

# Christian Theology and the Indic Religious Tradition\*

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This paper sets out to examine the philosophical positions of Prof. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Prof. Richard R. Niebuhr on religion from the standpoint of Comparative Religion. A dichotomy commonly employed in Comparative Religion is that between the Semitic Religious Tradition and the Indic Religious Tradition. In this paper the positions of Prof. W. C. Smith *et al.*, will be examined more specifically in the light of the Indic tradition. Several approaches suggest themselves at this point, of which I have chosen two. These may be formulated as specific questions:

- (1) All three writers are Christians. Are then the central concepts identified by them adequate for handling the Indic religious tradition?
- (2) What is the 'question of Comparative Religion' according to these scholars and is the question any different for a member of the Indic religious tradition?

## I

All the three philosophers of religion under discussion conceive of the ultimate Reality in terms of God. God as the ultimate point of reference, however, seems to leave out large parts of the Indic religious tradition; namely, Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism. In these systems the ultimate may be said to be viewed not in terms of God but TRUTH. Such a final term of reference has the effect of pushing the frontiers of the philosophy of religion beyond that envisaged by Prof. Smith and others, beyond 'Theology' as it were. One could argue here that God and Truth are convertible terms; one could also argue that they are not. The Truth could well be that there is no God. In such a situation if we stand by Truth we are still in business; if we stand by God we are at least in trouble if not out of business. It was this consideration which led even the theistic Mahatma Gandhi to prefer defining religion as a 'search for Truth' rather than as a 'search for God'. Nor can the problem be avoided by calling God 'transcendent' because the transcendent of Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism seems to transcend the transcendents of other religions.

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\* This highly condensed paper was presented at a seminar at Harvard Divinity School in 1972. It is printed here in the hope that, read in conjunction with Dr Boyd's paper, it might provoke discussion. *I.J.T.* welcomes letters from readers.—*Editor.*

Though the three scholars have the use of God in common, each has evolved his own points of emphasis. At the risk of being somewhat arbitrary one might select the notion of 'faith' in Prof. Smith, that of 'piety' in Schleiermacher and that of 'experiential' in Prof. Niebuhr as the locus of some of their emphases. How, then, do these concepts fare when extended to the Indic tradition?

To be sure there are concepts analogous to these in the Indic tradition—SRADDHA is reasonably close to faith; BHAVANA to piety and ANUBHAVA to the experiential. Yet these parallels, though helpful in a general way, can be misleading especially when one is talking about Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism. It was pointed out earlier that whereas faith for Prof. Smith is an inner and subjective reality, in Theravada Buddhism it is associated with an inner but objective reality. Piety for Schleiermacher is 'a sense and taste for the infinite' in the finite. In Advaita Vedanta the tables are turned—the final position is one of infinite you relishing the finite! Similarly the experiential religion of Niebuhr is religion as experienced in the 'enviroming world'. The Indic religious tradition also insists that religion is 'experiential' but in a very different sense. Experiential religion in the context of Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism means that the ultimate reality can be and should be directly and gnostically apprehended by the seeker. Thus though the Indic and Christian traditions as articulated in English may use the same words, they mean different things. In terms of a cliché—the verbal bottles are the same, the semantic wines have different flavours!

## II

To turn now to the 'question of Comparative Religion'. It must be recognised that at the root of the issue lies the fact of religious plurality, for if only one religion prevailed over the entire globe the question of Comparative Religion would not exist, at least contemporaneously. In the face of the till-now persistent, even obstinate, religious plurality of the world the question arises—how do we face this fact in the light of our own traditions?

This question has a very different import for one reared in the Indic tradition *vis-à-vis* the Semitic. For a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew the issue is a *theological* one: how and why do other 'false' or lesser religions exist and what kind of accommodation must I arrive at with them? Since other religions are by definition false there is an in-bred tendency to place one's religion at the top of the heap—a tendency so noticeable in Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*. For a Hindu, however, the question is not a theological one. He feels quite at home in a world of religious pluralism spiritually. What upsets him is the effort on the part of the religions of the Semitic tradition to ram their self-proclaimed truth willy-nilly down his reluctant throat. So for him the problem of Comparative Religion is a *practical problem*: how is he to defend his own tradition from the self-righteous onslaught of other traditions? This is why there are several organisations opposing Christian missionary activity in India and hardly any chair of Comparative Religion at an Indian university.

This difference in approach also comes out in the rhetoric which is bandied around the 'coming dialogue of religions'. The scholars of the Semitic tradition speak of a 'harmony of religions'. That is to say, each religion preserves its identity but learns somehow to get along with others. Hindu scholars, however, often speak of the 'unity of religions'—not merely of harmony among them. This unity is often sought in the mystical tradition of the different faiths.

### III

Both the approaches adopted in the paper can now be seen as converging on a single salient point. From the point of view of Comparative Religion the great limitation of the philosophies of religion as developed by Prof. W. C. Smith, Schleiermacher and Prof. R. R. Niebuhr is the failure to take into full account the mystical strand in the religious tradition of mankind of which Advaita Vedanta and Theravada Buddhism constitute the more systematic treatments. One suspects that they have neglected if not rejected not merely the mystic strand of the Indic religious tradition (wherein it is prominent) but also that within their own tradition. In any case their philosophies may be applicable to *Homo Christianus*; they do not seem to apply as well to *Homo Religious* in all his fullness.