulandran, *Grace in Christianity and Hinduism,* 1964, p.264) has recently put it. "An *avatar* may enter human life, but he does not share it. He is over and above it, always God, helping, guiding, instructing, but as God". There is no real identification with finite existence. In the Christian notion of the Incarnation however God becomes "truly man" and the main formative task of early Christian theology was to establish this claim against attractive alternatives which made the faith easier in some ways to understand and accept'.

There is an important distinction to be drawn here between the comparison of the orthodox position of a religion and heretical notion *within* that religion and parastic upon it, and the

comparison of two separate religions bound to different contexts. I agree that there are important differences between the Hindu notion of *avatar* and the Christian doctrine of Incarnation and that it is not easy to expound these. But it is clear that Professor Lewis wishes to go beyond noting the differences and to demonstrate that there is something wrong with the Hindu doctrine. The adjectives 'restricted' and 'qualified' strike clear and hard on a sensitive ear, and my difficulty is knowing what 'wrong' can mean in this context. The point of my parody which I place in the mouth of an imaginary Hindu scholar is to show that Hindu and Christian doctrines have their own separate contextual significance, and that it is by studying each context with its inter-related concepts from *within* that we will truly understand such doctrines.

But Christianity has never had much reluctance to thinking in terms of divine incarnation. Indeed the belief in a once-for-all incarnation, of God coming down in a particular man at a specific point in human history is a very prominent feature of Christianity. But this is a very different notion of incarnation to the one we find in Hinduism, and a much more restricted one. As a British writer (H.D. Lewis, *World Religions*, 1966, p. 186) has put it. 'In the essential Christian claim there is no compromise over either the complete divinity or the complete humanity of Jesus'. There is in Christianity, therefore, the self-contradictory notion of a 'real' identification with phenomenal illusory existence. In the Hindu notion of *avatar* God helps and instructs, but he remains God above human life'. Hindu and Christian presuppositions about time and deity are radically different, and to divorce doctrines from their contexts to compare them directly can only lead to conceptual confusion.

Historical study, on the other hand, is a firmly established procedure in the study of religions with its emphasis on tracing lines of continuity in the historical growth of world religions. We understand historically the rise of the various Buddhist sects after the Buddha's death in terms of an attempt to resolve logical and religious difficulties in the Buddha's teaching on rebirth, and similarly the emergence of different theological schools after the time of Muhammad which wrestled with rational difficulties in the Qu'ran relating to Allah's sovereign power and justice

and man's accountability for his actions. However great the discontinuity which may emerge in the growth of a religion, and some religious systems have moved very far from their origins, a measure of continuity remains, so that even a major dislocation is in part the result of previous development. The Christian coherence, for example, has undergone a thorough refashioning in the West as a result of the challenge of the secularization of concepts. The history of religions has been one of the titles of the subjects from its earliest beginnings, and Professor Smart remarks that the organization co-ordinating studies in comparative religion calls itself the International Association for the History of Religions. There has been an unsuccesful attempt recently by members of the British section to alter this title to the Study of Religion. But he adds that since Indian religious history has mainly occurred independently of European religious history, the history of Indian religions can in principle be treated separately. Historical study is to be distinguished therefore from comparative study. What then is comparative religion? Let me quote Professor Smart, 'It feeds on the hope that one can make some sense of the similarities and differences between separate religious histories'.[11] It is a descriptive and explanatory method which sympathetically tries to account for the correspondence of axes through which some of the diverse doctrines and various beliefs are expressed and experienced *and* the organic nature of individual religions with their unique properties. Professor Smart applies his method successfully to a number of Indian religious systems with their diversity of doctrine and recurrence of patterns of religious practice and experience on the basis of a polarity between the austere *yoga* type of religion and the devotional *bhakti* type. He concludes by emphasizing the psychological and sociological roots of religion, and the links between comparative religion and the psychology and sociology of religion. In a more recent article entitled 'The scientific study of religion in its plurality',[12] Professor Smart again distinguishes between those pursuits in the study of religion which are expressive and proclamatory and here he analyses different types of theology, and those which are purely descriptive and relatively free of value-laden models like the phenomenology of religion, comparative religion, the

anthropology and sociology of religion, the psychology of religion, the history of religions and iconography, although he allows that there are overlaps and affinities, so that a rigid separation in the old Müller style is no longer possible. This article does valuably display the central and complex role of methodology in the study of religion, while emphasizing the creative, educational character of the subject and its significant contribution to the human sciences.

Yet the question needs to be explicitly formulated whether Comparative Religion truly identifies the entire subject, or whether it is itself one among a number of distinct methods which can corporately be labelled the Study of Religion(s). Frank Whaling has recently argued that to interpret comparative religion in the narrower sense, and to understand the anthropological and historical approaches as prolegomena to comparative religion whose task it is to compare and classify, facilitates methodological clarity[13], and with this standpoint I wholly agree. One can also sense a certain methodological unease in the variation as between the uses of the singular 'religion' and the plural 'religions' in one of the proposed titles for the subject. I favour the latter on the grounds that initially we are confronted by a plurality of religious systems or cumulative traditions, so that in the first instance it is the diversity of religious forms that we see. If we go on to see the unity of religion that is a secondary discovery or possibly mental construct.

In my own article I attempted to underline the significance for a genuine in-depth understanding of other religious cultures, of Professor Smart's reference to the suspension of doctrinal judgement and sympathetically and imaginatively entering religious worlds, and to show some of the difficulties inherent in this enterprise and to suggest a way of resolving such problems. I made the point that in attempting to understand religions from within their won contexts which is where their true meaning lies and in the light of their inner criteria, the generic use of terms like 'monotheism', 'theism', 'atheism', becomes problematic. Atheism in the West is extrinsic to the religious coherence of the Semitic type with its central doctrine of the Creator-God and inimical to it, but in the East atheism is instrinic to a number of different religious systems and supportive of them. I, therefore, made the

further point that in the study of religions one should adopt the stance of the novice or disciple, that is one must learn those religious concepts which are integral to the field of study, and seek to understand their inter-relationship with other related concepts which together constitute the inner integrity and coherence, and perhaps feel their impact upon oneself, and I would now add even suffer change in the process. Religious concepts are value-concepts, their reference is to an ideal limit, and the apprehension of value does involve a definite process of unselfing and loss of ontological poise. One forgets self when its avaricous, destructive tentacles are broken, and becomes poor and needy and rolls, as it were, in the direction of value which has a magnetic quality and a moving metaphysical appeal.

At the end of the article I suggested that there are three main methodological steps to be taken. The first step is that of discriminating between the structures of various religious traditions and here one is dependent upon the linguistic experts and historical specialists. The second stage is the search for suitable analogies and concepts in our Western culture which will enable us to build bridges of understanding between ourselves and the particular traditions we are studying. The third step is to use these in such a way that they propel us imaginatively and empathetically into other religious worlds. The German *Einfühlung* neatly expresses the complex process whereby the student of religion seeks to identify himself more closely with the subject matter. A sound methodology, in other words, both reflects upon the field of study and also upon itself in the light of the data being studied. It must necessarily be a flexible methodology as it constantly revises it own theory and method in the process of implementation.

It is also evident that while similarity between religions may be mistaken for identity, some of the dissimilarities go beyond the level of belief and interpretation to the plane of subjective religious experience. It has long been recognized that the metaphors, analogies and images of the Bible are mainly drawn from personal and social life and are not easily correlated with studies in depth-psychology, while the surrounding 'polytheisms' which contributed to the development of Biblical religion are in some instances illuminated by Jung's archetypes. Religions are

prone to borrow from each other, but the borrowed elements are quickly assimilated by the existing ideology and begin to assume a new meaning. On the other hand items which constitute a threat to its conceptual coherence are just as speedily rejected.

To understand, for example, the achievement of Jesus, in a real as opposed to a merely notional sense, if I may be permitted to adapt Newman's celebrated distinction, it is necessary to consider the history of Judaism before his time and to realise how the hellenistic tendencies of a section of the Jewish aristocracy and foreign oppression had evoked a distinctive response from those Jews who were faithful to the central tenets of their religion, so that a reformation from within Judaism was no longer possible. In the second century B.C. the Seleucid Antiochus IV known by the title Epiphanes seized an opportunity to raid the temple at Jerusalem and attempted to stamp out this troublesome religion. A royal decree was issued which involved the compulsory abrogation of the Torah and the persecution of those who were faithful to it. The temple he dedicated in 167 to the service of Zeus, an image was set up in the sanctuary and on the temple altar animals considered unclean according to Jewish law were sacrificed to Zeus. Circumcision was forbidden and the observance of the Jewish Sabbath became punishable with death. The resistance of the loyal Jews was first passive and then fiercely active. Of the five brothers of the Hashmon family, one of those families of the priestly class which had not succumbed to the hellenistic trends, the most outstanding was Judas, who was given the additional name Maccabee meaning 'hammer'. These brothers became the leaders of a revolt which took the form of successful guerilla warfare throughout the countryside. In December 165, three years to the day that it was profaned, the temple was restored to its proper use at a ceremony of cleansing and rededication still celebrated by Jews as a festival of lights. So the attempt to hellenise Judaism by force resulted in a violent reaction on the part of the majority of the Jews in Judea, which gradually became channelled in a new zeal for the Torah and eventually the Torah was absolutized with the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism.

The later Judaism of the Mishnah and Talmud had been born, and post-Biblical Judaism is a massive example of a new identity

discovered out of an antipathy. But this rigid fixation on the Torah which became a fortress of the Jewish mind and spirit, enabling Judaism to survive the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, ruled out any possibility of a creative reformation from within Judaism. Only a transformation was possible, the hard shell had to be broken, and this, Primitive Christianity with its universal orientation and prophetic impetus accomplished.

In a valuable study John Riches begins from this premise. His book is entitled *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*[11]. How then did Jesus accomplish this transformation? How did he succeed in saying something new which was nevertheless related to existing Jewish religious concepts and therefore intelligible to his hearers? Mr. Riches' exposition is, in effect, that he initiated a dislocation which was in part the result of previous development. He argues that it is necessary to distinguish between the core meaning of a word on the one hand, and on the other its connotations in a particular group or community according to its specific tradition. The core meaning of the concept 'kingdom' is the kingship and power of God. Generally speaking all groups within Judaism held the view that God's sovereignty must find expression in resistance, resistance to extraneous, alien influences and internal unacceptable tendencies. Jesus reinterpreted the traditional terminology to mean God's rule manifesting itself in love and forgiveness. The author applies the same principles of revaluation to the Law, notably the concept of purity, and the theism of Jesus. The importance of the work of Jesus was not so much that he had a specific programme or design, but that he transformed the conventional associations of key terms and gave a new orientation to basic assumptions about God, man and the world. The achievement of the life of Jesus was less in his attempts to create social change and more in his embodiment of the new assumptions of love and power and the transformation of Judaism in his own person.

Islam appearing later than Judaism and Christianity and belonging to the same family of traditions borrowed from both, but the figure of Jesus assumes another identity within the context of the Qu'ran. This is due as much to a complicated misunderstanding which stretches back beyond Qu'ranic interpretation to its roots in Greek and Christian philosophical speculation, as it does to

the central Muslim doctrine of the transcendence and indivisibility of Allah. The general attitude of the Qu'ran to other religions is one of tolerance, it can indeed be regarded as an ancient precursor of some of the principles which have characterized comparative religion in the past, and notably the principle of fulfilment-theology, because it regards previous revelations as preparing the way for the final message delivered through Muhammad. Jesus is one of the previous messengers and the attitude of the Qur'an to Jesus is one of respect and reverence. But the idea of his sonship is categorically denied[15].

The frequent use of 'bin' or 'ibn', meaning 'son of' in Semitic idiomatic expressions makes it, at least, plausible that the title Son of God was originally an authentic saying of Jesus about himself, although a great weight of New Testament scholarship now favours the view that this and other titles derived from the post-Easter community. The haunting and revelatory words of Hosea come to mind, 'When Israel was a child then I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son'.[16] The reference in such idiomatic expressions is to status not substance, and the concept is moral not metaphysical, but this primary meaning has undergone a metamorphosis as a result of Greek philosophical thought which influenced the Creeds and the Syrian, Semitic-speaking church. The wholly unsemitic abstruse expressions concerning 'unbegotten' and 'begotten', 'substance' and 'person' which in their Greek sense could not be adequately translated into Semitic, inevitably confused the Syriac and then the Arabic mind by suggesting associations with divine lineage and physiology, ideas foreign and indeed repugnant to the Semitic mind. We can appreciate therefore why the Qur'an, which is a thoroughly Semitic scripture, should reject with such vehemence the idea of the sonship of Jesus. It had become an item which could not be assimilated.

On a more positive note, it is important to add that there is in the Qur'an a perfect parallel to the Christian concept of sonship. This is the idea of *khilāfah,* man as Allah's vicegerent here on earth who shoulders the trust, which not even heaven and earth can realize, of freely fulfilling the divine moral will. This Arabic concept exactly conveys the connotation of moral status.[17] A.J. Arberry in his renowned translation of the Qur'an renders the

Arabic by the term 'viceroy', which possibly betrays the mystique of British imperialism![18] What can be said clearly is that by calling his work an interpretation rather than translation, Arberry showed respect for the Muslim view that the Qur'an is essentially untranslatable. This point is vigorously made in Michael Gilsenan's original and profound volume *Recognizing Islam;*[19] 'The directness of the relationship with Allah through the Word and its intensely abstract, intensly concrete force is extremely difficult to evoke, let alone analyze, for members of societies dominated by print and the notion of words standing for things.

It is yet more difficult when we realize that the shape and form of the letters making up the Qur'anic verses that adorn mosques and homes, for example, are not decorative in any Western sense but are part of this essential directness of the Revelation and are felt as intrinsically full of divine energy and grace.'

PART III

The discovery that although the subject was about theology or theologies it was not itself concerned with advocating any particular religious traditions had a liberating effect on scholars, and since the mid-sixties a great volume of literature of a technical and popular nature has appeared in the bookshops on the history of religions, the phenomenology of religion and the comparative study of religions. Concurrently the influx of growing numbers of immigrants and adherents of the world religions into Britain to live and to work added a new and urgent dimension to the academic and contemporary significance of the subject, and the need for the revision of school syllabuses, the training and re-training of teachers and a much wider understanding of religion as a world-wide human phenomenon which supports cultures and civilizations, inspires art and literature, informs social institutions and leads men and women to the heights and depths of their human resources is now being shouted from the educational roof-tops.

The new trends in our Western society and the incidence of renaissances in various world religions have evoked a response from a number of prominent Christian theologians. There are those like Rahner and Küng who have attempted to accommodate the existence and reality of other world faiths within the traditional, exclusive Christian claim of salvation through Christ, in the Protestant tradition, and in the Catholic, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Rahner's concept of the 'anonymous Christian'[20] refers to all religious believers who seek to fulfill the divine will, even though they may not have an explicit Christian faith and may profess allegiance to some other world religion. This is an attempt to retain and emphasize the universal and inclusivist significance of the Christian Gospel without abandoning the old exclusivist *extra ecclesiam* doctrine. There are obvious strains and conflicts in this interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and other world faiths. To allow that the process of salvation or liberation is really taking place within religious systems other than Christianity is an important step forward in theology, but then to describe as Christian, people who are negotiating the great crisis of life and death on the basis of other faiths, some of which ex-

plicitly deny the notion of a Creator-God, seems to be an example of the misuse of words. The argument that salvation within the other world religions is the work of the cosmic Christ, the universal divine logos, also faces the difficulty that deities in other systems, for example Vishnu in the Hindu Tradition, enjoy the status of cosmic, universal principles. Such theological arguments are like a two-edged word and can just as easily be turned against Christianity. Similar objections can be raised against Küng's distinction between the 'extraordinary' way of salvation in the Christian Church and the 'ordinary' way of salvation in world religions.[21] Küng allows that a man is saved within the particular religion which is available to him in his cultural and historical situation, but qualifies what appears at first sight to be a significant concession by describing this as the common or ordinary way of salvation which awaits fruition and fulfilment in the special or extraordinary way of salvation in the Christian Church. He, too, is theologizing within the presuppositions of the old exclusive dogma which views Christianity as the solar centre of the universe of faiths around which the other religions are revolving.

There are many objections to this line of reasoning in additon to the ones mentioned, and to these I will return later. But there is one further objection to which I will now refer. It is a logical difficulty and it seems to me to be insurmountable. Theologians who consciously or unconsciously elevate Christianity to the status of a paradigm against which the truth-claims of other world faiths can be tested are presupposing that there exists an independent Christian standard of ontological truth, that is independent of the total Christian coherence, which justifies their position that Christianity is the one true religion or final expression of the absolute truth. But on reflection this presupposition is seen to be absurd. By definition there can be no Christian standard independent of Christianity. It is *within* Christian discourse that we come to understand Christian truth. The argument is circular, begs the question and is logically invalid. But one theologian who has lived and worked in Birmingham among a multi-racial community, has broken free of the circle and produced a methodological model which applies equally to all world religions including Christianity.

Ever since his controversial book *God and the Universe of Faiths*[22]

was first published in 1973, Professor John Hick has consistently argued for a copernican revolution in our theology of religions. Just as the older ptolemaic astronomy with its view that the earth was the centre of the solar system was replaced by the copernican that it is the sun which is central, so Professor Hick's methodology calls for a new understanding of the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. They are all, he claims, revolving around a common centre, namely God, but it is significant that more recently he has substituted talk of reality-centredness for talk of God-centredness.[23] This allows his theory to become applicable to those religious systems which deny the concept of a Creator-God. Professor Hick displays the richness and relevance of his astronomical analogy by drawing a parallel between the various attempts to accommodate the adherents of other world faiths within the sphere of Christian salvation by means of the concepts and theories of implicit faith, baptism by desire, anonymous Christianity, the latent church, the ordinary and extraordinary ways of salvation, the claim that Christianity does not belong with other world faiths within the category of religion, and the epicycles, circles revolving on circles, which were added to the ptolemaic astronomy in an effort to bring the theory into line with the observed facts. These 'epicycles' of subsidiary theological theory are not entirely without value because they do graciously extend the realm of salvation beyond its former limits, and may exercise a psychological function in slowly shifting our minds from their moorings in the ptolemaic theological universe and preparing them for the copernican revolution.

Professor Hick's proposal is, therefore, that we should give up the notion of one religious way of salvation, and entertain the idea of a plurality of perceptions and conceptions of the ultimate within the several religious traditions which represent a variety of responses to the real, and that within each of them salvation or liberation, that is the transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness, is taking place. The conclusion is that there is not one but a plurality of ways of salvation or enlightenment each one shaped by the distinctive thought-forms, religious beliefs and spiritual techniques belonging to the several traditions.

In his paper 'John Hick's Copernican Theology'.[24] Philip Almond has maintained that there are in Hick's writings four

implicit arguments for the necessity of a copernican revolution in theology. He calls these, the moral, the relativity, the conceptual and the theological arguments. They are, in effect, objections at various levels to Christian exclusivism which is now usually expressed in some implicit form or other. The moral argument is that as Christians we are confronted by a hideous contradiction when we come face to face with the adherents of other world faiths because we both believe that God is the Creator and loving Father of mankind and that salvation is through faith in Christ alone. The relativity argument draws attention to the fact that commitment to a particular tradition is heavily dependent upon genetic and environmental factors. If we had been born in Sri Lanka, the probability is that we would be Buddhists, and if in Egypt, Muslims. The conceptual argument is inspired by Kant's fundamental distinction between the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* realms, that which lies beyond and that which is within the reach of human knowledge and experience, and suggests that although the real *an sich* (in itself) cannot be known, it can be phenomenally and humanly experienced in a variety of ways by means of the several religious concepts and images which belong to the different traditions. The theological argument emphasizes that the various religions are phenomenal manifestations of the noumenon, and that when they are regarded historically it will be seen that they are not essentially rivals, for the apparent differences of doctrine and practice are culturally conditioned, so that the thorny issue of competing metaphysical truth-claims becomes ultimately spurious, or at least can be indefinitely postponed until the day of eschatological verification.[25] Together these arguments constitute a heavily fortified defence of the necessity for a copernican revolution in theology.

But if I may continue the martial analogy, the anti-revolutionaries would appear to have a very formidable cannon in their armoury which might breach any defence. This is the doctrine of the Incarnation which in its classical form, expressed by the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon is closely allied to the doctrine of the Trinity, and claims that Jesus was God incarnate, the Second Person of the Godhead living an earthly life. The logical corollary of such a doctrine understood in this way

is an explicit or implicit Christian exclusivism. But Professor Hick offers alternatives to such an all-or-nothing Christology, which enable him to go some way towards reconciling the doctrine of the Incarnation with his pluralistic philosophical theology. In his book *God and the Universe of Faiths*[26] he reformulates the doctrine, enquires to what logical category the doctrine belongs and concludes that it is a mythic expression of the Christian experience of salvation and should not be thought of as rivalling the myths of other faiths. In his more recent paper 'Religious Pluralism'[27] he gives the concept of Incarnation an adjectival rather than substantival interpretation and the all-or-nothing Christology now gives way to a degree Christology which allows one to speak of an incarnation or point of contact with the transcendent in varying degrees in seers, holy men and saints. We can therefore assert that Jesus is the Christian's living contact with ultimate reality, without having to deny that there are other saving contacts in the various religious traditions.

I am doubtful about the validity of treating incarnational language as mythological or metaphorical, on the grounds that a myth in the true technical sense has credal status and abiding relevance for man's temporal existence, and is not a metaphor. There are further grounds for objection in the profound differences between the categories of theology and mythology. Theology in the Christian sense has a historical quality, is based on systematic reflection and contains a rational self-explanatory structure, whereas mythology moves in a symbolic dream-world of fantasy and fable where conventions of time and space are absent or transcended, and really does require experts to expound its meaning. It is the other alternative of a degree Christology which seems to hold out the best hope of reconciling the doctrine of the Incarnation with a pluralistic theology, although it is abundantly clear that Professor Hick's methodology has wide-ranging implications for the Christian understanding of the uniqueness and divinity of Christ and the wider religious life of humanity, and it will be some considerable time before these are fully assimilated and a wholly satisfactory Christian theology, ethic and liturgy are formulated. Creative Christian theologians are like the crew of a ship at sea who can decide to remodel any part of the ship they sail in, they can even remodel the ship in its

entirety stage by stage, but they cannot remodel the entire ship all at once.

It is also the case that Professor Hick's epistemology of religion will require some modification in the light of the mystic's claim, relating to the higher stages of his experience, that he has known, in a non-rational, non-dualistic mode, the real in itself, although such claim is itself subject to a detailed examination of the intricate relationship between spiritual training and experience on the one hand and report or interpretation on the other in the study of mysticism. In Sanskrit one who knows in this mode is *evamvit,* a true gnostic, one who has become his immortal Self and verified in his own person that the Absolute is already within him. *Atman* the human soul is *Brahman* the cosmic soul from all eternity, man is a fragment of the Absolute, all things are intrinsically the Buddha-nature. 'I am the Truth', *ana'l haqq,* uttered the ninth-tenth century Sufi mystic al-Hallaj in his ecstasy, *al haqq,* the Truth being one of the titles of Allah, which always brings to my mind the poignantly beautiful cry of Catherine Earnshaw, 'I am Heathcliff', from *Wuthering Heights* that great mystical masterpiece of English literature. For those who have tasted the rapture of liquefaction the glory of this world is at an end, and the earth turned to ashes.

But in this interim period it is appropriate to stress the strengths of Professor Hick's re-interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and the other religious traditions. It exposes in an indisputable manner the weakness of the old style of comparative religion which delighted in distinguishing between superior and inferior religions, and missed the heart of the matter which is that there are diverse ways of making religious sense of the infinitely elusive nature of reality. Whatever the outcome of future research in the study of religions, it will no longer be academically legitimate to return to that position, or any allied modified method which seeks to skilfully conceal its biased presuppositions in their implementation.

It is in essence a plea for a global perspective which attends to all aspects and dimensions of the major religions, the prophetic and the mystical, the exoteric and the esoteric, the rational and the non-rational, the personal mode of awareness of the real as well as the impersonal or suprapersonal, and allows for both unity

at the summit, an hypothesis which is arrived at inductively, and diversity on the lower ranges of the schematization of the ultimate in specific religious concepts. It is a comprehensive methodological model which is applicable to both the concept of God and the Absolute, *Saguna Brahman, Brahman* with attributes and *Nirguna Brahman, Brahman* without attributes, the *Tao* that can be named and the *Tao* that cannot be named, and is, in effect, a vindication of Wittgenstein's telling saying, 'The unutterable will be unutterably-*contained* in what has been uttered'.[28]

The stance is neither theological in the traditional sense nor merely phenomenological, and while it retains the strengths of both positions, commitment and fairplay, it avoids their respective weaknesses, prejudice and relativism. Professor Hick has discovered a middle way which centres in something other than human attitudes and concepts and experiences, something other than moral imperatives and ethical injunctions. The unity of religions is metaphysical in the strict sense, that which transcends the world, knowledge and expression but which, again in Wittgensteinian language, is *shown* in the soteriological power of the several theologies, philosophies and ontologies of the great religions.

I believe that a central problem of philosophical theology is involved in this discussion, and that it can be posed in the form of a question. What is the form of expression of the relationship between the transcendent in the metaphysical sense and the contingent? How is the ineffable admitted into human discourse? Is this question best approached ontologically, dialectically or psychologically? If I have understood the direction of his developing thought correctly, it seems to me that Professor Hick, with some qualification, belongs in the same linguistic camp as the Buddha and Ludwig Wittengstein. The transcendent is limitless and beyond speech, but is the focus of human intentionality in its diverse conceptual and linguistic forms, or it can only be expressed negatively by means of the *via negativa,* or it cannot be said but can be shown in the latent, ideogrammatic evocative and non-factual power of religious language to express things which cannot be expressed in any other way, or in the difference religious belief accomplishes in the life of the individual. What is clear is that the mystic's claim to have known and indeed to be the transcendent comprises both aspects of the problem, ontological

cognition and contingent expression, and although it is a rash thing to offer a prediction in such matters it may be suggested that the truly important research of the future will be done in the area of mystical experience and mystical language. Such research will necessarily reveal that although he may be capable of Kierkegaardian leaps between two worlds, the mystic walks the slenderest of tight-ropes, with one foot on the crumbling edge of the sayable and the other in the ineffable.

[1]Cf. *Chips from a German workshop,* I, Longmans, Green & Co., 1867, pp. xviii-xxv, xxvii-xxviii.

[2]Cf. *Introduction to the Science of Religion,* Longmans, Green & Co., 1873, pp. 4-17, 24-35.

[3]Cf. J. Mathews (ed). 'The idea of art', *Aesthetics* (The Collected Works of P. Valéry, vol. 13), Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964, pp. 73, 75, 77.

[4]*Category formation and the History of Religions,* Mouton, 1971, pp. 54-125.

[5]Cf. G. Schmid, *Principles of Integral Science of Religion,* Mouton, 1979, pp. 11f., 38.

[6]Cf. E.J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History,* Duckworth, 1975, pp. 120ff.

[7]Cf. I. Blythin, 'Magic and Methodology', *Numen,* vol. 17, Feb. 1970, pp. 45-59.

[8]*Theoria to theory,* vol. 1. Jan. 1967, pp. 138-45.

[9]*Theoria to theory,* vol. 2 Oct. 1967, pp. 58-62.

[10]H.D. Lewis and R.L. Slater, Watts & Co., 1966, pp. 184-6. I have previously used this parody in a Welsh article ('Olrhain Ffrydiau Crefydd', cyf. 123, Ion. 1968, tt. 25-6) and am grateful to the Editor of *Y Traethodydd,* Professor J.E. Caerwyn Williams, F.B.A. for permission to use it again here.

[11]*loc. cit.,* p. 139.

[12]F. Whaling (ed.) *Contemporary approaches to the study of religion,* I, Mouton, 1984, pp. 365-78.

[13]*op. cit.,* pp. 166, 174.

[14]Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980.

[15]Suras ii: 110; iv: 169; ix: 30; x: 78. Cf. sura liii: 19.

[16]xi: I.

[17]Cf. suras ii: 29; vi: 165; xxxiii: 72.

[18]*The Koran Interpreted,* The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1983.

[19]*An Anthropologist's Introduction,* Croom Helm, 1985, p.16.

[20]Cf. G.A. McCool, (ed.) *A Rahner Reader,* Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975, pp. 212f.

[21]Cf. J. Neuner (ed.) *Christian Revelation and World Religions,* Burns & Oates, 1967, pp. 52 ff.

[22]Macmillan. Cf. also, *God has Many Names,* Macmillan, 1980; *Problems of Religious Pluralism,* Macmillan, 1985; *The Experience of Religious Diversity,* co-ed. with H. Askari, Gower, 1985.

[23]'Religious Pluralism', in F. Whaling (ed.), *The World's Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies,* Essays in honour of W. Cantwell Smith, T. & T. Clarke, 1984, pp. 148f., 158ff.

[24]*Theology,* vol. 86, Jan. 1983, pp. 36ff.

[25]For a detailed discussion, see J. Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism,* chaps. 6, 8.

[26]p. ix; chaps. 11, 12.

[27]*loc. cit.,* pp. 154ff.

[28]P. Engelmann, *Letters from Wittengstein, with a Memoir,* trans. B.F. McGuiness, Blackwell, 1967, p.7.

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D.J. JAMES LECTURES

1961	Bleddyn Roberts	Sôn Am Achub
1962	E.T. Davies	Religion in the Industrial Revolution in South Wales
1963	W.T. Pennar Davies	Rhwng Chwedl a Chredo
1964	D.R. Griffiths	The New Testament and the Roman State
1965	Griffith T. Roberts	Dadleuon Methodistiaeth Cynnar
1966	Nantlais Williams	Faith Facing Facts
1967	Gwynfryn Richards	Gwir a Diogel Obaith
1968	W.D. Davies	The Gospel and the Land
1969	D. Eirwyn Morgan	Bedydd — Cred ac Arfer
1970	O.E. Evans	Saints in Christ Jesus
1971	James Humphreys	Yr Argyfwng Cred
1972	Eric M. Roberts	Jesus — Son of God Son of Man
1973	Maurice Loader	Yr Epistol at y Galatiaid
1975	G. Henton Davies	The Old Testament as a Whole
1977	Gwilym R. Tilsley	Crefydd y Beirdd
1979	S. Ifor Enoch	Jesus in the Twentieth Century
1981	David Protheroe Davies	Gwir Dduw o Wir Dduw
1984	Iorwerth Jones	Recent Revelation Theology
1986	Dafydd G. Davies	Canon y Testament Newydd — ei ffurfiad a'i genadwri

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