

The Teaching of Religions in the Indian Context

HERBERT JAI SINGH*

Characteristic of the Indian context is the fact of many and diverse religious communities living together. Religious pluralism in this country is not merely a condition of living but an ideology, a philosophy of life, a serious commitment to a pattern of common living in which diversity is accepted and even encouraged within a common national pattern of communal togetherness.

For the study of religion this context signifies an abundance of data for study and research. This is a context of living faiths where a scholar of religion may not only observe but should also participate in the actual drama of religious life.

Here religions can be studied in their living, growing forms in response to the challenges of life, modern and otherwise. A student of religion finds himself here in the midst not simply of the phenomena of past sacred forms but also of actual throbbing contemporary religious life.

Place in Curricula

Traditionally, Indian educational institutions have fought shy of giving religion a place in the curricula of schools and colleges. The British followed a policy of strict neutrality in religious matters. The free Republic of India has a similar approach in consonance with its secular stance toward education. Religion is taught in schools as "moral instruction" and in the universities as a part of syllabi in Indian Philosophy. As of today most universities in India are not prepared to adopt a secular approach to the study of religion.¹

While institutions of secular learning have kept aloof from the subject of religion, the Christian theological colleges and seminaries have had no such hesitation in introducing in their curricula courses in "Comparative Religions." For many years the large share of the pioneering work in this field has been done by Christian missionaries and European scholars. Christian institutions such as S.P.C.K., Y.M.C.A., C.L.S., N.C.C., and the seminaries have encouraged the development and publication of literature on the religions of India.

* Dr Jai Singh is Professor of Religions at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

¹ Courses in Religions are offered in the Panjabi University, Patiala; Visvabharati, Shantiniketan, and Benares Hindu University, Varanasi.

Hence, when one sets out to write about the teaching of religion in the Indian context, one must concentrate on the work of the Christian theological seminaries in this country. This is what we intend to do in this article.

Awareness of Method

Scholars of the History of Religions have presuppositions underlying their method of approach to their vocation of the study of religions. A deliberate awareness of this situation keeps them from many pitfalls and errors in handling of their data. No scholar is completely free from the bias of his religious upbringing, philosophical position, cultural milieu and ethnic origins. These invariably influence his point of view, his choice of data and his interpretation of religious phenomena. Our perception or non-perception of structure and meaning in the midst of religious data depends on our intrinsic presuppositions.

This can be illustrated from the works of individual scholars as well as from different *series* of books written in India on various topics in the area of History of Religions.

1. *The refutation of other religions*: Studying the development of the study of religions in India, one is impressed by the strong evangelistic missionary motive that underlay many of the writings on the religions of India. Abbé J. A. Dubois, author of the classic, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, is typical of this position when he says: "There is one motive which above all others has influenced my determination. It struck me that a faithful picture of the wickedness and incongruities of polytheism and idolatry would by its very ugliness help greatly to set off the beauties and perfections of Christianity."²

A similar methodology was the presupposition of the *Hindu Series* published by the Christian Literature Society for India soon after the emergence of *The Sacred Books of the East*. The prospectus of *The Sacred Books of the East Described and Examined* outlines the plan of the series as "an explanatory introduction, a correct summary of each work, and remarks at the end reviewing its character."³ The actual plan of the books of the series is to give in the first part an introduction to a religious classic, in the second part quotations of passages as translated in the *SBE*, and in the final section a critical evaluation. This last portion consists of a comparison of the teachings of the text with Christianity with a view to showing the superiority of the latter over the *SBE* Hindu classic. The book on the Bhagavad-gita ends with the following conclusions: "The style of the com-

² Abbé J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, tr. and ed. Henry K. Beuchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, reprint 1968), p. 9.

³ J. Murdoch, *The Sacred Books of the East Described and Examined, Hindu Series, Philosophic and Law Books* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1898), Vol. II, p. i.

position is flowing and elegant, but the philosophy taught is unsound, and the doctrine immoral. It is poison administered in honey."⁴

2. *Preparation and fulfilment*: In the early decades of the twentieth century a new point of view emerged. Religions are not rejected as false but are regarded as on an ascending ladder in the development of the religious aspirations of the human race and the culminating rung is that of Christianity. This point of view characterized another series of books, "the Religious Quest of India," edited by J. N. Farquhar and H. D. Griswold. In the general editorial preface, they state their general purpose: "1. They endeavour to work in the sincere and sympathetic spirit of science. They desire to understand the perplexingly involved developments of thought and life in India and dispassionately to estimate their value... 2. They seek to set each form of Indian religion by the side of Christianity in such a way that the relationship may stand out clear. Jesus Christ has become to them the light of all their seeing, and they believe Him destined to be the light of the world. They are persuaded that sooner or later the age-long quest of the Indian spirit for religious truth and power will find in Him at once its goal and a new starting-point..." The writers go on to say that they find no incompatibility between these two motives, "for they have found that he who would lead others into a new faith must first of all understand the faith that is theirs already, — understand it, moreover, sympathetically, with a mind quick to note not its weaknesses alone but that in it which has enabled it to survive and has given it its power over the hearts of those who profess it."⁵ The series followed a definite pattern: a clear statement of an Indian religious theme, then showing in the last chapter how the religious quest of India leads up to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The method was meticulously followed by J. N. Farquhar in his own book, *The Crown of Hinduism*,⁶ where the religion of India finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. His method, according to an earlier statement, "consists in setting forth Christianity as the fulfilment of all that is aimed at in Hinduism, as the satisfaction of the spiritual yearnings of her people, as the crown and climax of the crudest forms of her worship as well as of those lofty spiritual movements which have so often appeared in Hinduism but have always ended in weakness... The theory (of fulfilment) thus satisfied the science of religion to the uttermost, while conserving the supremacy of Christ."⁷

3. *For interpretation of Christian faith*: Another position, often unquestioningly accepted, was (and continues to be) that the study of

⁴ *Ibid.*, "The Bhagavad Gita" (1895), p. 87.

⁵ J. N. Farquhar and H. D. Griswold, *The Religious Quest of India*, "Editorial Preface" (London: Oxford University Press, 1915), pp. iii-iv.

⁶ J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913).

⁷ Quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion, A History* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 153.

Indian religions was necessary so as to facilitate the task of the Christian theologian to interpret his faith in indigenous terms, using the religious and philosophical background of India. In the earlier positions there was a clear opposition between the religions of India and Christianity. Now the purpose of their study was to provide terminology and thought patterns for an indigenous Christian theology. The position was clearly spelt out by Joseph N. Rawson, a Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion in Serampore College: "The Serampore Senate believes that it is essential that Indian students of Christian theology should be trained to appreciate India's great heritage of thought and culture,—that Indian Christian thought must be organically and not merely geographically Indian, and must consciously seek to relate the new to the old. A *déracinée* theology, like any other rootless plant, can hardly be vital or vigorous. A truly original Indian development of Christian theology must of course have its roots in the Christian scriptures and in Christian experience, but it must also spring from knowledge of and reverence for all that is true in that religious thought and experience of India's past."⁸

Dialogue

Since its founding in 1957, the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, has been a powerful catalyst in the discussions on the question of the relation of Christian faith with the religions of India. Much of its thinking has gravitated around the concept of dialogue. The underlying assumption of much of the literature is that the study of religions is to provide reliable data so that people of different faiths, and especially of Christian faith, can enter into dialogue with one another intelligently and creatively. The Institute has stressed the need for fairness in the study of religions, for only on the basis of correct information about different faiths can a meaningful dialogue take place. It definitely has had a positive attitude towards religions and has taken them as serious alternatives to the Christian faith. It warned, in the words of P. D. Devanandan, of "the temptation of exaggerating the validity of Christian claims by deliberately minimizing the inherent worth of other faiths."⁹ Nonetheless, for Devanandan, the purpose for the study of Hinduism was the communication of the Christian gospel. "Pretensions to scholarship and research," he says, "can be self-defeating unless there is consuming devotion to Christian commitment. It is not the vain desire to justify

102

⁸ Joseph N. Rawson, *The Katha Upanisad* (Calcutta: Association Press, 1934), p. viii.

⁹ *Christian Concern in Hinduism* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1961), p. 96. P. D. Devanandan influenced Indian thinking on the relation between religions, first as Professor of Philosophy and History of Religions, for seventeen years, at the United Theological College, and later as Director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore, from 1957 to 1962.

ourselves as Christians before our Hindu kinsmen, but the eager anxiety to explain the inadequacy of our Christian witness which has perplexed and confused them that should set us to this study of contemporary Hindu religious beliefs and practices."¹⁰

Apologetic Stance

The conclusion from this brief survey of the study of religions in India is that History of Religions has been undertaken, not for its own sake, but to serve the apologetic purposes of Christian evangelism. The study of religions tended to be a tool in the hands of the Christian theologians. What is needed is to accept the History of Religions as a discipline in its own right and to give it an independent status of its own, distinguishing it clearly from apologetics. It should be freed from the domination of apologetic and evangelistic concerns.¹¹

Understanding

The primary task of a historian of religions is understanding a religious tradition or some aspect of it, and presenting it in clear and systematic form. An excellent summary of the *process of understanding* is given by Van der Leeuw in his book, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*.¹² The student of religion observes and records religious phenomena, that is, *what appears* to view. Hence an oft used name for the discipline is "phenomenology of religion." Van der Leeuw suggests six stages in the procedure of the study of religious phenomena.

To illustrate these stages, we may take the example of a ceremony in the temple of Kali. The stages would apply with equal validity to the study of a religious document or some other phase of religious belief or practice.

1. *The giving of a name*: This consists in observing the phenomenon and giving it a *name*. The student observes a goat being brought in the temple of Kali, slaughtered and offered to the goddess. He calls it by the name of *sacrifice*. By the act of naming, the data is thus separated, sifted, and distinguished from the chaotic mass of sounds and images of the total scene.

2. *Using sympathetic imagination*: The interpreter "interpolates the phenomenon into his own life."¹³ He looks into his own religious experience and by an act of *imaginative sympathy* tries to visualise what

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹¹ This is not to say that scholars other than Historians of Religions cannot or must not use the results of phenomenologists' researches. Also historians of religions themselves are free to use the data in different roles such as theologians or moral philosophers, etc.

¹² Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, tr. J. E. Turner (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), Vol. II, pp. 674-678.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 674.

the phenomenon means in the life of the devotee of Kali. The human in us responds to the human in the devotee and by virtue of our common humanity comprehension is made possible. "When the professor is told by the barbarian that once there was nothing except a great feathered serpent, unless the learned man feels a thrill and a half temptation to wish it were true, he is no judge of such things at all."¹⁴ It is by an act of intense sympathy that the phenomenologist can feel an *approximation* to the religious experience of the devotee of Kali by putting himself in his place and by reproducing in himself his total experience.

3. *Restraint from normative judgment*: There is danger in this procedure¹⁵ — the student might ingress too much of his own experience rather than that of the devotee. This third stage safeguards against this pitfall. The phenomenologist should exercise restraint as to his own personal judgment on the phenomena. He should, for the purposes of understanding, put into brackets (*epoche*)¹⁶ all normative pronouncements. He should let the devotee speak for himself without making such value judgments as: "This is horrible... an act of superstition...in Jesus Christ such sacrifices have become unnecessary...Kali must be a blood-thirsty goddess." Instead, the

¹⁴ Quoted by van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 675, from Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, p. 111.

¹⁵ In the procedure as described in no. 2 above, "using sympathetic imagination."

¹⁶ G. van der Leeuw defines *epoche* as follows: "The term *epoche* is a technical expression employed in current Phenomenology by Husserl and other philosophers. It implies that no judgement is expressed concerning the objective world, which is thus placed 'between brackets,' as it were. All phenomena, therefore, are considered solely as they are presented to the mind without any further aspects such as their real existence, or their value, being taken into account; in this way the observer restricts himself to pure description systematically pursued, himself adopting the attitude of complete intellectual suspense, or of abstention from all judgement, regarding these controversial topics" (van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 646, footnote 1).

See John B. Carman, *The Theology of Ramanuja. An Essay in Inter-religious Understanding* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), chapters 1 and 19, "A Phenomenological and Historical Approach to Ramanuja's Theology" and "Questions at the Limits of Phenomenological Understanding" for the application of the phenomenological method to a particular study.

Also, for a critical evaluation of the concept of *epoche* in the context of dialogue between religions, see Raymond Panikkar, "The Internal Dialogue — The Insufficiency of the so-called Phenomenological 'Epoche' in the Religious Encounter," *Religion and Society*, Vol. XV (1968). Firstly, we are not using the term here in the context of inter-religious dialogue. It is suggested rather as a stage in promoting understanding of religious phenomena. But, secondly, even in relation to dialogue, *epoche* would serve a useful purpose as a deterrent to overwhelming the dialogic situation with religious prejudice and dogmatism.

true phenomenological attitude is to reach out to the real experience of the Kali worshipper, what he feels when he says: "Kali is mother...She has power (*sakti*)...She is propitiated by the sacrifice of the goat. . . She grants the petitions of those who are willing to express devotion to her by concrete acts of sacrifice." The phenomenologist refrains from both blame and praise. He testifies to what appears before him, as faithfully as he can.

4. The phenomena observed must be *clarified and comprehended*. "All that belongs to the same order must be united, while what is different in type must be separated."¹⁷ Thus a clear structure needs to be discerned amidst the constituent parts of the total ceremony such as the Kali priesthood, the ritual (*mantras* etc.), and the myths associated with the ritual, the process of sacrifice and its meaning — and all these seen in their inter-relationship and unity.

5. These activities, as outlined above, and pursued simultaneously, lead to the *dawn of understanding*. Understanding, basically, is a meaningful nexus between the observer and the phenomenon (appearance). Every experience of understanding has a measure of relativity depending on the point of view of the observing object. But that is what is given in the realm of human possibility. Thus two observers seeing the phenomenon of sacrifice at the Kali temple would see the same act and yet not quite the same, the difference being the unavoidable perspective of each of the observers. It is *epoche* that keeps distortion deliberately to its minimum.

6. For the sake of increasing accuracy of interpretation of the data gathered, one needs a "*perpetual correction*" of conclusions by additional information from relevant sources. Reading of sacred texts relating to sacrifice in general and to Kali literature in particular would add further to the understanding of the subject under study. A knowledge of languages involved would be helpful — in this instance, Sanskrit and related vernaculars. Extensive conversation with knowledgeable and articulate Kali worshippers would add increasing authenticity to information. Further perspective would be gained by a historical study of sacrifice in the Indian religious tradition, possibly going back as far into antiquity as the Indus Valley Civilization. To achieve this one would need, in addition to philological competence, aid from historical documents and archaeological research.

Absolute objectivity, the knowledge of the object in itself, remains only an ideal, for all knowledge must pass through some human perspective, conscious or unconscious. One makes every effort to remove the distortions of subjective bias and prejudice. "To see face to face is denied us. But much can be observed even in a mirror; and it is possible to speak about things seen."¹⁸

¹⁷ Van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 676.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 678.

Aims and Purposes

The study of the History of Religions has been made with different motivations and purposes. Some of these may be briefly mentioned here:

1. To counter other religions with a view to showing the superiority of the Christian faith over other faiths. The term "Comparative Religions" in this context was used to mean comparing Christianity to the disadvantage of other religions.
2. To interpret Christian faith by using the language and thought patterns of Indian religions for purposes of communicating the Christian message in indigenous terms.
3. To understand the religious and social world of my neighbour and thus widen the scope of our community together at the deeper levels of our faith, to stress the study of persons in their dynamic involvements in problems of daily living rather than religious systems.
4. To deepen one's own religious experience by reading about and listening to the spiritual pilgrimage of people of different religious traditions.

It is necessary to distinguish here the proper and limited scope of History of Religions: it is to gather data about religion with the precision of a scientific technologist and to interpret it as precisely as possible. *Religionswissenschaft* (the science of religion) presents this data which can be used by philosophers, theologians, sociologists and others. The task of the historian of religions is limited to data collection, organization, and interpretation. Should he use the data for other purposes, such as theological or philosophical, he is going beyond his own field and assuming other roles than that of the historian of religion. The aims enumerated above often spill over the boundaries legitimately assigned to the discipline of the history of religions, and the historian of religions must know the point where he goes beyond the limits of his field.

Syllabus

The syllabus and the manner of teaching should be consonant with the aims and purposes that a person or institution has in view.

Here is a brief summary to give an over-all concept of what a syllabus might include. We hope that it is sufficiently open-ended to allow necessary modifications:

1. *Methodology*: a survey of methods used for the History of Religions in India, with special awareness of underlying presuppositions. A critical study of the theological, historical, and phenomenological approaches. Typology of religions. Contribution of psychological, archaeological, philological and sociological methods to the study of religions. A critical evaluation of the use of different

terms for the discipline. Personal qualifications for the student of religions. Themes and methods of research.

2. *History of the History of Religions*: with special reference to the history of the development of research in the field of different religions of India.

3. *The General History of Religions*: Nature of religious experience; mysticism; symbolism; myth; cultus; rites of passage; sacred community; sacred literature.

4. *Survey of World Religions*: religions (a) of India; (b) of the Middle East; (c) of China and Japan; (d) of Africa; (e) of other areas.¹⁹

5. *Specialization*: in one or two religions; the problem of inter-religion; relationship.

6. *Study of Themes*: within one religion; across two or more religious traditions.

7. *Language Study*: related to the need of the student's area of study and research. (Dogmatism in this area needs to be avoided.)

Teaching

1. In the past "Comparative Religions" has been taught by Christians, both Indians and Westerners. In the contemporary context question can be raised in regard to inviting people of other faiths to teach courses on their own religious traditions as if from the inside. This might be a healthy corrective to the traditional teaching in the past where "non-Christian" religions have been taught as if from the outside. It must, however, be borne in mind, that this approach could well become an apologetic in the reverse. Teaching by persons of other faiths could indeed be a corrective and an exciting experiment if the participants are exposed to the methodology of the History of Religions and are aware of the academic rules and restraints of the discipline. In this direction, a suggestion made by Wilfred Cantwell Smith is well worth pondering over: "In the case of an encounter between two religious groups, let us say for example Christianity and Islam, the scholar's creativity must rise to the point where his work is cogent within three traditions simultaneously: the academic, the Christian, and the Muslim."²⁰ Teachers from other faiths would add depth and reality to our teaching and would go a long way in

¹⁹ Students need special expertise in the religious traditions of India. World religions are recommended with a view to widening the perspective of religious study in India and also to facilitate the thematic phenomenological approach to the study of the nature of religious phenomena.

²⁰ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither — and Why" *The History of Religion, Essays in Methodology*, ed. Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 53.

fulfilling the purpose of the discipline of History of Religions, provided there is fluent mutual communication and for this there is need that a community of scholars participates with full awareness and commitment as to the objectives and methods of the discipline.

2. There is a debate between the historical and the phenomenological approaches to the teaching of religions. According to the historical approach, religions are studied in their chronological order dealing with developments in successive periods of history. The phenomenological approach selects themes and fills them with data supplied by many religious traditions.²¹ The term "Comparative Religion" in this phenomenological sense does not imply any normative treatment of the subject, and for that reason, it is being brought back into common usage as an appropriate name for the discipline — only it needs to be divested of the vestiges of meaning given to it in earlier years, when "comparative" meant comparison of religions with Christianity, the latter serving as norm of spiritual excellence. Actually both these approaches, the historical and the thematic complement each other and are integral to the study of religion.

3. Where should be the main focus of the study of the History of Religions: on understanding human beings in their religious situations, or, alternatively, on religious systems? For Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the History of Religions is basically a study of persons: "The student is making effective progress when he recognizes that he has to do not with religious systems basically but with religious *persons*; or at least with something interior to persons."²² He talks in terms of personal encounter, dialogue, human involvement and so forth. The History of Religions, in this view, is concerned with people — what they are saying concerning religious and moral experience, what they understand the meaning of their own religious tradition to be, how it is changing under the impact of modernity, and how they envisage its shape in the future. It is to be involved directly in the study of religion as it is lived by fellow human beings, in short, a study of persons in their existential religious concerns. The proper task of the History of Religions, in this view, is the interpretation of "something interior to persons."²³

The other approach is a dispassionate study that deliberately maintains distance and objectivity in the interest of scientific accuracy for the study and recording of religious data. The proper role of the History of Religions is the investigation of religious data not dependent on such unmanageable factors as "the scholar's subjective attitude and views, and ... his religious faith." It is rather "a science which, using

²¹ Compare Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York: Perennial Library, 1965) for the historical approach, and Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), for the thematic phenomenological approach.

²² W. C. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 35. Italics mine.

²³ *Ibid.*

accepted historical method and with the support of psychology, sociology and phenomenology, establishes and examines facts in order to identify historically integrated religious worlds and to study their respective characteristics."²⁴

The question is: are the two approaches irreconcilably opposed. Are not living men influenced by their religious tradition and system of belief and are not systems in the process of reinterpretation under the challenge of contemporary concerns of living men? Can we fully study persons without reference to their religious systems and are systems totally abstracted from the inner life of those who subscribe to these systems? Is not the History of Religions large enough to hold these two concerns together within its scope?

²⁴ Kurt RILDICH, *Die Religionsgeschichte an der Leipziger Universität*. (The History of Religions at the University of Leipzig), quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282, footnote 33.