

THE VALUE OF THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS ¹

By L. E. BROWNE, M.A., D.D.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS,
FORMERLY PROFESSOR OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

THE Comparative Study of Religions is so well established in this University that it is not likely to be questioned as a legitimate subject of study. But, all the same, it may be worthwhile to stand aside a moment and ask ourselves why we undertake it, and what we expect to get out of it. I think perhaps I can make the problem clearer if you will allow me to tell of some incidents in my own early experience, which not only led me in this direction, but also set me on the lines that I eventually followed.

At the age of fourteen I was confirmed, and had the advantage of being prepared for that great spiritual experience by a man who knew a little theology and took it seriously. From him I learnt first about Polycarp and Irenaeus and about the First Prayer Book of King Edward VI. I remember too his showing me a geometrical diagram of the Trinity, which indicated that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were each God, and yet were not identical with one another. It was a good beginning, and perhaps specially good for me to see that diagram, the crudity and probable falsity of which did not escape me. He also gave me some devotional literature in the good catholic tradition. One sentence still stands out in my memory after this lapse of half a century: I was bidden to repeat some confession of faith (I cannot remember what, but most probably it was the so-called Nicene Creed) and then to pray, "May I die in this faith".

That struck me at the time as a most extraordinary prayer. Was I to anticipate that at some future time, perhaps in senile

¹ A lecture delivered at Manchester University on the 16th of March, 1954, in connection with the jubilee of the Faculty of Theology.

decay, I should be led by the devil to deny the faith that I now knew to be the truth? Or was it that I was so bound by loyalty to the Church of England and to this teacher who had passed on to me some of the theology which he had learnt at Oxford or Cambridge, that I was determined to stick fast to what I then believed, even if evidence should some day show that it was not quite true? I felt inclined to pray instead, "May I die in the true faith".

Some seven years passed, during which time I had been trained in Natural Science. Of the theories of scientific research, and the philosophy of science, of course, I knew nothing. But I was living in an atmosphere in which the scientific method seemed the obvious and only one to follow. The transition to theology was peculiar, and yet there was some similarity in the Cambridge tradition of exact scholarship which had been developed by Lightfoot, Westcott, and Hort. One day, with a friend who was also beginning theology, I met a priest who tackled us with the question, "Why are you a Christian?" I hesitated for a moment. My friend, always impetuous, rushing in where I feared to tread, blurted out at once, "I suppose because I am a fatalist". I never discovered what he meant, and suspect that he did not know himself. When I had recovered from the shock of what I considered a rather impertinent question, I replied, "Because Christianity is the best religion I have met so far". The priest was rather taken aback by my answer, and tried to explain to me the real grounds for belief. I think I argued a little about it. Anyhow, eventually he said, "You will understand it all some day from the catholic point of view". I was annoyed at his complacency, as if he, with an obviously narrow outlook, could dare to claim to see the wide perspective of the universal church.

Perhaps it is not surprising that these two incidents of my childhood and early manhood should stand out so clearly in my mind. Looking back they form an integral part of my life, as if it was a pre-arranged plan that I should be led through this particular succession of disciplines in preparation for my later tasks. For me the comparative study of religions has served my understanding of Christianity in two ways. Where

there is similarity between Christianity and other religions, the evidence for the truth of the doctrine concerned is strengthened. Where there is opposition, the contrast has emphasized the importance of the truth of that particular Christian doctrine. These two results I might have expected. But a further, and quite unexpected, result has followed from my study of Islam. Islam, as you know, arose after Christianity, and has proved an exceedingly doughty opponent, not only opposing Christianity but persistently misunderstanding its teaching, and asserting that it is not a monotheistic religion at all. It is all very well saying that the Muslim is the most obstinate man on earth. But the experienced teacher should know that if the children completely fail to understand him it is probably his own fault. Thus it has gradually dawned on me that our expression of Christianity is at fault : not merely that we have not found the best way of approaching Muslims, but that our doctrinal statements in themselves are at fault, even though the religious experiences which they were intended to explain are perfectly true. Now, if this is true, and if we can remedy the fault, it will mean that our study of other religions has brought back a blessing for our own Christian people, and for those in this land who are as yet untouched by Christianity. This is the subject with which I have been dealing in my Hulsean Lectures at Cambridge, and time will not allow me now to pursue this line any further ; only I wanted you to know what great possibilities there were of service rendered to the cause of Christianity by the study of other religions.

How, then, are we to conduct our study ? I have found the opinion expressed in some books that the only scientific way to undertake the comparative study of religions is to be entirely objective, and to pay no attention whatever to the truth or falsehood of the doctrines involved. I cannot see anything remotely resembling scientific method in such a procedure. In fact, it reminds me forcibly of the method of Qur'anic exegesis favoured by the great Islamic commentators. They quoted in turn the various opinions as to the meaning of the verse in question, and then abruptly ended with the formula, "but God knows". Can one seriously suppose that such sitting

on the fence, such refusal to express a judgement or at least a probability, is more scientific than the method of the Master who was wont to demolish the errors of His predecessors with the words, "But I say unto you", followed by a clear-cut decision based upon the moral issue involved?

I suppose the mere fact of being willing to study other religions shows the open-minded attitude of scientific research. Since some of you may not be scientists I would like to give you just one example of what the devotion to truth involves. Fifty years ago the wave theory of light was absolutely proved. It explained the refraction of light through glass, its diffraction from a grating, the pressure it exerts on a surface on which it falls, and perhaps most surprising of all, the presence of a minute spot of light in the centre of the shadow of a silver threepenny bit. The theory was so certain that one could almost have forgiven a physicist if he had prayed, "May I die in the faith of the wave theory of light". But then difficulties began to accumulate. The ether which carried the waves of light became strangely elusive. It had no mass nor weight, its elasticity was perfect. Eventually the ether became more and more tenuous, until it could only be described as the subject of the verb "to undulate". Other evidence began to come in, too mathematical for me to follow, which compelled physicists to admit that the truth was far more complicated than had originally been supposed, and that light had the properties both of waves and also of moving particles. That example indicates the sort of devotion to truth that we must adopt if we are to call our study scientific.

In the comparative study of religions one must begin with the openness of mind which is prepared to find truth in any quarter. But there is no compulsion to find truth everywhere, or to shut one's eyes to falsehood and error. Indeed, since the Christian religion, in which we have been brought up, teaches us to distinguish between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, we ought to be prepared to search for and hold the truth and to eschew the false, wherever we find them. To start, as many do, with the assumption that all religions are equally true, or that all religions are seeking the same end, is

as unscientific as it would be to assume that every word in the Bible was true and every word in the Gita was false.

I think the most profitable way I can deal with my subject in a single lecture is to take a few outstanding doctrines from different religions, and to consider them in relation to their origin, and the measure of truth they contain.

First let us take the doctrine of re-incarnation which first appeared in Hinduism about 600 B.C. It is practically peculiar to Hinduism, for the similar doctrine of transmigration which was taught by a few Greek philosophers a century later never became an integral part of Greek thought, and bears all the signs of being an odd piece of flotsam carried by the chances of wind and tide from India to Greece. Today the doctrine of re-incarnation is almost axiomatic in Hinduism, and is not accepted in any other religion except in Jainism and in a modified form in some varieties of Buddhism. Here is a case where, as far as we can see, the truth or falsehood must be absolute. Either after death the souls of men return to mortal life on earth, or they do not. If Hinduism is right, then Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, and a host of lesser religions, are false ; and vice versa.

It is commonly supposed that the doctrine arose from the deliberations of philosophers, and that a foretaste of it is indicated by the mention of repeated deaths in the books called the Brahmanas. That I do not believe ; first, because it is most unlikely that a philosophical idea would have seeped down to the lowest intellectual strata of society ; secondly, because it first appeared on the borders of Nepal, where Hinduism was only just establishing itself ; and thirdly, because it is found in a more extreme form in Jainism. In Jainism re-incarnation is possible, not only into plants and animals, but into creatures which neither the Hindus nor ourselves regard as animate, such as diamonds and drops of water. To me the doctrine bears every indication of an animistic origin, and of a period when the individual was of no account in comparison with the tribe or clan. Nowadays, the doctrine is accepted as an explanation of suffering, as being a punishment for sins committed in an earlier life. It is doubtful whether punishment for sins of

which one has no memory can serve any rational purpose. Moreover, the Hindu conception of sin is largely restricted to the breaking of caste law ; and it would be a natural thought that one who had broken his caste law would be condemned in another life to exclusion from his caste. Modern Hindu philosophers, if they accept re-incarnation, accept it as an axiom, and not as a result of philosophical reasoning. My own considered judgement would be that it is as false as magic, and that it is a conclusion drawn from the erroneous ideas of primitive man. Yet behind it does lie one truth that primitive man had reached, viz. the solidarity of the clan. There is a unity which we are still trying to understand, and to secure in the human race and in the kingdom of God. The attempt of the re-incarnation theory to link up the animal creation with mankind is interesting, and comparable in some way with St. Paul's hope for the redemption of all creation. Yet, much as I would like one day to see my cat and dog growing in intelligence and grace, and discussing with me some of the deep things of life, I do not feel that the time has come for any profitable speculation on the future of individual animals. The degree of their sense of individuality, and of their moral sense, is so slight, except perhaps in domestic animals, that a personal future life for them has little meaning. It may be worth mentioning that the belief in re-incarnation has not encouraged the Hindus to show kindness to animals, or to keep pets ; though they have developed a repugnance to killing animals, a change probably due to Buddhist influence.

I turn now to what is the central doctrine of philosophical Hinduism, the identity of the individual soul with the soul of the universe. That which gives the individual man his consciousness of himself and his very being, is called the *atman*. The magical incantation at sacrifices which compels the gods to give their favour ; that, indeed, which lies behind the whole façade of the gods ; that which lies behind all reality, and (in later thought) became the sole reality, is called the *brahman*. Now the central truth of the whole philosophical theory, appearing suddenly as a flash of genius or a divine revelation, is the identity of the *atman* with the *brahman*. To the ordinary

man the soul appears to be an individual entity, separated from all other souls by the barriers of individual personality. These barriers are the cause or symptom of the divisions, the quarrels, the selfishness of men. The philosophers of the Upanishads, with the blunt directness of prophets, just threw the barriers down and declared that they never existed; the *atman* is identical with the *brahman*. All that is required is to know this as a present fact.

I am amazed at the insight that was able to see in a flash the whole disunity of the world disappearing, melting into the unity of all that there is, the ineffable *brahman*. The authors of the formula, "Thou art That", which identified the wretched human self-centred "thou" with the "That" which constituted the reality of the universe of the gods, were not philosophers, but prophets. Like the prophet who declared that "God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good", they refused to face facts, and found satisfaction in a vision. The vision is a lie, not corresponding to anything that we now know. As a guide in life that false vision is a will o' the wisp, a phantasmagoria, lulling one into a sense of security that does not yet exist. Yet we can thank God for it, for it speaks of the indomitable spirit of man which forces him to leave the reality that he hates, and seek an unreality that he longs for and cannot understand.

Once more the scene changes, as we turn to one who hated almost everything in Hinduism: its sacrifices, its Gods, its asceticism, its philosophy, the pretensions of the priestly caste. They call Gautama Buddha a protestant, a reformer of Hinduism. Yet what a strange sort of protestant, who accepted nothing from Hinduism except the newly introduced theory of re-incarnation! The one fact that seems certain about early Buddhism is that Gautama had a sudden revelation about the cause and cure of suffering as he meditated in the deer park near Benares, and that what he preached in consequence of his revelation was accepted throughout North India as a gospel of salvation. Suffering seemed bound with life on earth, and it appears that Buddha, like the Hindus, was oppressed by the thought of countless lives to come. None of their methods of escape

seemed to him of any value. He was probably agnostic about the existence of the Gods, and had no use for sacrifices. He had tried asceticism, and found it useless. The philosophers' way of knowledge had no appeal for him: possibly he had never heard of it. Yet it would appear that he did share with the philosophers the belief that the fault lay with the self. If only we could cease desiring, the bondage of self would be broken. But we look in vain for any other centre towards which desire might be directed instead of towards oneself, either God or fellow men. Is it possible that unselfishness without altruism could have made so wide an appeal? It may, of course, be that he did preach love for others though tradition is silent about it. If not, one can only suppose that the gloom that had descended upon Hinduism was so deep that even a programme of inaction seemed better than feverish activity that only made matters worse.

The insufficiency of Buddhism to supply the needs of man is shown first by the fact that it completely died out in India, and secondly by the fact that in all the countries where it has spread and flourished it has taken on elements which certainly had no part in primitive Buddhism. For the most part those elements are not of a lofty religious character: in Burma there is a type of animism, in China and Japan a frank polytheism. That such additions can in any way supply the lack of Buddhism seems to show that Buddhism can have contained very little that could strictly be called religious. May we perhaps sum up the teaching of Buddha by saying that he succeeded in displacing self from the centre of the picture, without knowing God as the real centre? I suppose it would have been of some value if Copernicus had displaced the earth from the centre of the solar system, and had not put the sun there. We ought at any rate to be thankful for Buddha's corroboration of the fact that self-denial is one part of the way of salvation.

The question has often been asked what there is in Christianity that no other religion has. Something like loving your neighbour as yourself is found in the Dhammapada; something like the kingdom of heaven in Zoroastrianism; something like Christian mysticism in the experiences of Hindu mystics, Muslim Sufis,

and the followers of the Greek mystery religions ; something like a Bible in the Gita or the Dhammapada ; something like an incarnation in the *avatars* of Vishnu. Is there anything in Christianity that is more than different in degree ? The answer that comes readily to most Christian lips is, " Yes, the one unique thing in Christianity is Christ Himself ".

That answer is true, but its truth is not evident at first sight to non-Christians. Others have led fairly holy lives ; others have died as martyrs ; others have given much true teaching. It is only when the Christian interpretation of Christ is understood that the full implication of His being is realized. Christianity is unique in that it reflects back the character of Christ to God Himself. It is in Christianity alone that God is perfect in holiness, in love, and in truth. And the last word of this likeness of God to Christ is so amazing, and so overwhelming of all our preconceived ideas, that it is only in this generation that men are beginning hesitatingly to whisper it, that God is perfect in self-sacrifice and in humility.

Let us look now at the different religions to see what adumbrations of this truth are to be found. The greatest revelation of the Old Testament was the utter holiness of the God who was worshipped in the temple at Jerusalem. The recognition by Isaiah that the holiness of God was the perfection of the character of holiness which is seen in small measure in the best of men, is the high water mark of Jewish religion. But that high water mark was only reached at one high tide ; and too often in later writers we find conceptions of holiness which are related to freedom from ritual impurity ; too often we find an attitude ascribed to God which is more in keeping with earthly tyrants. God might be described as having eyes too pure to behold evil (Hab. i. 13), but His own actions in destroying evil-doers and their innocent children (e.g. Ps. cxxxvii. 9) contradict the holiness of His own character.

It was an axiom of Plato's that God was good, but to our minds a God who is above feeling fails in perfect goodness.

In the Rigveda, one God at least, Varuna, not only took account of men's doings, and withdrew His fellowship from the evil doer, but was good in Himself. But this hope, held

out by the earliest form of Hinduism, that moral goodness would be enthroned on high, was dashed to the ground when the warrior God Indra took the place of supremacy, and Varuna was bidden farewell. In the later philosophy of Hinduism, moral considerations disappear: the *brahman* was above characterization; human sin was narrowed to breach of ritual laws, and sin could be wiped away by bathing in the Ganges or by the touch of the sacred *tulsi* plant. The grand equation *atman* = *brahman* was rendered nugatory by the omission of the moral element: there was no moral condition for the union of God and man, nor was that union to be attained by human striving for goodness. Likewise for the mystics, union with God was assured by the feeling of satisfaction, and not by the attainment of divine character. There has been no moral courage in Hinduism to deny the fables of Krishna's human failings as unworthy of the highest God, even to the extent to which the Greek poets poured scorn on the immoral stories told of their Gods.

I find it hard to generalize about Buddhism, which covers so great a variety of religions. Where there are Gods, as in China and Japan, a Goddess of Mercy can hold the first place, but that does not make holiness supreme. The curious aberration of morality by which alms are given to the monks, not out of compassion for their poverty, nor of admiration for their devotion, but solely to bring a benefit to the giver, is just about on the same level as the old sacrifices in which the gifts compelled the gods to give their favours. Bottom is touched by a modern Japanese sect which teaches that the Japanese (unlike the Chinese) are moral by nature, and therefore the teaching of morality is unnecessary.

In Islam we find a situation similar in many respects to that in Hinduism. God is almighty, and His ways past finding out. No question can be put as to His actions, for what He does is good, and what He commands is good. According to the philosophers He is as abstract as the *brahman* of the Hindus, and it would be as impious to say that He was good as it would be to say that He was evil. The only adjectives that may be applied to Him are those that occur in the Qur'an. Even

their synonyms may not be used. In essence He is unknowable. As for the mystics or Sufis, they are exactly like the mystics of Hinduism. The only test of their sainthood, and of the truth of their mystic experience, is their feeling of passing away from consciousness of phenomena, and their feeling of union with God. Their lives may be moral or immoral; they may keep or break the Islamic law. There is no connection between their manner of life and their relationship with God.

So we return from our little survey of the world's religions in regard to holiness, the holiness of God, and the holiness that He requires of men. Obviously it is in the true scientific spirit to enquire into such matters, and to record our observations. But is it unscientific to go further, and say that the truth is to be found where religion and morality march hand in hand?

Let us be quite clear what we are doing if we come to this conclusion. If we accept this statement, we are storing up terribly difficult problems for ourselves: the whole problem of the evil in the world. Mark you, for those who believe that God has no particular character, even if He is almighty, there is no problem of evil. Why do some painters cover their canvas with colours and patterns that are inexplicable to most of us? It may be that they are without skill, and are unable to do better. Well, then, we have no quarrel with them; they are only like a finite God. But if they are skilled, corresponding to almighty God, what is the reason? If it is that they know it is bad, but do it because it sells well, there is no problem. Only we do not admire the artist. But if the artist is both skilled, and beyond reproach, and yet produces pictures which we cannot understand, the problem remains, and it is the problem of our understanding the picture.

That, then, is the problem for those who believe in the good God. For the fact of evil in the world can scarcely be disputed. Is our conviction of the goodness of God sufficient to stand the strain? I look out on the world, and give my estimate of the value of what I see. Something in me, whatever it may be, tells me that there are few more beautiful sights than a mother wearing herself to death to save the life of a child; than Father Damien giving his life for the lepers till he con-

tracted the dread disease ; than Jesus dying on the cross to save us from sin. If that judgement of mine is wrong, then the world makes no sense to me. But if it is right, if those precious scenes are the ones of rarest beauty, then the world must exist for such beauty—or to put it in common language, “ Such is the Creator of the world ”.

So I come back again to the question that was asked me so long ago, “ Why are you a Christian ? ” This time I answer : I have been round the world, and seen its religions in action. I have tried to enter with sympathy and understanding into their ways of thought and of life. I have seen much to admire, especially much seeking after truth ; much also that is saddening, much frustrated effort. I have seen the evils wrought by selfishness and greed, and by resting in the things of sense. I have seen the beauty of holiness, the love of truth, and self-sacrificing devotion. There is only one religion to which those beauties are indissolubly linked. The other religions, by their failures, by their seekings, and by their near misses, seem to point to that one. That religion shows the way that God indwells the human soul and imparts His character. Yes, I am still a Christian. It is the best religion that I have met so far.