FAITH AND THOUGHT

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the Christian Revelation and modern research.

1972 *Vol. 99* *Number 2*

PETER COUSINS

Comparative Religion in the School.

In this paper Mr. Cousins, who is Head of the Department of Religious Studies at Gipsy Hill College, discusses the possibilities of teaching comparative religion (CR) in schools. He finds that, despite the difficulties which he discusses in detail, there is much to be said in its favour, even though the Christian who advocates this course may find himself in strange company!

In our pluralistic and relativistic society religious education poses a problem for every educationalist. What precisely should we teach – in fairness, that is, to all members of the community?

The study of comparative religion (CR) seems at first sight to offer a ready solution because it receives support from a wide spectrum of the community.

When we examine the situation, however, we soon begin to realise that the very width of the spectrum may cause embarrassment: support for CR may even turn to opposition when one realises how alien may be the associates with which the lot of the CR supporter is cast!

Let us first ask who its supporters are, and what their motives are. We may start with those farthest removed from the Christian point of view.

CR in the school is often favoured by those who despise *all* religion: those who, like David Tribe, insist that every mention of religion in the state school should be 'completely impartial' as between one religion and another, or between religion and no religion at all. It is the declared wish of Tribe and those who think like him that Christianity should be treated, if treated at all, on a par with "astrology, spiritualism and demonology which are excluded from the

curriculum"[1] (Tribe) and to this end the teaching of CR is a first stepping stone. A rather similar attitude is displayed by the obsessive enemies of the establishment who wish to see the provisions of the 1944 Act abolished simply because it has for many years been part of the established order. For such CR is a handy weapon in the unceasing conflict with accepted standards.

The study of CR is also, at times, supported by the agnostic who sees in the religions of mankind remarkable examples of human creativity. Man is not only the tool-making or the talking animal; he is also the animal who prays, his religious systems testifying to his uniqueness – a uniqueness accepted by Christian and humanist alike (*cf* the title of Dr. Julian Huxley's book, *The Uniqueness of Man*). No religion on this view, is to be despised, for religion represents man's response to the mystery inseparable from all existence: a response which transcends subjectivity. Is it even possible, the agnostic may ask, to improve upon the religious way of expressing important human feelings and aspirations? In view of such considerations as these he is disposed to support the sympathetic presentation of religious beliefs and attitudes in schools. He will, however, favour CR because he is convinced that no single religion is adequate to express mankind's response to reality.

Religious syncretists may support CR because they suppose that all faiths are ultimately identical – a supposition which, by the way, is by no means clear to all scholars. Thus R. C. Zaehner, Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford, writes:

> The basic principles of Eastern and Western, which in practice means Indian and Semitic, thought are, I will not say irreconcilably opposed; they are simply not starting from the same premises. The only common ground is that the function of religion is to provide release; there is no agreement at all as to what it is that man must be released from. The great religions are talking at cross purposes.[2]

Others who would not go so far as to say that all religions are basically one, take it for granted that no one religion could be true for everybody and therefore conclude that the schools

must teach a sufficient number of religions for every child to have a choice. In its most extreme and doctrinaire form, the demand is made that all religions should be taught on equal terms. However, though such demands are often encountered, it may be doubted how far they are intended seriously. Do responsible citizens really want their children to be taught the religion of Congo pigmies or the Hindu Tantras? The implications of the value judgment involved in the plea that teaching should be confined to the 'higher' religions are rarely faced.

Finding that he will be aligned with such supporters of CR as we have considered, it is not suprising that the orthodox Christian sometimes regards the teaching of CR with suspicion. If his views are biblically based he may regard non-Christian religions as worthless or even demonic. "What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God", says St. Paul (1 Cor. 10: 20). This, however, may be a one-sided view. The Bible, not to say Christian theology, does not condemn every religious experience outside the Christian or Jewish faith. The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel affirms that the Eternal World enlightens every man and even Paul himself at Athens and at Lystra assumes that the pagans he is addressing possess a genuine if limited knowledge of the one in whose image they are made.

Again, the Christian must bear in mind that whatever his private attitude may be, it is a fact that non-Christian religions such as Islam and Hinduism are now in our midst and constitute an unimpeachable argument in favour of CR. It can hardly be questioned that the teacher must help the young to understand their environment.

We must also take into account the affect of the revolution in communication. Inhabitants of McLuhan's global village are perfectly well aware that its diverse inhabitants are not all white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. In fact without some knowledge of their religion and world view we cannot hope to understand or sympathize with our neighbours either in the next house or in the next continent.

* * * *

Despite the force of these arguments, however, a case may still be made for the view that only Christianity among the religions should be taught in schools.

Two reasons given for this view are based on practical considerations. Few teachers can teach Christianity really well let alone other religions. With RE still officially classified as a 'shortage subject' it is unrealistic to expect the situation to change overnight. A speaker sent by the local synagogue, mosque or temple might be considered but in view of the difficulty which some British clergy experience in communicating their faith, it is pardonable to doubt whether Sikhs and Buddhists whose native language is not English, will be successful in explaining beliefs of their alien religions to British children and adolescents.

Secondly, teachers have not the time available. Few secondary schools allocate even two 40-minute lessons a week to RE in all classes; many offer only one per week in the first three years and possibly less thereafter. This is hardly adequate to do justice to biblical history and literature, the religious concepts of the Old and New Testaments, church history, the church's contemporary role, the philosophy of religion, Christian theology, and the social and ethical implications of Christianity. Thus there may be, as Professor Hilliard has suggested,[3] a case for introducing CR as a separate subject with its own allocation of time, but one certainly cannot reasonably suggest adding world religions to the list already enumerated.

What further objections are there to CR apart from the practical difficulties? Opponents may rest their case on the unique role of Christianity in our culture. It remains the only religion of which most people have any direct experience. Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism are not in practice alternatives available to more than a tiny minority. The influence of Christianity is felt even where it is rejected; Beckett could not have written *Waiting for Godot* against a background of Eastern religion. Those who take this view make short work of the alleged distinction between religious and Christian education. For members of our society, the only way in which they are likely to gain insight into religion is through the Christian faith. Once they have grasped the

meaning of prayer, worship and priesthood in this context they will be equipped to understand these and similar concepts in other religions. The ignorant but devout Salvationist may well have more in common with the dedicated and bigoted Muslim than the eighteen-year-old intellectual who has passed an examination in CR.

Christians or those sympathetic with Christianity may take a weak or a strong view, believing either that Christianity is the highest among a number of valuable religions, or that it alone is true and all other false. But whichever of these two views is taken, it remains true that other religions are significantly relevant to an understanding of the world we live in. Nor should it be hastily concluded that CR studies will weaken the authority of Christianity: the reverse effect is not unlikely.

John Stuart Mill makes some points which are relevant here. He advocates complete freedom to propagate all opinions, whether true or false. After arguing that if we silence an opposing view point because it is false, we assume infallibility, he continues:

> Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied. Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.[4]

Taking these points in order, we find some Christians who claim that Christianity contains "the whole truth" and who will therefore deny the possibility that CR can supply anything which Christianity lacks. Even if they are right, however,

all Christians are inevitably limited by individual and cultural factors in their grasp of their own faith. CR may serve to challenge and strengthen such people by presenting them with insights which they may at first sight judge to be alien to their faith, but which, on closer examination they see to be part of it. As an illustration we may take the activism and busyness of Christianity, in the Protestant West at least. The student brought up in this tradition may judge the quietism of much Eastern religion opposed to his faith. But if the contrast impels him to a closer examination of the biblical evidence and of Christian spirituality he will become aware of a very similar tradition which he might otherwise have overlooked.

Mill's third point is particularly applicable to the state of affairs that prevailed earlier in this century when many Christians certainly held their faith "in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds." Any honest approach to CR is bound to pass beyond mere phenomenology and description of what religionists believe and practise, to a consideration of the validity of the claims to truth made by different religions. It is too often assumed, by both the friends and the enemies of Christianity, that such an investigation will do it irreparable damage. Whereas Christians should be the first to claim that the result is far more likely to be an increased awareness of the "rational grounds" for accepting the biblical revelation and the claims of Jesus Christ.

In the same way, Christianity has become for many people "a mere formal profession", its meaning obscured and its force attenuated". When, however, it is placed alongside other world views, its significance, implications and demands become clear. There is an immense and exhilarating difference between believing that all is God and that God created all. The arrogant or ignorant people who suggest that free will constitutes a problem for Christians alone will think again when they find Indian scholars discussing the identical question and asking whether man is saved as a puppy which runs to safety or as a baby monkey which clings to its mother and is carried. The unique value attached to the

Incarnation by Christians is enhanced, not obscured, when juxtaposed with the Hindu belief in *avatars*. For whereas the *avatar* of a god appears in form only, for a short time, and at no specific point in history, the Incarnation involves a becoming flesh, a human life lived and a human death died, and all "under Pontius Pilate." A class of sixteen year olds learned what Christians mean by being "born again" only when they were discussing the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation - a very different concept and yet one which may at first sight appear similar.

* * * *

On balance there seems to be no doubt that we ought to find a place in our schools for the study of comparative religion. It is not difficult to find reasons for including it which will convince even the most fervent and convinced Christian. First of all, CR will help children realise that religion is a universal phenomenon and not merely the invention of an otherwise unimportant semitic tribe which has burdened the western world with an entail of neuroses and meaningless metaphysics. The untypical minority are not the practising Christians of this country but the handful of people who claim to have no religion.

Secondly, CR will show the formal resemblances between all religions – that all make certain claims (except perhaps some varieties of philosophical pseudo – Christianity), all prescribe certain types of behaviour, all are associated with certain emotions, Such teaching might make people less ready to make inaccurate and partial generalisations about religion: "It's nothing but feeling" . . . "It's all things you must do or you mustn't" . . . "It's just a way of explaining what you don't understand".

Thirdly, CR will help towards a better understanding of others. Such insight is especially important at a time when we are for various reasons and in various ways being brought into closer contact with members of alien cultures. Deriding and hating what we do not understand is so common a human failing that schools should do whatever they can to impart knowledge and insight. A fourth argument, related to

this, is that such knowledge can also give deeper understanding of world affairs, most obviously perhaps relating to the sub-continent of India, divided as it is by religious factors: or in the Middle East where Judaism and Islam have done so much to mould attitudes.

* * * *

If we leave until last our fifth reason – that children should be made aware of other religious options besides Christianity – this should not be interpreted as implying any low estimate of its importance. However, a distinction must be made between a valid and an invalid form of this argument.

In its invalid form, already mentioned, the claim is made that many religions should be taught so that children may make their final choice when they reach years of discretion. Those who reason like this know as little about the nature of religion as they do about what can in practice be done by teachers of RE in our schools today. It is quite a different matter to say that an important function of religious education is to show students the need for responsible choice between alternatives. CR can help to make this clear by offering what must necessarily be a limited body of knowledge about non-Christian religions.

Finally we must consider, briefly, what the inclusion of CR would mean in practice. Clearly new systematic teacher training would be necessary and the school time allocated to RE would have to be increased. If these obstacles could be overcome, CR might find a place in primary as well as secondary schools.

In the past, the study of non-Christian religions has usually been reserved for the higher forms of the secondary school. The systematic study of Christian theology is not possible before the student is capable of abstract thinking, and the concepts underlying Eastern religions are more difficult to grasp than those of Semitic religions – at least as far as Western students are concerned. So difficult is this theoretical study that many teachers who have attempted to teach CR even with sixth form students have concluded that young people are not in fact really interested in learning about other faiths.

However, if at first the study of other faiths was confined to Judaism and Islam, which have so much in common with Christianity, better success might be achieved. As these religions are also of great importance in our society their study is doubly recommended. A study of primitive religion might also be worthwhile; resemblances to and differences from higher religions would be worth considering.

If this type of abstract and systematic study were all that could be attempted, then CR would have to be confined to the upper forms in secondary schools. But religion is a human activity and expresses itself in human ritual actions. All religions cherish sacred objects and places, all involve religious activities in the home: all are concerned with certain emotions. So, it is plain that even young children can be introduced to CR in its simplest and most concrete terms. A common centre of interest in infant education is the home and family; often work on this subject includes information about the family life in other parts of the world. Since family religion is often an important aspect of family life, there is good reason to include references to this. Similarly, as slightly older children learn about other aspects of life in different parts of the world, they should surely learn about religion.

This does not mean that they will be given a potted version of the faith concerned. When children of eight or nine study geography they learn about things not abstractions. But sacred objects and sites and rituals are concrete and memorable. It is absurd to teach children about India without mentioning Hinduism; the omission is a powerful anti-religious instrument. Geography is not of course the only area of the curriculum in which CR is of importance. Art, history, literature and music are all fields in which the phenomena of religion present themselves quite naturally for attention. Inevitably something must be said about the ideas which lie behind the phenomena considered, but the ideas are far more likely to be understood in such a context than when they are presented in naked abstraction without reference to anything save other similar abstractions. Against the background of such a concern with religious behaviour, many parts of the Bible will take on new meaning, as sacrifice, priesthood, revelation

and worship are seen in a new light. There is certainly room for stories about the founders and great men of other religions and also for stories popular as folk tales.

It would seem reasonable to pay most attention to the religions of greatest local significance, and there are clearly great potential advantages in being able to make use of pupils who practise them. Teachers should be cautious, however, in approaching such pupils. They may not be particularly devout, and even if devout will possibly be ignorant. What impression of Christianity would be given by an eight-year-old British child addressing a class of little Buddhists? Or even by an average teenager, for that matter? On the other hand, even a shy boy or girl who does not know much about the theology of his family faith can give an interesting account of a religious festival, especially if a knowledgeable teacher asks the right questions where this is necessary.

By the time children are at secondary school they can begin to see how every religion has its own system of ethics. The resemblances are very important and studying them provides an impressive argument for the objectivity of ethical standards. (Christians who believe that all men are made in God's image have, of course, no vested interest in denying that men can distinguish right from wrong without reading the Bible). But there are also significant differences, and these can be related to the theology of a religion and possibly to the character of its founder. Such an ethical approach may well precede and prepare the way for a more theological and systematic consideration in the upper forms of the secondary school. Even here, however, visual material will be helpful, and teachers of RE today are fortunate in having available a fair amount of film and filmstrip.

REFERENCES

1. D. Tribe, *Secular Education,* n.d. (Pamphlet published by the National Secular Society).
2. Quoted by H. D. Lewis and R. L. Slater, *The Study of Religions,* Pelican, 1969.
3. F. H. Hilliard In J. R. Hinnells (Ed.), *Comparative Religion in Education* (Oriel Press, Newcastle) 1970.
4. *On Liberty.* World's Classics Ed. p 65.