

CHAPTER 6

The Validity of the Theological Starting-point

MORE than once in previous chapters we have stated that the whole problem of religion and religions, even when separated from the special problem of their relation to the Christian religion, calls for a theological treatment. We have evaluated various “scientific” and philosophical attempts (naturalistic, sociological, psychological, transcendental) that have been made to understand or explain the problem of religion or to give a reasonable and universally acceptable account of it. We have indicated the positive value of their findings and their limitations.

The limitations of the “scientific” attempts are inherent in their approach; that is to say, their attempts at explanation are based on the assumption that religion is one of the great manifestations of human cultural capacity and activity, which, in turn, the Science of Religion can only afford to explain out of itself, or out of man himself. We do not mean to say that *a priori* this is wrong. Everybody who cares to do so has a right to uphold such an assumption, and to try to demonstrate its truth. The objection to be made to it lies in the fact that its truth and validity are taken for granted. The *demonstrandum* is more or less treated as a self-evident *demonstratum*. Therefore we pointed out that underneath these “scientific” attempts there are (for the most part unconscious) attitudes which are non-“scientific”, i.e. elements of *Weltanschauung* in which there is contained a certain conception of man, life and the world, coupled with value-judgments which have non-scientific grounds and therefore cannot be regarded as universally valid verifications.

Yet these value-judgments are unavoidable because, without these, how could one classify religion? How could one live? It is to be expected that the workers in the field of the Science of Religion will go on investigating their subject with increasingly

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refined and effective methods, often holding on to their necessary fiction of objectivity, and will also continue their endeavours to find patterns of transcendent unity in all the religions. Again, nobody can find fault with this activity. On the contrary, one can only be grateful for the accumulation of knowledge and insight this work will certainly yield. Yet, in making the point that in their supposedly strictly “scientific” handling of the subjects, there are always inevitably non-scientific factors at work, a very important conclusion had to be drawn; namely that as a purifying and stimulating force, scientific objectivity is a necessary directive; but it is eternally unattainable, because what we called “our human condition” militates against this attainment. Attainment would even mean the destruction of our true human nature.

What does this imply? One is legitimately tempted to suspect that, in spite of the many useful results these professedly “objective” theories yield, the presupposition that religion, as one of the aspects of human culture, can and should be immanently explained, is not so self-evident as is often assumed. The data of religious consciousness compel us to put many question-marks about the mystery which is called man and about the mystery of religion. The phenomenological approach to religion has acknowledged the difficulties inherent in the scientific attempts at explanation and evaluation, and therefore tries rigorously to restrict itself to the congenial understanding of religion (*Verstehen*), with a radical exclusion of value and truth-judgments (*époché*—to use the technical term). We have seen, however, that even in phenomenology we do not escape our *condition humaine*.

THE INADEQUACY OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

Various philosophical attempts to deal with the problem of religion have taken account of the fact that religion pretends to live in a transcendental context and therefore religions have to be tested by their amount of value and truth. Whereas many “scientific” workers in the field of the Science of Religion are unavowed, though often rather inarticulate, philosophers of religion, the professional philosophers of religion are avowedly so. These philosophic approaches have also resulted in

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many cases in profound understanding of the subject, but at the same time, as we have shown, they produce as many distortions and arbitrary judgments, and show an unmistakable tendency to understand and interpret only one or some aspects of the manifold manifestations of religion, and a still more unmistakable tendency to misunderstand and misinterpret the Christian faith, because it does not fit into their highest categories. Their basic starting-point, the idea of the Essence of Religion as hidden, essential reality in all religions, breaks down on two points:

(1) There continue to exist various and even warring concepts of the Essence of Religion. Close investigation shows that these concepts are inextricably bound up with the spiritual roots of the philosopher's existence. The result (to take one very clear example) is that a Western and an Oriental philosopher, for instance, have from the outset a different conception of the Essence of Religion and therefore a different idea of what is the mark of authentic truth and of what is the right appreciation of values. As we have seen, the whole discussion about *die Absolutheit des Christentums*, set in motion by Troeltsch, breaks down on this fact. And yet Troeltsch was a man of massive learning and great philosophical acumen. Radhakrishnan, as we have seen, regards and evaluates all religions in the light of Vedantic conceptions, and so comes to quite different conclusions, thereby giving the lie to Troeltsch's presupposition that *Persönlichkeitsreligion* is the normative concept. Logically speaking, Radhakrishnan is fully entitled to do so. We have stressed this before.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that a liberal interpretation of Christianity (Troeltsch) and a conception grounded in the Indian version of absolute idealism (Radhakrishnan) cannot both represent the Essence of Religion as regulative ideas. The latter's approach seems to have the advantage of appealing strongly to the religious agnostics, appearing to justify every kind of religion, the lowest and the highest, as a mixture of good and bad elements. Nobody can refute this completely. One can only accept it, or reject it in giving a reasonable but not necessarily convincing account of one's rejection.

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THE PREJUDICE AGAINST THEOLOGY

(2) Religion only becomes manifest in history in a plurality of religions which show striking similarities and deep divergences, but have different axes. The real problem lies not so much in those various religions as in the fact of the *religious consciousness* as inherent in human nature. The great question is: what do you say about it? How do you explain it? Can it be explained? Why must men live religiously? This compulsion towards being religious appears, on closer investigation, in persons who have entirely broken with any religion and in “secular” movements which pretend to be a-religious or anti-religious. Jung’s psychotherapeutic analysis and Communism can be adduced as examples.

Here again the query arises as to whether theology perhaps has something to say about it.

Why have we insisted so strongly on this rather laborious reasoning about the point reached by the science and the philosophy of religion? The reasons are simple, but important. The students of religion and its manifestations, who claim to be *the* true (often, they feel, the *only* true) “scientific” workers, whose method, work and results only can be trusted and should be accepted as clad with real authority, ought in the light of this our investigation to take a more modest view of what they can and cannot do. Many of them certainly need some more training in critical philosophical thinking, and more awareness that it is rather strange to deal with problems of religion without any understanding of the meaning and value of theological thinking. The philosophers of religion stand in great need of seeing more clearly their limitations and the fundamental ambiguity of their whole undertaking.

Since the eighteenth century the assumption has been widespread that theology is *per definitionem* the most prejudiced, subjective, untrustworthy agent to deal with the problems of religion and religions. There undoubtedly were and sometimes still are grounds for this view. Theology has often given a bad account of itself in the past in this matter, and at some places in the foregoing chapters we have frankly recognized that.

Nevertheless, theology in the last centuries has learned a great

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deal about what is due to a fair and honest interpretation of alien spiritual worlds. The number of theologians who have done outstanding work in this field in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is striking. Theology's understanding of itself and of the nature of its task has also developed greatly. It is, therefore, a matter of sheer fairness that students of religion should shed their customary haughty prejudice towards contributions coming from Christian theologians. These contributions should be treated on their merits or demerits, but not on the assumption that they are, of course, products of "subjectivists", unable and unwilling to attain the "objectivity" of the student of religion, who says that he has no allegiance to any religion and, therefore, is necessarily less subjective.

Here comes the main point. We have tried to show that more acute and philosophical thinking has revealed the fallacy and pitfalls of the idea of *Voraussetzungslosigkeit* (without any prejudice) and has produced a more sober and true idea of what "objectivity" can and cannot mean. The so-called "subjectivity" and prejudice of theology has in this new climate a right to be seen in a different light. Theology has not only the duty, but philosophically speaking the same right as the other approaches to religion to say its word, and, as we said in a former chapter, to do it with a good conscience, provided it keeps to the rules of the game in regard to a serious and vigilant endeavour towards impartial understanding insofar as that is possible.

MEANING OF THE THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

It is not our aim to maintain that, since the scientific and philosophic endeavours to explain, understand and interpret religion have only partially succeeded, the solution is that theology will now be summoned to do the job. Far from that. What we aim at is to maintain that, on scientific and philosophical grounds, theology is fully entitled to formulate the case and to say its personal word on the problem of religion and religions, on the basis of its peculiar presuppositions. Just when it is frank about its presuppositions, it can be free of a false make-believe of "scientific" objectivity. It is obliged to give a clear account of its estimate of the value and truth of all religions outside the sphere of the Biblical revelation.

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By the theological approach we mean that in his attempts to understand and interpret religion and religions, the Christian thinker must frankly confess that he can never behave simply as the adherent of *a* religion, taking, if he so chooses, a standpoint detached from the basic views implied in the Christian faith. Under all conditions, in all kinds of work (including this work of interpreting and evaluating non-Christian religions, which calls for a great amount of scholarly work), he remains primarily a disciple, a captive of Jesus Christ, in whom God disclosed Himself, full of grace and truth. This, by the way, is a thing radically different from being primarily the upholder of a set of dogmatic tenets. If the Person Jesus Christ were synonymous with a body of dogmatic verities, the whole procedure would simply be one more kind of rationalism, the measuring of peculiar embodiments of human religious life and spirituality by another peculiar human embodiment of religious consciousness. Revelation, of which Christ as a living Person is the final embodiment, is *toto modo* different from Religion. Religion speaks about what man thinks of God, Revelation speaks of what God thinks of man.

In saying this we are fully aware that many do not accept this statement, and that they have many reasons for this disavowal, worthy to be considered. Yet we feel confident of substantiating this thesis later on. After all that has been said already, it suffices here to say that this theological starting-point is as valid as, for instance, that of the mystical philosophies of religion, which assume axiomatically the identity of God and man as self-evident. Formally speaking, this axiomatic preference for the mystical attitude as the one that is basically the right one, is on the same level, in the order of thinking, as the "Christian" presupposition of the theologian who deals with the problem of religion. If in the first case nobody dreams of *sacrificium intellectus* (sacrifice of comprehension), neither should it be done in the second case. Materially speaking there is indeed a deep difference also, because to be bound to Jesus Christ as the Lord of one's whole life is entirely different a fact from being subject to our common human situation, which implies that in our philosophical and "scientific" thinking we are dominated by ultimate axiomatic *a prioris*. And it is just this qualitative difference which brings it about that the Christian student of

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religion—or whatever else—is enabled to take an open attitude, because allegiance to the Person Jesus Christ is essentially different from allegiance to the infallible authority of a system of propositional truths. In the last case there is, decidedly, an unacceptable impediment to “scientific” liberty. Also amongst convinced Christians it is necessary to stress these points.

The following example can illustrate this: The lively discussions at the World Missionary Conference in 1938 (Tambaram) which centred on my book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, were often very confused. The fundamental reason was that my critics, all fellow-Christians, neither understood nor accepted my standpoint, which, as I often clearly stated, was within the realm of the Christian revelation. They found this “unscientific”, prejudiced narrow-mindedness, and required from me a neutral, presumably “objective” standpoint, as if a Christian has the possibility and the right to have a “standing-place” whence he may judge Jesus Christ. Moreover they did not see that without any reflection or valid philosophical argument they took for granted that the revelation in Christ is subsumed under the general Idea of Religion, and that this general Idea is the “standing-place”.

Their demand was philosophically naïve and theologically inadmissible, because the choice is not between “scientific” objectivity (to use this unsatisfactory word in this context) or alleged theological “subjectivity” and prejudice, only the first guaranteeing scientific open-mindedness. Rather the crucial question for Christians is: Is Christ the measure of true religion, or is it some general religious *a priori* by which Christ has to be measured? Christians cannot behave as if there is an ultimate religious *a priori*, under which Jesus Christ is subsumed. For them Christ is the religious *a priori*. Non-Christians or non-believers naturally will disavow this, but have to keep in mind that their decision for their religious *a priori* is just as much an act of faith as the Christian’s choice for Christ.

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The theological starting-point therefore is revelation, which is basically different from religious intuition or divination, and which is not a product of the human religious consciousness,

because according to Biblical religion it enters history in the form of sovereign divine words and acts. Revelation of God, if taken in the real sense, is divine self-disclosure, issuing from divine initiative. This, by the nature of the case, can only be motivated by itself. The sole possible response to it is, therefore, that of faith, not a justification by reason; although reason can render Christianity help in understanding it, without believing it. Without faith, the Biblical thesis of revelation will generally be considered a fiction, an illusion, a pretence, or a useful error.

We quote again Rudolf Otto: "Religion fängt mit sich selber an" (Religion begins by itself). This is the final verdict Otto had to give after his great effort to understand religion by means of psychology. It is a confession, in disguise, that religion cannot be fully and satisfactorily explained out of its subject, man. A sincere, scientific approach which takes religion as relevant to human life, and does not explain it away as many psychologists do, has indeed to end with some such statement. It is here that theology, or, if one prefers, the Christian approach to religion and religions, can give, and in the course of the ages has tried to give, its peculiar contribution. The question then runs as follows: Has this religious consciousness, independent of the variegated quality—good and bad—of its fruits and embodiments, anything to do with God of the revelation? Has the God of revelation anything to do with it? If not, why not? If so, why and how? Can one understand religion without taking God into account, that is to say, not as an idea or projection of human needs, but as a reality?

This way of putting the questions has vital consequences for the spirit in which the problem of truth implied in our subject: Religion, Religions and the Christian Faith, is conceived. It presupposes that truth is not abstract truth, but the right life-relation of selves, the Divine Self and the human selves. The God of Biblical revelation is the God who spoke the word: Adam, where art thou? Therefore, the right perspective in this context is not in the first place to speak about *falsa et vera religio*, which inevitably has a rationalist connotation, but about distorted, corrupted, disorientated or authentic religion, in which the question of *falsa* and *vera* gets its own, but a subordinate, place.