THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF RELIGION

PART I

INTRODUCTION, HISTORICAL AND PRELIMINARY REMARKS

CHAPTER I

THE COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF RELIGION, ITS NATURE, AIM, AND METHODS

There can hardly be a more fascinating object of investigation than the history of religion. Perhaps also there cannot be a more difficult one. For, as we nowadays realize more and more clearly, this history is most intimately connected with the beginnings of human culture, and with the further development of that culture in general.

The science which has this subject for its province came into existence as such towards the end of the last century but one. The entire nineteenth century, during which our science first began to expand, was really not favourable to it in the various currents of thought both of its former and of its latter half. But it might be supposed that our own century is in a position to steer the bark into a quiet middle channel, after it has so often wandered to right or left from its course, and so, without waste of time and energy, to bring it to its desired haven.

1. DEFINITION OF 'HISTORY OF RELIGION'

The very definition which we must now set forth will show how much more lucid we can now be both in positive determinations and in negative distinctions. We are to deal with an introduction to the comparative history of religion. Two things must be defined: our subject, religion, and the form in which we handle this subject, comparative history.
(a) Religion may be defined both subjectively and objectively. Subjectively, it is the knowledge and consciousness of dependence upon one or more transcendental, personal Powers, to which man stands in a reciprocal relation. Objectively, it is the sum of the outward actions in which it is expressed and made manifest, as prayer, sacrifice, sacraments, liturgy, ascetic practices, ethical prescriptions, and so on.¹

And now the words 'personal Powers' call for explanation. It is of course possible to feel oneself dependent upon impersonal powers, but it is not possible to enter into reciprocal relations with them, since they cannot answer from their side. Consequently, it makes no difference whether it is a material force, as for example the vast and mighty universe, or some inexorable law thereof. Both are dumb and unresponsive to the human personality. Hence also primitive Buddhism, inasmuch as it recognizes no personal gods, cannot be considered as a religion, but only as a philosophy. Later Buddhism indeed, and Buddhism everywhere that it has become a popular religion, has included in its wide-reaching system innumerable personal deities, brought in by a thousand back doors.

(b) It is not merely a religion, or the religion of particular peoples, with which we are concerned; we are to make a comparison of all religions, one with another. It is a pity that we cannot express this by a single word, as for instance the German word 'Volkerkunde' differentiates itself from 'Völkskunde' a description of any single people. Even in German it would hardly be possible to bring into use any such term as religionenkunde, 'science of religions', or religionengeschichte, 'history of religions', in distinction to religionskunde, religionsgeschichte, which are used to mean respectively the science and the history of religion in general, but might also signify the knowledge or history of a particular religion.²

The object of this comparison is, firstly, to understand the peculiarities of each individual religion by the very fact of contrasting it with others, and secondly, to attain to a synoptic grouping of religions and religious phenomena, in other words to a typology of religion. But we will not rest content with a mere static typology, which claims no more than to review the facts as they were and are, this is rather the business of the psychology of religion. We endeavour to grasp all that is characteristic of each religion, and thus also we can comprehend the influences which have affected it and the results which it has produced. We comprehend religions in their capacity as cause and effect of other things; but also we include the other cultural factors which have played this same part of cause and effect to religions. We plunge into the flowing stream of events; our subject is the comparative history of religion, and thus, and only thus, do we grasp the full reality of religion.

(c) We speak of the comparative history of religion. This is the final differentia of our science. It aims at setting forth the issue and the course of religious facts; it therefore does not rest content with a typological juxtaposition of them. Nor is it satisfied with a merely outward sequence, but tries to investigate the causal nexus of action and reaction between the facts. That is to say, it tries to attain to an inward understanding of the outward course of events, to pragmatic history.

². [I have translated the above paragraph freely, as the terminological difficulties in English are quite different. Our phrases 'history of religion', 'science of religion' are unambiguous; but we lack the convenient substantives religionskunde, religionsgeschichte, and the corresponding adjectives. Hence the difficulty of rendering, e.g. vergleichende Religionsgeschichte, literally 'comparative religion-history' or religionsgeschichtliche Lehre, 'religious-historical teaching'.]
Our science is thus clearly differentiated from the other members of the group dealing with religion, and as clearly marked as belonging to this group. The other sciences which are to be classed with it are the psychology and the philosophy of religion. That we are now able to differentiate the history of religion clearly from these sister sciences is one of the most important advances that our subject has made, and therefore we must speak of it somewhat more fully.

2. RELATION OF OUR SUBJECT TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

The psychology of religion is concerned with those religious happenings which take place and forces which exist within the human soul. Now these inner experiences are of the very essence of religion; outward forms and observances are of themselves lifeless and not real religion at all. Hence the Historian of religion, while he describes the outward course of events, must also to a certain extent include the inward life. This he can do in part by means of a quite natural knowledge of the soul, not formally scientific; but in part also he will gratefully use the results of scientific psychological study. The psychology of religion thus will be one of the principal ancillary sciences to the historian of the subject, and he will neglect it as his peril.

An American writer on religious psychology, James H. Leuba,\(^3\) defines the objects of the two sciences very justly as follows:

'As to the psychologist, he may regard his task as completed when he has pointed out the several possible origins of the god-ideas, the characteristics of each, and the nature of the general causes which determine the dominance of particular gods.' A little earlier he writes: 'It is for the anthropologist and the historian (I should prefer to say “the anthropologist who has been trained in the history of culture”) to discover what in any particular case has actually happened ... and to determine the origin or origins of any particular god.'

It is then the duty of the psychologist to define simply the general psychological possibilities, not the actual series of historical events.\(^4\)

G. Wobbermin\(^5\) seems also to agree with him, although he holds that we are in danger of 'falling into the vicious circle of "no psychology of religion without history" (Wundt), but on the other hand "no history of religion without psychology"'. This circle, he goes on to say, cannot be wholly got rid of, and 'a method, rightly so styled, of the psychology of religion' is to be obtained only by definitely elevating it to a methodological principle. The viciousness of this alleged circle surely can be got rid of simply by engaging in historical and psychological work, each at its own proper time; first historical investigation aided by psychology, and then psychology aided by history.\(^6\)

The misuse which the Evolutionist school of the science of religion made, in the last generation, of psychology,—its own popular psychology,—consists in this. They imagined

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3. A Psychological Study of Religion, its Origin, Function and Future (New York, 1912), p. 99. The italics are mine. [Throughout this book Father Schmidt gives nearly all the passages quoted in German. With one or two small exceptions, the original, if English, has been copied by the translator; if in any other language, such as French, a new translation from the original has been made.]


5. In his article, Die Frage nach den Anfängen der Religion in religions-psychologischer Beleuchtung (Zeitschrift für angewandte Theologie, IX, 1915, p. 346 sq.).

that certain psychological states follow on one another of necessity; and that consequently, if one of them were known, the historical sequence of the rest could be determined therefrom, without any historical investigation. To this misuse they added a second. They explained this necessary sequence, the progressive evolution of these psychological states, by a certain judgement of values which they regularly made. According to this, the lower, the more bestial and ugly, must also be the older; the better in each case was the higher, and therefore the later, stage of development.

3. RELATION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

As the modern comparative history avoids unnecessary dabbling in psychology and is to be distinguished from the psychology of religion, so also it carefully abstains from passing judgement on the value and truth of the particular religions. It is thus sharply differentiated from the philosophy of religion. The latter may judge, from the standpoint of its own philosophy, which can hardly be separated from some general view of the universe, what truth and what value for the conduct of life the various religions and their elements possess. The history of religion, as such, abstains from any such judgements, and is careful that any which may unconsciously be made shall not influence the comprehension and exposition of the facts.

The question whether in this connexion a wholly uninfluenced exposition is possible is answered in the negative at the present day by intelligent men of all opinions. They have learned to recognize that absolute freedom from preconceived ideas is beyond any man's power. Here and there only the amusing simplicity of some reactionary imagines that an unprejudiced view of the science of religion is the privilege of the unbeliever. To all such, a French student of religion, Father H. Pinard de la Boullaye, makes the following sound remarks:

7. If we speak of an instinctive and spontaneous tendency (sc., to judge in accordance with one's own religious convictions), that seems an undeniable fact; but we often forget to complete this platitude.

7. The fundamental cause of such an inclination is, that when religion is in question the soul hazards all it has. It risks, we may say, everything on the truth of the conclusions to which it has been led; the rational dignity of its own conduct, the gain or loss of the rewards in a future life, in short all that makes existence worth while, that existence which it controls for a few moments. Now the religious man is not the only one who runs this risk. The irreligious man also hazards all he has, neither more nor less than the religious, on this same inevitable question of the sense of life. He has a different ideal, it is true; but, for him as for the believer, that ideal is the hidden mainspring of his conduct, the one good which makes him ready to take the trouble of living at all. ... The interests involved are, we may say, mutually opposed for the two types of men; but they are equal. The same thoughts, which are outside the range of our critical powers, trouble men's souls from one direction or the other; and the non-religious, or definitely irreligious psychologist must defend himself against them, no less than the religious.'

It is then the duty alike of the believing and of the unbelieving investigator not to let their views of the universe, their philosophy and their resultant judgements as to truth and value, in any way influence their setting forth of the historical facts. And an investigator who seeks honestly for objective truth will be especially grateful for the frank, criticism of one who holds different views from his own, because that can expose

his own unavoidable weaknesses to him, and so forward his advance towards the whole truth, better than a friend's could.

But it is just in the investigation of the history of religion that a believing student of the subject has an advantage which his colleague who thinks otherwise can hardly equal. If religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can be truly grasped only from within. But beyond a doubt, this can be better done by one in whose own inward consciousness an experience of religion plays a part. There is but too much danger that the other will talk of religion as a blind man might of colours, or one totally devoid of ear, of a beautiful musical composition. Renan perceived this; he however believed that a still better investigator was one who had formerly been religious and had since abandoned his creed. This cannot be allowed. Renan commits himself thereby to the most emphatic expression of a judgement concerning truth, and so forfeits all claim to objectivity.

The Belgian savant, Count Goblet d'Alviella, has suggested the following division and nomenclature of the stages of our subject: Hierography, or the introductory critical description of the facts and their geographical extension; Hierology, which proceeds to group these facts, to establish their chronological sequence, and, where possible, to go back to their origin; Hierosophy, which judges of the truth, value and metaphysical character of religions. H. Pinard likewise accepts this division and the terminology. There is a great deal to be said for both, but there are two disadvantages attached. Firstly, no distinction is made between the history and the psychology of religion; secondly, the word 'religion', which is fully naturalized and can hardly be done away with, is dropped in favour of the wholly new ιερός. If we could tolerate the composition of Latin religio with Greek γραφία, λογία, σοφία, we should get such formations as 'religiography', 'religiology', 'religiosophy', which would have to contend with 'religionography', 'religionology', 'religionosophy', like 'missiology' and 'missionology'. Hardly any of these words would gain acceptance, particularly in German, which possesses the serviceable words religionshistorie, religionspsychologie, and religionsphilosophie.