

Author's Preface

IN SENDING THIS BOOK into the world, I am aware of taking great risks and a serious responsibility. Great risks, because it is fairly certain that it will evoke much criticism, by its ideas as well as its frankness of tone. As to criticism in regard to its ideas, I shall be most grateful if this is as frank as I myself have been.

Issues of thought can only prosper by frank discussion which is concerned only about the subject-matter and not about reputations or so-called established positions. I hope that the serious reader will sense that in the frankness of tone a sincere respect is implied for the great capacities and achievements of those from whom I venture to differ.

Some of my friends who have read the first draft of this book rightly observed that they somehow got the feeling that it betrayed its partial origin from lectures in the classroom. That is true. Parts I to IV, in a considerably abbreviated form, were given as lectures in the University of Geneva in the winter of 1953/54. These friends expressed some fear that I was too much thinking aloud. In thinking over this fear, I came to the conclusion that this is, after all, an advantage. For a healthy atmosphere it is necessary sometimes to think aloud in all sincerity, particularly in our time when it is often the custom in theological discussion to use guarded and considerate language, which may be very courteous but leaves you in doubt about the real position of the writer. The pursuit of truth is not served by courtesy or discourtesy, but by open, sincere discussion.

It may be helpful to summarize in this preface my main objects in writing this book, which enters into discussion with historians, phenomenologists and philosophers of religion, and not least with theologians. This summary will make clear that, although I sometimes come back to points I have made in my book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* and answer criticisms—in my view justified or unjustified—made on that book, the present book is as a whole quite new.

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The main theses and conclusions of this book, then, are the following:

(1) Our concern is to investigate into the great human fact: Religion, in the light of Biblical Revelation, particularly in the light of Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Therefore, a specific attempt is made to find out what there is to be found in the Bible in regard to this problem, and what directives this exegetical research provides us with, for our thinking on this problem.

(2) In regard to the evaluation of the pluriform religious life and systems of mankind, in the light of the Christian Revelation, the position is taken that the crucial questions are these: Are the various religions (philosophies, life-conceptions) of mankind places of encounter between man and God, or are they not? Or to put it differently: Are they responses to a divine activity, or are they not?

In what sense (positive or negative, or both combined) are they responses and places of encounter? And how far are they so? The answer given in this book is dialectical, as a parallel to the dialectical character of Religious Truth, manifest in Biblical Revelation.

(3) The place to find an answer to these questions is not the numberless religions and their so-called good and bad sides. It is the human religious consciousness, manifest *in* the many religions.

Another crucial question, therefore, is: Is there evident in this religious consciousness a drama between God (always used in this book in the sense of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ) and man? This book answers in the affirmative to this question and tries to explain this answer in the light of Biblical Revelation. But the affirmation is always dialectical in character.

The subtlest psychology of Religion, although it increases our knowledge and insight, remains unable to reach the root of the mysterious character of human religious consciousness. The reason for this inability is its immanent interpretation. If there is anything in man that demands a transcendent view-point, it is the religious consciousness.

(4) We discuss in this book the possibilities *and* the limitations of all religious philosophies, of whatever kind. We try to do the same in regard to all phenomenologies of Religion.

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(5) In the light of this critical discussion we try to establish the scientific and philosophical legitimacy of a theological treatment of the problem of Religion and the pluralism of religions besides Christianity.

We are fully aware that this thesis runs counter to the current opinion of most scholars in the field of the Science of Religion, who claim to be *the* monopolists in the scientific treatment of Religion and who regard a thesis as put by us as an aberration from the orthodox path of Science.

It is, however, too often forgotten that all Religious Sciences are not only describing facts and relations, but also interpreting them. A theological interpretation is as scientific as any other one, provided it is given on the basis of methodical and critical research of the same calibre and kind as every scholar uses.

With all due respect to the knowledge and genius of the professional scientists of Religion (amongst whom I count myself), I submit that the exclusive claim of scientific scholarship many historians of Religion claim for themselves arises ultimately from an unconscious arrogance, the fruit of a lack of philosophical and religious discernment, and militates against the modesty scientific research always rightly claims.

(6) Taking firmly a theological stand in the scientific interpretation of Religion, we critically review the most important theological interpretations of Religion, from the first centuries of Church History till the present time. We then come to the conclusion that these interpretations are without exception very valuable, but that, with the exception of Calvin, Luther and Hamann, they are sometimes more, sometimes less defective in one essential point, that is to say, a radical Biblical orientation which takes into account the whole Bible.

(7) To substantiate this view we have tried to give such a radical Biblical orientation. One of the main results of our *attempt* (we stress the word attempt) at a radical Biblical orientation in regard to the theme of the book is that we arrive at a greater depth and adequacy of interpretation of the riddle of human religious consciousness than any other approach can yield.

All subservience to any religious philosophy is automatically excluded, which is very important, because most theological interpretations of Religion and Religions are philosophies of Religion in theological garb. It is fitting and necessary to state that our whole book is an attempt, open to criticism and inviting criticism.

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In one respect I have tried to improve upon an attitude taken in my previous book. Acknowledging, in *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, that God certainly works amongst the peoples and in the religions outside the Biblical realm of revelation, I added that it was not feasible to try to point out where the spots of this divine activity are, and so I stressed mainly the point that the non-Christian religions are great human achievements.

By my endeavour in this present book to point out the religious consciousness as the place of dialectic encounter with God, and of giving a negative, or partly positive but often distortedly positive, answer to this encounter, I have made more room to express definite opinions (though necessarily always open to revision) on this encounter.

This means that I do not any longer maintain the unfeasibility of such attempts. It does not mean, however, that I reject my former thesis that there is a great amount of human achievement in all religions. It only means that I take now a far more dialectical view of this thesis than in my previous book.

I feel the need to express my warm thanks to many friends who read an original draft for their helpful criticisms and remarks. Some found the book rather heavy going. I am quite prepared to submit to this judgment, but I want to say that, if Christians intend to do their duty in the present encounter of Church and World in all its sectors, they must rejoice in the unavoidable, arduous heavy-goingness of the battle.

Special thanks are due to my faithful secretaries at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, who with great intelligence and devotion helped me in shaping up the manuscript. The editor of this book, the Rev. Cecil Northcott of the Lutterworth Press, London, and his colleague Miss Hilda M. Wilson, have obliged me deeply by their energetic and wise support in bringing it out in a form which, I know, makes it readable for an English-reading public.

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