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THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS
Understanding Human Experience

by
Joseph M. Kitagawa

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I

THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS IN AMERICA

I

On the sixtieth birthday of Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach dedicated to him an essay "On Teaching History of Religions."¹ In this essay, Wach noted that there was no one way or method which could be handed down from one generation of scholars and teachers to the next, because the approach will have to be adapted to the specific needs of each generation and different conditions prevailing in different countries. Considering the fact that increasing numbers of educational institutions in America are offering courses in the history of religions and related subjects, it may be worthwhile for us to reflect on the nature and the scope of the discipline, and discuss some of the relevant problems relating to the research and teaching in the field of the history of religions or *Religionswissenschaft* in America.

It is significant to note that the discipline of the history of religions, in the sense the term is used in the present article, did not develop in America until a relatively recent date. This may be due, in part at least, to the religious background of America. During the Colonial period, America witnessed the introduction of various types of European church groups. In the course of time American cultural experience, coupled with the influence of pietism, revivalism, and rationalism, resulted in the principle of religious liberty, which enabled Americans of diverse confessional backgrounds to live together in relative peace. In this situation the religious problems which were relevant to Americans centered around the relations among different ecclesiastical groups—between Protestantism and Catholicism, and between Christianity and Judaism. Tales were told of other religions in far-off lands, but religions other than Judeo-Christian traditions presented no real alternative and thus did not concern the citizens of the new republic. To be sure, there was one Bostonian, Hannah Adams (d. 1832), who wrote on such topics as "A Brief Account of Paganism, Mohometanism, Judaism, and Deism," and "A View of the Religions of the Different Nations of the World," but she was a rare exception.

¹Joachim Wach, "On Teaching History of Religions," *Pro-regno pro sanctuario*, ed. Willem J. Kooinan (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, 1950), pp. 525-32.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, interest in religions of the world became rather widespread in America. Philosophers, theologians, philologists, historians, and ethnologists began to be fascinated by the so-called comparative approach. In the year 1867, James Freeman Clarke was called to the chair of natural religion and Christian doctrine in the Harvard Divinity School. His *Ten Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* dealt with the historical origin and development of individual religions as well as the historical survey of certain key ideas and doctrines, such as doctrines of God, man, and salvation. Another pioneer in this field was a Unitarian minister, Samuel Johnson, whose book *Oriental Religions and Their Relations to Universal Religion* was indicative of the cultural climate of his day. In 1873 Boston University invited William Fairfield Warren, author of *The Quest of the Perfect Religion*, to become its first professor of comparative theology and of the history and philosophy of religion. Crawford Howell Toy's *Judaism and Christianity* and Frank Field Ellinwood's *Oriental Religions and Christianity* were also read in the same period. Parenthetically, Ellinwood, who was professor of comparative religion at New York University, was instrumental in organizing the American Society of Comparative Religion in 1890. Other books which appeared in the latter part of the nineteenth century include James Clement Moffat's *A Comparative History of Religions* (1871), Samuel Henry Kellogg's *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World* (1885), David James Burrell's *The Religions of the World* (1888), Edward Washburn Hopkins' *Religions of India* (1895) and *The Great Epics of India* (1901), William Dwight Whitney's *Max Müller and the Science of Language* (1892), George Stephen Goodspeed's *A History of the Babylonians and Assyrians* (1902), and William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).²

In the year 1881, Princeton Theological Seminary established a chair in the relations of philosophy and science to the Christian religion, and in 1891 Cornell University appointed a professor of the history and philosophy of religion and Christian ethics, and Harvard University called George Foot Moore to the chair of the history of religions. In 1892 the University of Chicago established the Department of Comparative Religion and called George Stephen Goodspeed to teach comparative religion and ancient history. In the same year Brown University inaugurated a chair in natural theology. Also in 1892 a committee representing Columbia, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Pennsylvania, Yale, and other leading institutions established "The American Lectures on the History of Religions" for the purpose of encouraging scholarly presentation on various aspects of the religions of the world. It is also to be noted that in 1895 the University of Chicago established the Haskell (annual) and Barrows (triennial) lectureships, and in 1897 the Amer-

ican Oriental Society formed a section for the historical study of religions. In 1899 Union Theological Seminary, New York, joined other institutions in establishing a chair in the philosophy and history of religions.

By far the most dramatic event to stimulate American interest in the religions of the world was the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893 in connection with the Columbian Exposition. Its motto was:

To unite all Religion against all irreligion; to make the Golden Rule the basis of this union; to present to the world . . . the substantial unity of many religions in the good deeds of the Religious Life; to provide for a World's Parliament of Religions, in which their common aims and common grounds of unity may be set forth, and the marvelous Religious progress of the Nineteenth century be reviewed. . . .³

The parliament had a far-reaching effect on the American scene. Something of the nature of the parliament is indicated by the fact that the general committee, under the chairmanship of John Henry Barrows (Presbyterian), included William E. McLaren (Episcopal), David Swing (Independent), Jenkin Lloyd Jones (Unitarian), P. A. Feehan (Catholic), F. A. Noble (Congregational), William M. Lawrence (Baptist), F. M. Bristol (Methodist), E. G. Hirsch (Jew), A. J. Canfield (Universalist), M. C. Ranssen (Swedish Lutheran), J. Berger (German Methodist), J. W. Plummer (Quaker), J. Z. Torgersen (Norwegian Lutheran), L. P. Mercier (New Jerusalem, Swedenborgian), and C. E. Cheney (Reformed Episcopal). In addition to the representatives of the Christian and Jewish bodies, representatives of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religious faiths were invited to come and "present their views of the great subjects of religious faith and life." Each group was asked to make the best and most comprehensive statement of the faith it holds and the service it claims to have rendered to mankind. "All controversy is prohibited. No attack will be made on any person or organization. Each participating body will affirm its own faith and achievements, but will not pass judgment on any other religious body or system of faith or worship."⁴ Significantly, at the last union meeting of the parliament, E. G. Hirsch spoke on "Universal Elements in Religion," William R. Alger on "The Only Possible Method for the Religious Unification of the Human Race," J. G. Schurman on "Characteristics of the Ultimate Religion," George Dana Boardman on "Christ the Unifier of Mankind," and Merwin-Marie Snell on "The Future of Religion."

Among the participants were many notable scholars, including historians of religions, but they attended the parliament as representatives of their

²Louis Henry Jordan, *Comparative Religion, Its Genesis and Growth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905), pp. 197 ff.

³The World's Religious Congress, *General Programme* (preliminary ed.; 893), p. 19.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 20.

faiths or denominations and not of the discipline of the history of religions. Nevertheless, in the minds of many Americans, comparative religion and the cause of the World's Parliament of Religions became inseparably related. What interested many ardent supporters of the parliament was the religious and philosophical inquiry into the possibility of the unity of all religions, and not the scholarly, religio-scientific study of religions. Nevertheless, the history of religions and comparative religion, however they might be interpreted, became favorite subjects in various educational institutions in America. Even the established churches took keen interest in these subjects. For example, the conference of the Foreign Mission Boards of the Christian Churches of the United States and Canada in 1904 recommended that theological schools of all denominations provide for missionary candidates courses of instruction in comparative religion and the history of religions.⁵

Undoubtedly, the widespread acceptance of the study of comparative religion or the history of religions in American universities and seminaries from the turn of the century was greatly aided by religious liberalism. Professor George F. Thomas suggests two reasons for the popularity of these subjects. First, the history of religions was considered a science and was thus regarded neutral in the conflict between Christianity and other religions. Second, religious liberalism stressed the continuity of Christianity with other religions and preferred the philosophical to the theological approach to the subject of religion. Many liberals were convinced that the philosophy of religion could pronounce conclusions about religious questions without Christian presuppositions.⁶ In short, Christian liberalism was "an expression of the Christian faith in the one human community under the reign of God."⁷ Many liberals were naively optimistic about social progress as well as the "stuff of human brotherhood" crossing religious lines.

This tendency, favorable to the history of religions and comparative religion, has been reversed since the middle of the 1930's, partly under the influence of the theological renaissance and partly because of the change which has taken place in cultural and educational domains. Philosophers, theologians, and social scientists who formerly were fascinated by the comparative approach to the study of world religions have begun to question the validity of such an approach. Not a few of them go even so far as to deny the integrity of *Religionswissenschaft* or the history of religions as an academic discipline. At the risk of oversimplification, let us cite four major criticisms of the history of religions.

First, some philosophers of religion hold that historians of religions are

⁵Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

⁶George F. Thomas, "The History of Religion in the Universities," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. XVII (1949).

⁷Daniel Day Williams, *What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1952), p. 53.

essentially philosophers of religion, or they ought to be if they are not already. To them, the religio-scientific inquiry of the history of religions is an important tool to develop an adequate philosophy of religion, which transcends the regional and subjective elements involved in all religious systems. Or, to put it differently, they may say that all religions are manifestations of, or a search for, one underlying primordial "religion" and the task of the history of religions is, in co-operation with the philosophy of religion, to study the relation between religion and religions and to enlighten a confused humanity so that it will eventually move toward the absolute truth.

Second, there are those who hold that the so-called objective approach of the history of religions is not objective enough, because of the very nature of the subject matter. Thus they urge historians of religions to concentrate more on the historical, phenomenological, and institutional aspects of religions, depending heavily on the co-operation and assistance of anthropologists, sociologists, philologists, and universal as well as regional historians.

There is a third group who hold that the history of religions does not take seriously enough the subjective elements involved in the study of various religions. They sometimes compare historians of religions, uncharitably to be sure, to "flies crawling on the surface of a goldfish bowl, making accurate and complete observations on the fish inside . . . and indeed contributing much to our knowledge of the subject; but never asking themselves, and never finding out, how it feels to be a goldfish."⁸ What is important, according to this line of thinking, is to let the adherents of each religion speak for themselves about the nature of their own religious experiences, their views of the world and of life, and their own forms of beliefs and worship.

Finally, there are still others who rule out the possibility of religious scientific approach to the study of religions on the grounds that each investigator is incurably conditioned by his own religious and cultural background. On this basis they advocate the necessity of what might be termed a theological history of religions, be it Islamic, Christian, or Hindu, as the only legitimate discipline. Closely related to this perspective is that of *missionology* or *Missionswissenschaft*, which utilizes the data and findings of *Religionswissenschaft* for apologetic purposes from the standpoint of Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu faith.

All these criticisms have been raised by men and women in all walks of life. However, what concerns us particularly is the fact that the basic uncertainty of the discipline of the history of religions has created confusion regarding the place of the history of religions in the academic curriculum in this country. Generally speaking, there are three kinds of educational institutions which are concerned with the teaching of the history of religions. In the

⁸Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Comparative Study of Religion," *Inaugural Lectures* (Montreal: McGill University, 1950), p. 42.

undergraduate colleges and universities the question of the history of religions is discussed in connection with the problem of the teaching of religion. In the graduate institutions questions are raised as to the legitimacy of the history of religions as an academic discipline, and also the relations of the research method to other disciplines. In the theological schools and seminaries, the questions of the history of religions are involved in the relations of Christianity to other religions.

II

There are different kinds of undergraduate colleges in America, some private, some church-sponsored or church-related, and others are municipal or state institutions. Many of the state colleges and universities do not offer instruction in religion, while some of them provide courses dealing with the Bible, general surveys of religions of the world, and philosophical and ethical concepts of the Judeo-Christian traditions. The distinction between the private and church-related colleges is not always clear. A number of private colleges and universities were originally founded by church groups at the time when American religious life was strongly influenced by emotional revivalism. As a result, it was said in the last century that educated people had to choose between being intellectual and being pious, but found it difficult to be both simultaneously. In this historical context, one can appreciate the struggle of the educational institutions for the right of freedom of inquiry. Happily, today in most of the private colleges and universities teaching and research are free from ecclesiastical interference. At any rate, in some of the colleges there still remains an antireligious tradition, which began as a reaction against the earlier religious background of their institutions. It must also be remembered that until recently it was fashionable for intellectuals, both in the private and state institutions, to explain away religion.

Since World War II this situation has changed somewhat. The present religious scene in America is even described as an "Indian Summer of Religious Revival." In this situation, many educators, students, and parents ask: "What is the place of religion in the college curriculum?" Some people, while recognizing religion as a legitimate subject matter, maintain that religion is basically "caught" but not "taught," thus arguing against inclusion of courses in religion in the curriculum. Others, who admit the importance of religion in the curriculum, nevertheless have an instinctive fear that such a step might become the opening wedge of a wholesale invasion of religious groups into the academic institution. In this setting many questions are inevitably asked, such as whether or not the history of religions teaches religion, whether religions of the world can be or should be taught without value judgment, and finally whether the history of religions is to provide intellectual understanding about religions or contribute to the religious growth of students.

These questions are especially relevant to a program of general education. In many colleges, the first two years are devoted to general education and are followed by two years of a specialized program; in some others, both types of educational program are given side by side; in still others, the general education program is built in a pyramid fashion—for instance, three general education courses are taken in the first year, two in the second, and one each in the third and fourth years. In the specialized program, it is taken for granted that there are a number of courses dealing with the subject matter of religion in one way or another, such as courses in sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, literature, and the fine arts. But the place of the study of religion as such in the general education program is a subject of heated discussion and controversy. The famous report of the Harvard Committee, published in 1945 under the title, *General Education in a Free Society*,⁹ did not propose courses on religion as such. Instead, certain aspects of religion were included in the humanities and the social sciences. For example, in recommending a course on the study of the "heritage of philosophy in our civilization," the report said:

Western culture may be compared to a lake fed by the stream of Hellenism, Christianity, science, and these contributions might offer an extremely valuable way of considering the conceptions of a life of reason, the principle of an ordered and intelligible world, the ideas of faith, of a personal God, of the absolute value of the human individual, the method of observation and experiment, and the conception of empirical laws, as well as the doctrines of equality and of the brotherhood of man.¹⁰

The Harvard Committee also proposed a course within the social sciences on "Western Thought and Institutions," which was designed to examine the institutional and theoretical aspects of the Western heritage. In the words of the Committee:

The attempt is not to survey all history and all political and social thought but to open up some of the great traditions, to indicate the character of some attempted solutions of the past, to study a few of those topics and of the great statements of analysis or of ideals with some intensity.¹¹

Columbia University's introductory courses on "Contemporary Civilization" are similar to the Harvard Committee's proposed course on "Western

⁹Harvard Committee, *General Education in a Free Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 216.

Thought and Institutions." Along this line, most colleges and universities in America offer courses in which the place of religion in Western history and culture is treated. It is a sound educational principle to discuss the writings of, say, Thomas Aquinas or Luther in the economic, social, and political context of their times, for in a real sense they were "great expressions of ideas which emanated from certain historical backgrounds."¹²

It is significant that today there is a definite trend toward offering courses in religion within the context of general education. A recent catalogue of Harvard University shows that all students are required to elect three elementary courses in general education, one to be chosen from each of three areas (humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences). The elementary courses in humanities include such titles as "Ideas of Good and Evil in Western Literature," and "Ideas of Man and the World in Western Thought." The second group of courses in humanities include such courses as "Classics of the Christian Tradition," "Classics of the Far East," "Introduction to the New Testament," "New Testament Thought and the Mind of Today," "Religion and Culture," and "Roots of Western Culture." The social sciences also offer an interesting variety of subjects, such as "Natural Man and Ideal Man in Western Thought" and "Freedom and Authority in the Modern World" in the elementary courses, and "History of Far Eastern Civilization," "Introduction to the Civilization of India," and "Introduction to the Civilization of the Middle East" in the secondary group.¹³

This is not an isolated development at Harvard. Many colleges and universities offer at least one course in religion. "Typically," says Professor Harry M. Buck, Jr., "it is a three-hour course in 'comparative religions' in which Christianity, Judaism and all the religions of Asia are surveyed in a single semester by lectures, textbook assignments and collateral readings." Buck points out that "developments in the methodology [of the history of religions] have quite outstripped the practices in most undergraduate institutions," and "the demands placed upon instruction in this area in our own day compel a radical reappraisal of aims and methods."¹⁴

Who teaches such courses, and how are they administered? Here, again, wide variety may be observed. Where there are scholarly talents in specific religions and cultural areas, their participation is solicited to form a team. More often than not, however, what is nominally known as teamwork in teaching a number of religions in a single course degenerates into a "cafeteria" system. On the other hand, a single teacher cannot be expected to keep up with all the important researches in reference to many religions and cultures. To make the matter more complex, in some institutions courses on

world religions are offered in the department of philosophy, in others in the departments of history or religion. In some cases, teachers with personal interests, say a historian, linguist, anthropologist, philosopher, biblical scholar, or a returned missionary, persuade the college administrators to let them develop courses on world religions under the titles of the history of religions or comparative religion. Although accurate statistics are not yet available, it has been estimated by some that two to three hundred teachers, full-time or part-time, are engaged in teaching the history of religions in America, and nearly a hundred more may be added if we include Canada. All these teachers are wrestling with the question how best to teach the history of religions in the undergraduate setting.

We agree with Wach that there is not one way or one method of teaching, because the approach will have to be adapted to specific needs and different conditions. However, Wach's seven suggestions seem to be sound as general principles. He states that instruction in the history of religions must be (1) integral, (2) competent, (3) related to an existential concern, (4) selective, (5) balanced, (6) imaginative, and (7) adapted to various levels of instruction. ¹⁵ Buck also makes helpful suggestions, emphasizing the importance of (1) selectivity, (2) thoroughness in context, (3) comprehensiveness, and (4) a balanced perspective. ¹⁶ Far more urgent, however, is the clarification of the nature, scope, and method of the discipline of the history of religions itself. This is the problem which is debated heatedly in the context of the graduate program as much as in the undergraduate setting.

In a real sense, the chaotic picture of the undergraduate teaching of the history of religions can be traced to the lack of adequate graduate training centers for *Religionswissenschaft* in North America. Thus, when teachers of world religions are needed at many undergraduate colleges, they usually appoint either philosophers of religion, historians, biblical scholars, or theologians who happen to have personal interests and perhaps have taken two or three courses in the history of religions or comparative religion. If and when a person is trained solely in the general history of religion, he will have difficulty in fitting into the undergraduate teaching program. In retrospect, one is struck by the fact that the vogue of comparative religion, which started in the latter part of the last century and lasted until the 1920's, did not penetrate graduate institutions to the point of establishing strong centers of research and training in the field. Even where the so-called graduate departments of comparative religion were instituted, they usually centered around one or two scholars, who offered courses with the assistance of scholars in related fields.

In today's academic world, especially in the graduate institutions, scholarship implies specialized knowledge and competence. Unfortunately, from

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Official Register of Harvard University*, LII, No. 20 (August, 1955), 19.

¹⁴ Harry M. Buck, Jr., "Teaching the History of Religions," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, XXV (October, 1957), 279.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 528-30.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 280-85.

the standpoint of academic specialization the current teaching and research in the field of the history of religions appear to be ambiguous. The history of religions inherited the encyclopedic interest of the age of the Enlightenment. Its pioneers were interested and trained in several disciplines, such as philology, history, folklore, philosophy, and psychology. These "auxiliary" disciplines were regarded as necessary tools of research, to be called into service contemporaneously and employed by the same investigator. Today few, if any, can claim competence in all phases of the encyclopedic *Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*. By necessity a historian of religions must concentrate on one or two of the auxiliary disciplines and also on special fields, such as primitive religion, antiquity, Middle Ages, modern period, or any one of the major religious systems. It is inevitable that those historians of religions majoring in specific areas are constantly rivaled by scholars outside the field of religion who are interested in the same areas. It has come to be taken for granted, for instance, that Islamicists, Indologists, Sinologists, and Japanologists are "specialists" of Islam, Hinduism, Chinese religions, and Shinto, respectively, and that anthropologists are "specialists" on primitive religion. Hence the "Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association" include such works as *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Memoir No. 75), *Studies in Islamic Cultural History* (Memoir No. 76), *Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition* (Memoir No. 81), and *Village India* (Memoir No. 83). The scholars of these rival disciplines, equipped with adequate research personnel, facilities, and financial backing, are in a better position to pursue research in their endeavors than the historians of religions, and they often question the competence of the history of religions as an academic discipline.

It has also been observed that some disciplines are developing comprehensive outlooks, from their own perspectives, which often touch upon the problems that have been in the past dealt with in the systematic dimension of *Religionswissenschaft*. There is no denying that philosophers such as Hocking, Radhakrishnan, and Northrop, missiologists like Kraemer, and historians like Toynebee have much to say on the subject of religions. It is but natural that many people ask whether or not historians of religions have a special contribution to make which these scholars cannot make.

Thus it is that in both the undergraduate colleges and the graduate institutions questions have been raised concerning the nature of the discipline of the history of religions. Similar questions are also viewed with the perspective of theological schools and seminaries. One of the main features of American theological institutions is that the overwhelming majority of them are denominationally oriented and autonomous institutions, loosely related or unrelated to graduate universities. Although theological study itself is supposed to be graduate work, for the most part it tends to emphasize professional preparation, concentrating on ministerial training. The majority of seminaries, with the exception of interdenominational graduate theologi-

cal schools, have little access to universities, and thus are more sensitive to the movements within the churches than to the trends in the academic world.

Most seminaries in America consider either comparative religion or the history of religions a tool for the Christian world mission. In this connection, it must be remembered that American denominations developed as missionary churches. While European churches generally depended on semi-autonomous missionary societies for the missionary work abroad, most American churches accepted the missionary obligation as a task of the total church body. Starting with the formation of the Baptist missionary society in 1814, most major denominations established their own denominational missionary societies in the nineteenth century, and American churches played increasingly important roles in the domain of the Christian world mission. Some of the American missionaries were well trained in comparative religion, and they made significant contributions to scholarship. It is also to be noted, as stated earlier, that comparative religion was a favorite subject of American seminaries from the latter part of the nineteenth century to the 1920's.

Today, however, under the impact of a theological renaissance, American theological schools and seminaries are preoccupied with theology. Professor Nels Ferré analyzes the recent theological trends in America into two major kinds, those that stress objectivity and those that emphasize the subjective response. Under the former, he lists Fundamentalism, the High Church wing, and "Barthian" biblicism; under the latter, he discusses liberalism and existentialism.¹⁷ Here we cannot go into the analyses of each of these trends or the adequacy of Ferré's interpretation of the recent trends in American theology, except to say that theologians of different persuasions, with the possible exception of the so-called liberals, while recognizing the usefulness of the history of religions, nevertheless agree with Professor Hendrik Kraemer in stating that only theology "is able to produce that attitude of freedom of the spirit and of impartial understanding, combined with a criticism and evaluation transcending all imprisonment in preconceived ideas and principles as ultimate standards of reference."¹⁸ Such assertions imply that only those who view religions "from within" are competent to understand them. They do not exclude the validity of the history of religions; they insist, however, that the history of religions must for its own sake be aided by a theology.

Confronted by such serious questions and criticisms in the undergraduate colleges, graduate institutions, and theological seminaries, the history of

¹⁷Nels F. S. Ferré, "Where Do We Go from Here in Theology?" *Religion in Life* (Winter, 1955/56).

¹⁸Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 53.

religions is compelled to re-examine, from its own standpoint, its relation to other disciplines and in so doing to clarify the nature and scope of its own discipline.

III

The term the "history of religions" means different things to different people. To some it is a sort of Cooke's tour in world religions, in the sense that various aspects of religions are depicted and studied, using the comparative method. To others it is essentially a philosophical study of "religion" as it underlies all historical phenomena of various religions. To still others it is a historical discipline, analogous to church history, dealing with not only one religion but a number of religions. Is the history of religions a discipline auxiliary to philosophy of religion or to a social science? Or is it an autonomous discipline? And, if so, does it belong to the theological curriculum or the humanities?

This apparent ambiguity of the nature of the discipline of the history of religions is reflected in the diversity of names by which it has come to be known, such as comparative religion, phenomenology of religion, science of religions, and history of religions. All these terms, with minor differences, refer to a general body of knowledge known originally as *Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*. In the English-speaking world the imposing title of "general science of religions" has not been used widely, partly because it is too long and awkward, and partly because the English word "science" tends to be misleading. Thus, the world-wide organization of scholars in this field has recently adopted an official English title, "The International Association for the Study of the History of Religions." It is readily apparent that the term "history of religions" has come to be regarded as a synonym for the "general science of religions," and as such the nature of the discipline must be discussed in the total context of *Religionswissenschaft*.

It must be made abundantly clear that the history of religions is not proposed as the only valid method of studying religions. Actually, it is only one among many different approaches, such as philosophy of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and theology. Unlike philosophy of religion and theology, however, the history of religions does not "endorse" any particular system offered by the diverse religions of the world, nor does it advocate, as many ultra-liberals think it ought, any new universal synthetic religion. On the other hand, there are those who study other religions much as the commander of an invading army investigates enemy territory, and with much the same motivations. Such an approach is, of course, not acceptable to the history of religions, for this discipline does not prove the superiority of any particular religion over others.

There are three essential qualities underlying the discipline of the history of religions. First is a sympathetic understanding of religions other

than one's own. Second is an attitude of self-criticism, or even skepticism, about one's own religious background. And third is the "scientific" temper. Historically, the encounter of different peoples and religions has often resulted in serious conflicts and the subjugation of one group by another, but in some cases it has also fostered sympathetic understanding and mutual respect among individuals of different backgrounds. Sometimes, knowledge of other religions, or a crisis in one's life, leads one to question one's own religious faith.

For example, in sixth century B. C. Greece, the traditional faith in local gods began to be questioned for a number of reasons. Similar things happened in other parts of the world. In ancient times, however, questions about gods and religions were more often than not approached and solved "religiously" rather than "intellectually." Thus, the Hebrew god triumphantly challenged the skeptical man in the Book of Job:

And the Lord said to Job:

"Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?"

He who argues with God, let him answer it."¹⁹

Then Job answered the Lord:

"I know that thou canst do all things,

and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted,

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,

things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."²⁰

During the Middle Ages three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—existed side by side in the Mediterranean area. The relationship among them was amazingly amiable in certain areas, and Christians, Jews, and Muslims had ample opportunities to "compare" their religions with others and ask serious questions. Indeed, some of them did ask fundamental questions, but their questions and answers were dealt with theologically and philosophically, not "scientifically" in the sense of *Religionswissenschaft*. This "scientific" temper in the study of religions developed only at the dawn of the modern period, namely, during the Enlightenment.

Few words are necessary to emphasize the importance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the intellectual climate of Europe changed with the discovery of the non-European world. Knowledge of the sacred texts, rituals, and customs of non-European religions gradually became accessible to European intellectuals. Confronted by the diversity of religions

¹⁹ 40:1-2.

²⁰ 42:1-3.

phenomena, thinkers like Lord Herbert, Berkeley, Locke, Hume, and others tried to reconcile the rival claims of religions by digging deeper into the nature of religion itself. The thinkers of the Enlightenment attempted to find the meaning of religion in terms of "reason," rather than depending solely on the authority of "revelation." Locke was hopeful that revelation would confirm the natural knowledge of God given by reason. Hume sought the meaning of religion in its origin, as evidenced in his book, *The Natural History of Religion*. Leibniz differentiated between "contingent truths" and "necessary truths" in religions.

The expression *Religionswissenschaft* was first used in 1867 by Max Müller. Like the Enlightenment thinkers, he was concerned with *religio naturalis*, or the original natural religion of reason, and assumed that "truth" was to be found in the most universal essence of religion and not in its particular manifestations. The process of differentiation of the original truth into diverse religions was seen in much the same way as the Old Testament described the origin of different languages in the legend of the Tower of Babel. Significantly, Max Müller's key to the scientific investigation of religions was philology. He and his disciples were hopeful that by studying the development of languages they could arrive at the essence of religion "scientifically." He used the term *Religionswissenschaft* in order to indicate that the new discipline was freed from the philosophy of religion and from theology, even though in actuality his "science of religion," embracing both comparative theology and theoretical theology, was not too different from philosophy of religion. A Dutch historian of religion, C. P. Tiele, also regarded the science of religions as the philosophic part of the investigation of religious phenomena. While Tiele held that philosophic doctrines of belief and dogmatic systems should not be dealt with in the science of religions, nevertheless this discipline remained a philosophy of religion in Tiele's view. Another Dutch scholar, Chantepie de la Saussaye, did not find a qualitative difference between the science of religions and the philosophy and history of religions, here using the term "history of religions" in its narrower sense.

In retrospect it becomes evident that the scientific study of religions was a product of the Enlightenment. In the study of religion the Enlightenment period accepted the deistic notion of reason and rejected the authority of revelation. The Enlightenment thinkers also accepted the concept of *religio naturalis* or a universal religiosity underlying all historic religions which was to be perceived by reason without the aid of revelation.

The rationalism of the Enlightenment was followed by romanticism, in which the doctrine of *religio naturalis* was again foremost. Van der Leeuw provides us with a careful analysis of the impact of the three romantic periods on the scientific study of religions. First, the period of philosophic romanticism "endeavored to comprehend the significance of the history of religion by regarding specific religious manifestations as symbols of a primordial revelation." Second, the period of romantic philology, while reacting against

the unfettered speculation of romanticism, remained romantic "in its desire to comprehend religion as the expression of a universal mode of human thinking." Third, the period of romantic positivism, preoccupied with the principle of development, still accepted religion to be "the voice of humanity." Thus, Chantepie de la Saussaye, for example, "sought to comprehend the objective appearances of religion in the light of subjective processes."²¹

The early historians of religions, notwithstanding their conscious "emanicipation" from philosophy, had definite philosophical assumptions, be they rationalistic or romantic, and they dealt with religio-scientific data "philosophically." According to Joachim Wach, Max Scheler was probably the first scholar who made the distinction between philosophy and *Religionswissenschaft*. Following Max Scheler, Wach held that the religio-scientific task must be carried out not "philosophically" or "scientifically" but "religio-scientifically," with its own methodology. While Wach acknowledged the necessary contributions of philosophy to the scientific study of religions, he rightly insisted that the point of departure of *Religionswissenschaft* was the historically given religions.

Obviously the history of religions or *Religionswissenschaft* does not monopolize the study of religions. Normative studies, such as theology and philosophy, and descriptive disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and others, are concerned with various aspects of religions and religious phenomena. At the same time it must be made clear that the history of religions is not merely a collective title for a number of related studies, such as the history of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and primitive religion, or the comparative studies of doctrines, practices, and ecclesiastical institutions of various religions. In short, the history of religions is neither a normative discipline nor solely a descriptive discipline, even though it is related to both.

Our thesis is that the discipline of *Religionswissenschaft* lies between the normative disciplines on the one hand and the descriptive disciplines on the other. Following Wach, we may divide *Religionswissenschaft* into historical and systematic subdivisions. Under the heading of "historical" come the general history of religion and the histories of specific religions. Under the heading of "systematic" come phenomenological, comparative, sociological, and psychological studies of religions. All these subdivisions are regarded as integral parts of *Religionswissenschaft* or the history of religions, in the way we use this term.

While *Religionswissenschaft* is an autonomous discipline in the sense that it is not a composite of various disciplines concerned with the study of religions, it does not claim to be a self-sufficient discipline. That is to say, *Religionswissenschaft* depends heavily on other disciplines, including both

²¹Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1938), pp. 691-94.

normative and descriptive studies of religions. For example, the descriptive aspect of the history of religions must depend on the disciplines which deal with the historical delineation of each religion. Moreover, the analytical aspects of the history of religions must depend on psychology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, philology, and hermeneutics in its study of various features of religions, such as scriptures, doctrines, cults, and social groupings. This does not mean, however, that *Religionswissenschaft* regards itself as the queen of all disciplines dealing with the study of religions. It simply means that from the standpoint of *Religionswissenschaft* other disciplines can be regarded as its auxiliary disciplines. On the other hand, from the standpoint of a normative or descriptive discipline, *Religionswissenschaft* may be regarded as one of its auxiliary disciplines.

Careful attention must be given to the relation between *Religionswissenschaft* and other disciplines. This is an important question in today's academic world, especially in America. The question of the sociology of religion may be cited as an example of the relation between *Religionswissenschaft* and another discipline. According to Professor E. A. Shils: "It is scarcely to be expected that American sociologists would make contributions to the sociological study of religion along the lines of Max Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. American sociologists are usually too poorly educated historically and their religious 'musicality' is too slight to interest themselves in such problems." Nevertheless, Shils cites such works as Kincheloe's *The American City and Its Church*, Niebuhr's *Social Sources of American Denominationalism*, Mecklin's *Story of American Descent*, and Pope's *Millhands and Preachers* as examples of American "sociology of religion."²² The crucial question arises as to whether the sociology of religion must be viewed as a subdivision of *Religionswissenschaft* or of sociology.

It is our contention that there are two kinds of sociology of religion, one derived from sociology and the other from *Religionswissenschaft*, despite Wäch's hope: "We would like to believe that, though there is a Catholic and Marxian philosophy of society, there can be only *one* sociology of religion which we may approach from different angles and realize to a different degree but which would use but one set of criteria."²³ Wäch himself defined the task of the sociology of religion as "the investigation of the relation between religion(s) and society in their mutual ways of conditioning each other and also of the configuration of any religiously determined social processes."²⁴ Throughout his life, Wäch tried to bridge the gap between the

study of religion and the social sciences from the perspective of *Religionswissenschaft*. In his conclusion to *Sociology of Religion* he states: "The fact that this study is limited to a descriptive sociological examination of the religious groups need not be interpreted as an implicit admission that the theological, philosophical, and metaphysical problems and questions growing out of such a study of society have to remain unanswerable. They can and most certainly should be answered."²⁵ But the sociology of religion as a subdivision of sociology is interested in religion within the framework of the objectives of sociology, that is, "to gain a knowledge of man and society insofar as it may be achieved through investigation of the elements, processes, antecedents and consequences of group living." The sociologist, in his study of the sociology of religion, despite Wäch's admonition not to view religion as a function of natural and social groupings and as one form of cultural expression, has to start from the fundamental assumption that "the conduct of the person—his ways of thinking and ways of acting—and the nature of the social order—its structure, function and values—are to be understood as a product of group life."²⁶ Thus, although both kinds of sociology of religion deal with the same data and may even utilize similar methods, one sociology of religion inevitably views the data "sociologically," whereas the other views the same data "religio-scientifically." Similar observations can be made regarding the relation of *Religionswissenschaft* to other disciplines.

What does it mean to view the data "religio-scientifically"? This is not a simple question. Basically, the point of departure of *Religionswissenschaft* is the historically given religions. In contrast to normative disciplines, *Religionswissenschaft* does not have a speculative purpose, nor can it start from an a priori deductive method. While *Religionswissenschaft* has to be faithful to descriptive principles, its inquiry must nevertheless be directed to the meaning of religious phenomena. Professor Mircea Eliade rightly insists that the meaning of a religious phenomenon can be understood only if it is studied as something religious. "To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred."²⁷ To be sure, Eliade is aware that there are no purely religious phenomena, because no phenomenon can be exclusively religious. But we agree with him that this does not mean that religion can be explained in terms of other functions, such as social, linguistic, or economic ones. In saying this, however, historians of religions confront many serious methodological problems.

²²E. A. Shils, "The Present Situation in American Sociology," *Pilot Papers*, II, No. 2 (June, 1947), 23-24.

²³Wäch, "Sociology of Religion," *Twentieth Century Sociology*, ed. G. Gurwitsch and W. E. Moore (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945).

²⁴Wäch, "Religionssoziologie," *Handwörterbuch der Soziologie*, ed. A. Vierkandt, No. 1 (1931), pp. 479-94.

²⁵Wäch, *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), p. 374.

²⁶Philip M. Hauser, "Sociology," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1957 ed.).

²⁷Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956), p. xi.

IV

One of the fundamental problems confronting the history of religions is that traditional Western scholarship in the field of *Religionswissenschaft* has been too "European" and "Western" in basic orientation and framework. There are two implications of this problem. First, *Religionswissenschaft*, if it is to remain and grow as a religio-scientific inquiry of religions, has to reexamine its methods and categories of interpretation in the light of the criticisms of non-Western scholars in the field. Second, American historians of religions must articulate their unique tradition of scholarship so as to make significant contributions to the world-wide co-operative inquiry in the religio-scientific study of religions.

It is apparent that from the time of the Enlightenment *Religionswissenschaft* has been operating with Western categories in the study of all religions of the world, in spite of its avowed principles of neutrality and objectivity. We know, however, that world religions are developmental movements grounded in historic communities. Thus, the ultimate assumptions of each religion have been colored by decisions of human communities in particular historical and cultural situations. Yet the ultimate assumptions of each religion must be subjected to critical analysis if there is to be any *Wissenschaft* at all. The difficulty is that the assumptions and methodology of *Religionswissenschaft* are also products of Western historical culture. There is no denying that in practice the history of religions has acted too often as though there were such an objective frame of reference. Even those concerned with Eastern religions have asked, unconsciously if not consciously, "Western" questions and have expected Easterners to structure their religions in a way which was meaningful to Westerners. Admittedly, the Eastern emphasis on an immediate apprehension of the totality or essence of Ultimate Reality has been also conditioned by the Eastern historical communities. But the fact remains that the Western historians of religions, with their preoccupation with "conceptualization," have tended to interpret non-Western religious phenomena by attempting to fit them into their logical non-regional abstract systems of *Religionswissenschaft*.

The difference of outlook between Eastern and Western historians of religions seems to be magnified as time goes on in regard to the methodology, aim, and scope of the discipline. Historically, it was the Western scholars who made Eastern religions the subject matter of academic disciplines. They too were credited with training many Eastern scholars in Western universities. These European-trained Eastern historians of religions, upon returning to their native countries, faced precarious situations.

In the nineteenth century people in the East, under the strong impact of the West and modernity, reacted against the West in several ways. There was a small minority of those who, in their enthusiasm for everything the West

stood for, became "denationalized" for all practical purposes. On the other hand, there was another minority who, looking back to their own religions and cultural traditions with a newly acquired Western-type national consciousness, became extremely conservative and rejected the West *in toto*. In this situation, those European-trained Eastern historians of religions became suspect in the eyes of conservative elements in the East because of their emphasis on "Western scientific methodology" in the study of traditional religions. At the same time, these newly trained scholars "discovered" afresh the meaning of the Eastern religions; consequently, they were not welcomed by the progressive people who rejected everything traditional. In fact, it took some time for the history of religions to become an accepted discipline in the East. In the course of time, Eastern historians of religions began to reconcile their Western scientific methodology and Eastern world view.

The Eastern attitude, borrowing Dr. Radhakrishnan's oft-repeated expression, may be characterized by the statement, "religion is not a creed or code but an insight into reality." Religion is understood as the life of the inner spirit, available anywhere and everywhere in the universe. Easterners are inclined to feel that religious truth is the sum total of all the religions of the world. This Eastern attitude and understanding of religions enables us to appreciate why the first- and second-generation disciples of Max Müller in Asia were such enthusiastic advocates of the World's Parliament of Religions and similar endeavors, and why some of them, such as Radhakrishnan and Anesaki, found their way into the International Committee of Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations, and later into UNESCO.

On the other hand, Western historians of religions implicitly feel that religion is not the sum-total of all religions, but rather that "religion" underlies all religions. A religion is thus understood as the particular expression of a universal mode of human reaction to Ultimate Reality. Even today, in the Western tradition of *Religionswissenschaft*, there is an undertone of a search for "universals in religion" or "pure religion" underlying all the empirical manifestations in various religions of the world. Characteristically, many Western historians of religions often suspect the Eastern cosmological outlook as "mystical or intuitive," and not worthy of systematic investigation. On the other hand, the Eastern scholars are becoming critical of the Western scholarship in the field. For example, Dr. D. T. Suzuki observes: "Formerly Buddhists were glad to welcome a scientific approach to their religion. But nowadays a reaction seems to have taken place among them. Instead of relying on scientific arguments for the rationalization of the Buddhist experience they are at present trying to resort to its own dialectics."²⁸ It might be

²⁸ Quoted in *Modern Trends in World Religions*, ed. A. Eustace Haydon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 38.

added that such a development in the East has something in common with the Western development of a "theological history of religions."²⁹

In the American setting, it is our fond hope that there will develop several centers of learning in the field of the history of religions. The European centers of learning, nearly all of which were affected by two world wars, continue to devote great interest to this discipline. But the practical difficulties under which they have to work place an increasing responsibility upon American scholarship and initiative. It is encouraging to note that since World War II facilities for the study of Eastern languages, histories, and cultures have been greatly expanded in the United States, but provisions for the study of Eastern religions are still far from adequate. The crucial problem is how to develop coordination and co-operation among (a) theoreticians of the systematic aspects of the general history of religions, (b) historians of religions who deal with regional cultures and specific religions, (c) historians of religions who are competent in auxiliary disciplines, as well as scholars in the related subjects. From this point of view the introductory address on "The Actual Situation of the History of Religions" by Van der Leeuw at the Seventh Congress for the History of Religions, held in 1950 at Amsterdam, is significant. In it he stressed two main tasks of the history of religions for the future: (1) the need of a friendly relationship between the history of religions and theology and (2) the importance of contacts with other branches of learning, such as philosophy, archeology, anthropology, psychology, and sociology.³⁰ His statement is particularly pertinent to the American situation. Furthermore, American scholars in the field are in a strategic position to mediate between European and Asiatic schools of thought.

In a comprehensive discipline such as *Religionswissenschaft*, communication among the scholars in the various subdivisions of the field does not develop automatically. For example, the historians of religions who are engaged in the religio-scientific inquiry into Buddhism or Hinduism tend to be preoccupied with their subject matters and do not always relate their findings to the generalists in the field. They would rather work with Buddhologists or Indologists who have little interest in *Religionswissenschaft* as such. In reality, these specialists or those historians of religions engaged in the study of regional cultures or specific religions need informed criticisms both from, say, Buddhologists or Indologists, and from generalists in the field.

It is our observation that in the past both generalists and specialists have tended to be sharply split between inquiries into the theoretical or doctrinal

aspects and the historical, phenomenological, institutional, or cultic aspects. It goes without saying that both aspects are important, but what is more important is the study of interplay between theoretical, practical, and sociological aspects of religions. In order to understand the history of a specific religion integrally and religio-scientifically, one cannot ignore the problem of its origin, which, incidentally, fascinated the historians of religions of the nineteenth century. However, one must remember the admonition of Tor Andrae that the origin of religion is not a historical question; ultimately it is a metaphysical one. Thus, the popular theories of *Urmonotheismus* or the high-god, interesting though they may be, cannot be used as the basis of the religio-scientific study of religions with utmost certainty. What is probably most meaningful and fruitful is an approach toward a historic religion as a "wholeness." This task, however, is not an easy one. As a working hypothesis, we agree with Professor Gibb that Islam, or any other religion for that matter, "is an autonomous expression of religious thought and experience, which must be viewed in and through itself and its own principles and standards."³¹ In order to follow this principle, one must study the historical development of a religion, in itself and in interaction with the culture and society. One must try to understand the emotional make-up of the religious community and its reaction or relation to the outside world. Finally, there must be added a religio-sociological analysis, in our sense of the term, the aim of which is to analyze the social background, to describe the structure, and to ascertain the sociologically relevant implications of religious movements and institutions. One must be sensitive throughout to the internal consistency of the various aspects of the religious community. This is indeed a difficult task.

The term "internal consistency" is used advisedly in order to get away from popularly accepted genetic, causal theories, such as that Buddha rebelled against Brahmanism, therefore Buddhism rejects the caste system. Unfortunately, the field of the history of religions is plagued by many such dangerous oversimplifications. The pioneers in the field were largely responsible for this. Many of them had definite ideas about the so-called essence of each religion, such as its concepts of deity, of the nature and destiny of man and of the world, which have been handed down to us through manuals and handbooks that are abundant in the European tradition of *Religionswissenschaft*. These shorter treatises are useful and instructive, especially on the introductory level, but they must be used with great care. It is dangerous to explain, for instance, all the cultic and sociological features of Islam solely in terms of the religious experience of Muhammad. There is a gap between ideals and actual practices in all religions. At the same time,

²⁹ Cf. Joseph M. Kitagawa, "Theology and the Science of Religion," *Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 1 (January, 1957).

³⁰ *Proceedings of the Seventh Congress for the History of Religions* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1951), p. 20.

³¹ Sir Hamilton A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism, an Historical Survey* ("Home University Library" ed. [London, 1953]), p. vii.

what is happening in remote villages in Turkey or Indonesia cannot be understood without some reference to the life and teaching of Muhammad. Such is the problem of internal consistency.

Let us take another example. What does it mean when we say that the Vedas are central in Hinduism? If we accept the religious authority of the Vedic literature in the orthodox schools, we must also be aware of the fact that the Vedas have been interpreted, modified, believed, and abused by men throughout the ages. Or we may study the sacrificial system of Hinduism, but that again is not all of Hinduism. How, then, can we possibly understand the internal consistency despite these seeming contradictions which characterize historic and contemporary Hinduism? And yet, all aspects of Hinduism—theoretic, cultic, and sociological—are held together, and they are closely related to arts, literature, customs, politics, economics, and other aspects of Hindu history and culture. The task of the historian of religions is to try to feel and understand the “adhesiveness” of various aspects of historic religions.

But can we understand the adhesiveness and internal consistencies of religions and cultures other than our own? Here is the crux of the problem for the historian of religions. It is small comfort to know that other scholars, such as those who deal with intellectual history, confront similar difficulties.³² The historians of religions, in order to understand other religions of various cultural areas and historic epochs, must think of themselves as observers and investigators. Their own assumptions inevitably prevent them from entering into the inner world of other peoples, to say nothing of the difficulties involved in the linguistic and cultural gap. Often, written records must be checked by oral traditions and “acted myths.” Language is dynamic; it is always changing. It influences the culture, but men’s thinking and experience also influence language. It is impossible to abstract such words as *moksha* and *nirvana* from the historical contexts of ancient and modern India, China, Burma, and Japan and expect those words to have the same connotations.

The religious commitment, or lack of commitment, of a historian of religions must also be taken into account. Regardless of his formal affiliation with any ecclesiastical institution or adherence to a faith, he is never free from commitments on various issues, partly because of his upbringing and partly because of his fundamental decisions about life. In the words of Professor Benjamin Schwartz: “While these commitments are bound to color his understanding to some extent, he can make an effort to distinguish in his own mind between his commitments and his attempts to understand the conscious response of others. On the other hand, the illusion of complete non-involvement, with all the self-deceptions it nourishes, is more detrimen-

tal to objectivity than a lively sense of involvement controlled by the desire to understand.”³³

One’s religious faith is both an advantage and a disadvantage in the religio-scientific inquiry. It is true that “the only and the best way to learn how to pray is to pray.” We may recall Professor Hooking’s account of Jesuits in Kurseong, who are “poised, unhurried, with firm judgment and far vision,” dedicated to the study of the religions of India. More often than not, however, those who study other religions with firm conviction about their own faith are what Hooking calls “partly prepared men.” He says: “It is as though the graduate level of adept preparation were out of tune with our sense of haste and scantiness of means. . . . The real lack . . . is a lack of perception; a certain triviality . . . a supposition that we already know enough, and that more thinking is a luxury that can be dispensed with.”³⁴ Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that the historian of religions is engaged in the religio-scientific inquiry for the sake of “understanding,” and not for the service of the propagation of any particular faith. While we recognize the important role of a “theological history of religions,” this is a theological discipline, and we must maintain a wholesome tension between the history of religions and a theological history of religions.³⁵

Nevertheless, the religio-scientific inquiry of a historic religion cannot stop there. Any religion is man’s experience of, response and commitment to, Ultimate Reality in a specific historic situation. No religion, however regional and ethnocentric, can be interpreted without reference to universal human themes, such as birth, death, love, marriage, frustration, meaningfulness, and beatific vision. Just as in intellectual history, the religio-scientific inquiry has to proceed in the manner of oscillation between the universal religious themes and particular religious systems, communities, and histories, because all religions, both lofty and superstitious, are integral parts of the universal history of religions. Even for the sake of understanding one specific religion, we must relate it to the larger framework. As Fairbank suggests, “each step in such an oscillation leads into problems,” such as the problems of a text or a historic figure. “Inevitably we are faced with the broad question of the cultural circumstances, the social institutions and events. . . . In this stage of our process there is no logical stopping place short of the total historical comprehension of human history on earth; we must use our understanding of the whole historical process, such as it may be.”³⁶ Here we enter the most difficult stage of the *Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*. “It is less difficult to amass factual data, on the one hand,

³³ Benjamin Schwartz, “The Intellectual History of China,” in Fairbank, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁴ William Ernest Hooking, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1940), pp. 206–7.

³⁵ Kitagawa, “The Nature and Program of the History of Religions Field,” *Divinity School News*, November, 1957.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 4–5.

³² John K. Fairbank (ed.), “Introduction: Problems of Method and of Content,” *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

and to understand generalized concepts, on the other, than to fit them all together in an integrated, articulate account.³⁷ Ultimately, such a synthetic systematization must depend on many years of research and the genius of individual scholars, whereas individual scholars must be engaged constantly in the co-operative inquiry with like-minded scholars, who can provide them with informed criticisms, insights, and suggestions.

We discussed earlier some aspects of the problems of teaching the history of religions in colleges, universities, and seminaries in America. Questions have been raised again and again as to the real significance of the history of religions. The answer is to be found, in part at least, in the aim of education itself. We agree with John Henry Newman, who held that the object of a university is intellectual and not moral, and we might paraphrase him by saying that the significance of the teaching of the history of religions must be intellectual and not "religious" in the traditional sense of the term.

This essay was written with the conviction that the curriculums of all institutions of higher learning should include courses in the religio-scientific study of a variety of religions, including some of the major religions of the East as well as the Judeo-Christian religious traditions of the West. While many institutions are consciously attempting to present alternative interpretations of significant religious and philosophical questions in the Western tradition, a surprising number of leading schools in America have as yet done nothing to acquaint their students with the questions which have been raised in the non-Western religions and cultural traditions. We are not advocating that all students must become experts in *Religionswissenschaft*. But certainly in this bewildered world of our time, students ought to be exposed to some of the deepest issues of life, as they have been experienced and understood by the noblest men and women through the ages, in the East as well as in the West.

The history of religions, if it is taught competently in the undergraduate colleges, universities, and seminaries, can widen the intellectual and spiritual horizons of students by bringing to them these deeper dimensions of life and culture in the dreams and faith by which men live.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 5.

2

PRIMITIVE, CLASSICAL, AND MODERN RELIGIONS: A PERSPECTIVE ON UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

Is it shame so few should have clim'd from the dens in the
level below,
Men, with a heart and a soul, no slaves of a fourfooted will?
But if twenty million of summers are stored in the sunlight
still,

We are far from the noon of man, there is time for the races
to grow.

Red of the Dawn!
Is it turning a fainter red? so be it, but when shall we lay
The ghost of the brute that is walking and haunting us yet,
and be free?

TENNYSON

PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING

Religion is a complex phenomenon, embodying within it diverse elements and different dimensions of relationship between man and the mysterious universe and among members of the human community. No one has as yet proposed a satisfactory definition of the term "religion" that is acceptable to everybody concerned, and obviously we cannot solve this matter in this article. However, the following assumptions pertaining to religion are generally accepted by students of the discipline of History of Religions (*Religionswissenschaft*).¹

First, religion presupposes "religious experience," however this term may be interpreted, on the part of *homo religiosus*. Call it the experience of

¹We are aware of the fact that not all the scholars of religions share our assumptions. For example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith is persuaded that the study of religion is the study of persons. He says: "The externals of religion—symbols, institutions, doctrines, practices—can be examined separately; and this is largely what in fact was happening until quite recently, perhaps particularly in European scholarship. But these things are not in themselves religion, which lies rather in the area of what these mean to those that are involved." (See his article, "Comparative Religion: Wither—and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959], p. 35.) The same author elaborates this perspective in his *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963).