

**SHOULD THE CROSS-CULTURAL PHILOSOPHY OF
RELIGION BE NORMATIVE ?**

I

Before one could turn to a discussion of what the cross-cultural philosophy of religion should be like, one needs to know what it is like as it is practised today. And in order to determine that one needs to ask : what is cross-cultural philosophy of religion ? Indeed what is philosophy of religion ? To one inclined to ask the prior question : what is religion ? I would simply say : it is used here in the conventional sense, as those clearly demarcated entities which are so listed in a text book or an encyclopedia dealing with religion. This approach to the definition of religion itself reflects the cross-cultural nature of our intellectual enterprise. For, we have really only defined *a* religion and not religion; and indeed we have not even defined a religion, only identified it. Talk of religion *per se* would lead to a discussion of what it is in the abstract which we wish to avoid; while the discussion of the definition of *a* religion (not to say of the definition of religion) will also sidetrack us at this point.

II

Just as we had to distinguish our concerns from religion as such, we now need to distinguish our concerns from those of the philosophy of religion, which has been defined as "*philosophical thinking about religion*". Here the distinction drawn earlier between religion and *a* religion again comes into play, but not

in the singular but the plural. For if there is to be a *cross* cultural philosophy of religion, then a plurality of cultures is implied. Thus, it follows that if the philosophy of religion "studies the concepts and belief systems of religion as well as the prior phenomena of religious experience and the activities of worship and contemplation on which these belief systems rest and out of which they have arisen" then the cross-cultural philosophy of religion pursues such a study on a comparative basis. The cross-cultural philosophy of religion could as well have been called the comparative philosophy of religion, to be distinguished from the philosophy of comparative religion, the word comparative religion itself being a misnomer for the comparative study of religion.

The question then, what is cross-cultural philosophy of religion may be answered as follows. There are bodies of beliefs, practises etc. identified as particular religions. The particular religions have philosophical systems associated with them. The comparative study of these philosophical systems is the domain of the cross-cultural philosophy of religion.

Two residual questions need to be answered : (1) How is this study different from the philosophy of religion ? and (2) Why is the study called a cross-cultural philosophy of religion and not a philosophy of comparative religion ? With respect to (1) it may be noted that there is some overlap between the two fields—philosophy of religion and the cross-cultural philosophy of religion inasmuch as the philosophy of religion tries either to (a) extend its scope beyond that of Western Christian culture and/or (b) base its conclusions about religious experience on data covering more than one culture. The difference between the two lies in this, that while the philosophy of religion may

philosophize about religion itself, the cross-cultural philosophy of religion keeps its sights focused on the religions and such conclusions as their comparison may yield, even when it pertains to the nature of religion.

With respect to the second question, the use of culture over religion needs to be justified. It is clear that some religions may possess a feature so specific to it that it may be of either little or no use in comparing it with other religions. What is being suggested is that some aspects of the philosophies of these various religions may be so highly specific as to render comparison difficult if not barren. Examples : the debate in Hinduism whether Śūdras can have access to revelation or whether Brahmins alone can be temple priests; the significance of the mystical letters with which some of the Surahs of the Qur'ān commence or the issue whether Pīrs are worshipped *or* venerated; the pre-millennialism and post-millennialism or pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian debate in Christianity. They could perhaps still be brought within the ken of comparison but only as peculiarities related to larger issues rather than in their own right. By contrast with these, a comparison which can be extended beyond the sphere of one religion is by convention now called 'cultural' as distinguished from the one barely amenable to comparison, because of its peculiarly 'religious' character (on account of being specific to a religion). Thus, for instance, the debate over the access of the Śūdras to Vedic lore must be viewed as a special case of the question whether some forms of knowledge must necessarily be esoteric. The fact that the question whether one is saved by faith alone or must also exert cuts across religions entitles it to be called cultural, whereas the question of the role of the Gandharva is so peculiarly Buddhist that it must be regarded, and thereby disregarded, as 'religious'.

III

Thus, the cross-cultural philosophy of religion must be comparative; but now the question arises: should it be descriptive or normative? Or, more generally, is there room in the study of religion for a normative approach or should it confine itself to description?

Hitherto the cross-cultural philosophy of religion has been descriptive. That is to say, it makes comparative statements but does not evaluate these statements for their truth-value. This state of affairs needs to be both explained and justified.

The explanation lies in the fact that the cross-cultural philosophy of religion has emerged as a branch of study *not* under the aegis of philosophy but rather of religious studies. Its practitioners assemble at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and not that of the American Philosophical Association. Now the primary method in the study of religion, known as the phenomenology of religion, is built around the assumption of bracketing one's value judgements before embarking on the study of a religious tradition. What Husserl recommended as the hallmark of a philosophical method in *general* has been applied to a particular religious tradition in the study of religion. This has had the following consequences. Firstly, while in the study of natural science the objects themselves are inanimate and do not possess beliefs of their own, and therefore a meaning has to be *imposed* on them, in the study of religion the object of study, namely, a religion, that is, its followers, themselves possess faith, beliefs and a universe of meaning which are being studied and therefore have to be *disclosed* by them. This means that the student of religion must show a special respect for the believer's point of view, a position which finds its most extreme formulation in the statement that the believer

is always right. Such scrupulous solicitude for the insider is shown not only at the stage of the collection of data but also at the stage when conclusions are drawn based on this data which are not merely factual but also interpretive. A follower of the phenomenological method in the study of religion is required not to violate the self-understanding of the believers. Such self-understanding can be violated perhaps by philosophers of religion but not by the phenomenologists of religion. Thus, inasmuch as the cross-cultural philosophy of religion is to be genetically located in the study of religion in general, it has come to share these assumptions. The truth question has been bracketed out. The phenomenology of religion sharply contrasts with the objective procedures of science and the veridical procedures of philosophy.

The justification of this state of affairs will be subjected to criticism later. But inasmuch as this justification is justifiable, two points may be said in its favour. When an approach rooted in the empirical sciences is applied to the study of religion, it runs the risk of becoming reductionistic. This being so, the phenomenological method in the study of religion may have saved the day for religious studies against 'scientism' (though I imagine I would be saying something quite different if 'scientism' had prevailed!). Secondly, a philosophical approach to the study of religion, when philosophy of religion was heavily shaped by the Judeo-Christian religious tradition in its attitudes and norms, ran the risk of becoming judgemental, in the sense of passing adverse judgement on non-Christian religions. It was easy to dismiss Hindu polytheism, Buddhist atheism etc, without arriving at a proper understanding of them. Thus, the appearance of the phenomenological method in the study of religion may have been a godsend; what is now being questioned is its dominance to the exclusion of all evaluation.

IV

It will now be argued that the philosophy of religion should be normative. I would like to distinguish here between an *evaluative* and a *normative* approach to the study of religion. An evaluative approach assesses the various religious traditions in the light of a criterion supplied, e.g. attitude to birth-control or position of woman or human rights etc., receptivity to democracy, technology, progress etc. or any other criterion supplied to the student of religion. The evaluative approach does *not* evaluate the criteria, only the various religious traditions in the light of the specified criteria. In that sense the evaluative approach is open-ended. Moreover, there is no reason *per se* why such an evaluation may not be carried out in relation to less liberal criteria such as those of militancy, regimentality etc. The evaluation is itself value-free here. Such, however, is not the case with the normative approach wherein the criteria are also evaluated and a special value attached to the criterion of truth. There are no doubt, philosophical problems associated with the issue of criteria. If we are to evaluate criteria the question arises: by what criteria are they to be evaluated and then by what criteria are the criteria of criteria to be adjudicated? Similarly, if we offer a reason for a criterion of truth "then reason, and not the criterion proposed, becomes the true criterion". Notwithstanding these dangers, it is clear that what is being proposed is a move away from the current moratorium on value-judgements and an emergence from the state of axiological retreat the study of religion is in. The assessment of the "truth" of certain philosophical claims made by various religions is a task, one can immediately sense, of a somewhat different order than evaluating each religious tradition for its receptivity or otherwise to, say, family planning.

It is now claimed that the cross-cultural philosophy of religion should be *normative* for the following reasons. (1) Philosophy *per se*, if it is to continue to claim to be a rational inquiry into the nature of reality, cannot abandon its function of distinguishing between the true and the false when it becomes cross-cultural without endangering its claim to be philosophy. (2) It could be urged in the past that sufficient and sound data were not available regarding the philosophical traditions of other cultures for them to be assessed. This is no longer true. (3) It could also be urged in the past that such an exercise could degenerate into a form of intellectual imperialism. This danger is not denied but there is sufficient contemporary awareness of it to hold it in check. (4) Phenomenology of religion advocates the bracketing of value-judgements when encountering data from religious traditions other than our own. Should this not mean that "bracketing" be *confined* to the process of collecting data so that such collection is not distorted by the philosophical position of the scholar? Why should one be debarred by this method from evaluating such data after they have been collected? (5) The believer is not always right. Not only do other believers sometimes contend that he is not right, he can sometimes be shown to be acting in a way contrary to the "great tradition" within his own religion, as well as believing in facts demonstrably false historically. Thus, undue solicitude for the believers' views should not come in the way of developing a normative approach to the cross-cultural philosophy of religion. (6) It could be argued that such an attempt is likely to be inconclusive. It could be urged against this point that the inquiry may not be final in the sense that no model or paradigm even in science is final, but it need not be inconclusive, in the sense that, given the state of the art at any moment, it cannot allow us to draw meaningful conclusions. (7) It could be urged that the philosophical component of the religious traditions is too culture-bound and

constitutes such an independent integral system as cannot be evaluated. The fact of philosophical acculturation is no doubt true, but is it such as to prevent cross-cultural comparison and subsequent evaluation? The parallel found in South Indian Vaiṣṇavism to the Augustinian/Pelagian controversy and the common axiological component in the Hindu and Confucian reactions to Buddhist Monasticism are instructive here. (8) Human beings belong to particular culture but they also share a common humanity. While it is granted that particular and universal loyalties may cause tension and even conflict, the universal dimension of each philosophical system coupled with an open claim to universality on the part of some needs to be examined and not ignored.

V

If the aforesaid arguments are accepted then the question naturally arises: how should such a normative cross-cultural philosophy of religion proceed? The norms of truth and morality immediately suggest themselves.

For openers, let us consider the application of the norm of truth in the cross-cultural philosophy of religion. Now truth cannot be divorced from the issues of what is truth, what are the criteria of truth, etc. In other words, the discussion of the norm of truth must yield ground to a discussion of the theories for truth.

Three theories for truth have often been discussed in the literature on the subject. These are (1) the correspondence theory of truth; (2) the coherence theory of truth, and (3) the pragmatic theory of truth. According to the correspondence view of truth, "truth is some kind of correspondence of belief to facts." According to the coherence view, "truth is the agree-

ment or coherence of beliefs", According to the pragmatic view, truth is "the felt relation of consistency of our theoretical and practical consciousness as experienced in the successful working of our ideas in life".

The problem with the correspondence view is that while it can show that belief corresponds to cognition, it cannot establish that cognition corresponds to reality, for we "cannot get outside ourselves; and so there can be no direct evidence of correspondence between mind and reality". It cannot prove itself. The main advantage of this view is that it provides a test of truth which is objectively verifiable.

The problem with the coherence view is that although the harmony of experience may hold up to a point of time, it by itself does not guarantee that future experience will not falsify present knowledge. Its merit lies in the fact that it emphasizes the internal consistency and harmony of experience.

The problem with the pragmatic criterion is that even false cognition may result in successful activity as in the case of the flatness of the earth. Its merit consists in emphasizing the practical dimension of truth.

VI

How then can we use truth as a norm in the cross-cultural philosophy of religion? One may do so by applying the theories of truth in the cross-cultural philosophy of religion. How could this be done?

The correspondence view could be employed in evaluating the *presuppositions* of a philosophical system. Even though the criterion cannot prove itself, it at least suggests an objective referent which may provide some check on the truth-claim. Thus

if Hindu philosophy pre-supposes reincarnation one could set out to examine the evidence for and against it. If the divine audition of the Qur'an is central to Islam, then the manner in which such experiences occur should be explored. Such issues are typically dealt with in journals on parapsychology.

The coherence view could be applied to a philosophical system to examine its degree of internal consistency and doctrinal harmony *given its presuppositions*. Thus, one may examine the extent to which the various doctrines and practises of a religion are internally consistent. How does the idea of the Qur'an being in Arabic, for instance, square with the Islamic claim that God is lord of all the worlds? How is Brahman without distinctions to be reconciled with a Hindu social system in which castes proliferate? How does one reconcile Christian charity with the theology of missions? Inasmuch as the traditions themselves recognize and rationalize these apparent inconsistencies, how good a job have they done?

The pragmatic criterion could be applied to test the practical efficacy of the techniques for spiritual development elaborated in a philosophical system. Do these techniques work? Are some more effective than others? Thus, one could *experimentally* compare Hindu, Zen, Theravada and Islamic techniques of meditation represented by focusing on say, AUM, KOAN, SATI AND SAMĀ with the help of biofeedback equipment for their effectiveness. Such issues are typically dealt with in journals of transpersonal psychology.

VII

This would, however, require a fundamental change in the orientation of the philosophy of religion. The application of the correspondence theory seemed to extend the cross-cultural philosophy of religion in the direction of parapsychology, the

coherence theory into that of logic, and the pragmatic criterion into transpersonal psychology. Out of these only logic belongs to the orthodox heart of the philosophy of religion. The cross-cultural philosophy of religion stands at this cross road: will it study religion cross-culturally only to the extent that it can be done from within the *existing* domain of the philosophy of religion or is it prepared to extend that domain? In other words: will it let existing study of philosophy define its issues or will the issues determine what it studies? Will it confine itself to the existing wardrobe or will it add to it? I now leave you to reflect on the sartorial metaphor.

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