

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ijt\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php)

# History of Religions, Hermeneutics and Christian Theology in India

DAVID C. SCOTT\*

The general area of concern to which I originally committed myself was "teaching religions in the Indian context." However, my own existential situation of involvement in the life and work of the Church in India and, more specifically, of being on the faculty of a theological college constrains me to address myself to the present topic. Need I beg the pardon of the editor of *The Indian Journal of Theology* for introducing the element of Christian theology into the discussion? I trust not. But, I must admit that one would not have to be malicious or unduly pessimistic to suggest that there are too many unknown factors here to deal with in a single essay, and that it would, therefore, be presumptuous to indicate their relationship or unrelatedness (or both). We might perhaps agree in the most general terms on what the history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) is: it is at least an academic discipline devoted to the study of religion in a responsible way. We might also find some minimum consensus on what Christian theology is: human reflection, as sound and coherent as possible, with its starting point in God's revelation in Jesus Christ. And, in the present context, perhaps not many would disagree with the suggestion that India is the religio-cultural nexus which has given rise to and nurtured a plurality of religious traditions, among them the Hindu and Buddhist. To be more specific might well invite confusion. Yet the most abundant source of confusion for the present discussion is surely the underlying, fundamental hermeneutical question. What is really at stake is the science of interpreting religious phenomena, that is to say, the very core of the religio-historical pursuit.

There are reasons why modesty will be becoming in bringing up the subject of hermeneutics: the pervasive apathy with respect to general statements about the manner in which historians of religions interpret religious facts,<sup>1</sup> and the fear of being considered a dilettante

\* Dr Scott is Professor in the field of religions at Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur.

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that there has been a total lack of concern with hermeneutical questions in the history of religions. See, for example, J. Wach, *Religionswissenschaft* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924), and *Das Verstehen, Grundzüge einer Geschichte der hermeneutischen Theorie im 19. Jahrhundert* (3 vols., Tübingen: Mohr, 1926, 1929, 1933); contributions by G. Messina, S. J., "L'indagine religiosa nella sua storia e nei metodi" and R. Boccassino, "La Religione dei primitivi," in Pietro Tacchi Venturi, (ed.), *Storia delle religioni*

— not just one who is sticking out his neck, but also one who is unaware of doing so. It would have been far safer to have chosen for a subject one or two problems in Hinduism or Buddhism.

Having gone this far in self-disclosure, I might as well go all the way and add one more thing. The feeling of modesty turns into embarrassment when I realise the utmost simplicity of ideas I can unfold about hermeneutical questions. However, I have a haunting suspicion that I am not alone in this realization, and that this simplicity is in fact the weightiest reason why most historians of religions stay away from serious hermeneutical problems in public life. If we may speak of a common embarrassment, we have a point of departure. Whether we feel comfortable about it or not then, we are concerned with problems in understanding.

Of one thing there can be no doubt: when we speak as historians of religion about religion, no matter how specialistic we are and no matter how scientifically inclined, we do *interpret*. The most specialistic specialist has to identify cultic gestures, words, and things; the alternative would be complete taciturnity, which is ruled out under the present academic rules. Under the present rules it is not just, advisable but mandatory to ask questions about the manner in which our identifications are guided and how they find their coherence. No specialist can hide his hermeneutical orientation or difficulties for ever. There will be always others in the classroom who discover it from his casual remarks. Even when one does not consciously propagate a hermeneutical system, attitudes and choice of words are powerful interpreters. Since we cannot abstain from hermeneutics, we had better be as clear about it as possible.

If only one fraction of what I have said is true about the fear of revealing one's simplicity accounting for our hermeneutical malaise it will be best to try no more than to raise a basic question. Certainly hasty answers cannot help us. As in all humanistic studies, we should try to be fully conscious of the central problem of our discipline, or, rather, to become fully conscious of it in each generation. Since everyone involved in the study and teaching of religion does engage in hermeneutics, even if only on the sly, according to the measure of his development and power, I too can only do this much: raise my question in my way. Dealing with the question requires the manner of a meditation rather than a lecture. I do not expect to clear up all difficulties. But in presenting my question to colleagues I do hope they will be able to say of me something similar to what the poet

(Tornio: Unione Topografico, 1949), Vol. I; F. Sierksma, *Freud, Jung en de Religie* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1951); R. Pettazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1954), ch. xix; J. de Vries, *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie* (München: Alber, 1961); G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper, 1963) Vol. II, "Epilegomena"; contributions by M. Eliade, "History of Religions and a New Humanism" and "Crisis and Renewal in History of Religions," in *History of Religions*, I, No. 1 (Summer, 1961) and V, No. 1 (Summer, 1965).

Wallace Stevens once said when he reflected on the inquisitiveness of a little grandson:

His question is complete because it contains  
His utmost statement...<sup>2</sup>

I have already indicated an inevitable modesty in the present discussion as well as an embarrassment by which we as historians of religions recognize each other from afar. Where do we get by reflecting on our embarrassment? Let us try to visualize it for a moment.

I discover that some contemporary Indian deities have certain features in common with some deities of the ancient Near East: necklaces of human skulls, certain symbols that seem to have something to do with a calendar system, certain cultic vessels of a curious shape and so on. With what questions am I faced and which ones do I consider most important? I may ask what historical factual relationship can be demonstrated. I may also ask what unity in human existence could produce such a similarity. I may also catalogue the data in detail and be sceptical about the possibility of indicating any meaning in them at all. I may concern myself with the psychological unity of the human race. I may even find one more occasion to harp on the theme that God has at no time left himself without witness. Now, the peculiar thing is that each question could be defended as most important. Or should we rather say that the questions do not have enough in common to be put side by side and compared in significance? At any rate, I select. Or, more precisely and more disturbingly, my attitude with respect to religion in general is of decisive importance in my treatment of the subject in each case. Even if I should like to be silent about this personal element, it is almost impossible to ignore one's temperament when at any point of the exposition a student may say, "So what?". Thus, one is involved in hermeneutics. And is it permissible to leave the matter there to be decided by temperament alone?

By temperament we can arrive at some sort of *philosophia perennis*, sometimes of a sublime form, too often a pale rationalistic reflection, the trouble being that it is only form and lacks all specific contents. However, from the point of view of the historian of religions, the basic mistake in these temperamental endeavours to arrive at universality is that they all find a support in only one factual observation and that they recognize too hastily: the observation that no people has ever been non-religious. This fact may be well-known but as a cornerstone for a foolproof, all-embracing hermeneutics it fails. No religion ever occurs in a non-specific way. The word "religion" itself indicates a multitude of things of which we sense a unity, but this unity we can neither express nor demonstrate. Any self-styled universalism dependent on no more than a pure conceptualization bypasses the

<sup>2</sup> Wallace Stevens, "Questions Are Remarks," *The Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 462.

actual phenomena of religion and even that universality which is given with the specificity of religious symbols. A cosmic tree is not universal because I observe that cosmic trees occur all over the world (and because I can add this kind of evidence to my other evidence and conclude that religion in general is universal), but because any specific example is in some sense *the* cosmic tree. As we may come to see later, it would not be out of place to ask the eager rational universalist where *his* cosmic tree is situated. The temperament which rationalizes prematurely has not become any rarer among us in recent times. It is not to ridicule others but to point to a temptation among ourselves that I mentioned it first.

Temperament alone can still help us a great deal to get a foothold in some sort of crisis-theology. Such theologies tend to present themselves as full of content and enable us to stand fast with zeal and certainty in the midst of an ocean of religious phenomena. The immensity of the ocean does not disturb the central zeal and certainty. Immensities generally stop being threatening there. Only particular situations count. For purely temperamental reasons we can like the idea of the Church's saying its word about this or that moral problem rather than dealing with the whole immensity of human morality. Everything becomes specific in the great light and there is no reason to belittle this, for the endeavour to deal with specifics implies an endeavour to overcome the sterility which goes with the formalism of hasty perennial philosophers. *Vis-à-vis* religious problems, it takes some courage to speak of specific contents and specific confrontations. In the midst of traditions with rich cosmic symbolisms, the Church speaks of the cosmic Christ. Elsewhere, although not exactly in time, yet as a result of specific problems, the Church speaks of the fact that the Jews cannot really be accused of Jesus' death. Temperamentally, we may well sympathize with these and other appraisals of specific religious problems. We may recognize wholeheartedly that we cannot make truly general pronouncements.

Thus I have tried to depict two temperamental attitudes. They are both possible, yet diametrically opposed to each other. With respect to religious facts both are equally curious. Whereas in the former case tribute was paid too hastily and too formally to the observation that no people has ever been non-religious, in the latter case it is as if that observation does not mean anything at all. Along the lines of the crisis temperament, it has become possible to pronounce such words as secularism and secularity as if they were a battle cry, a summons to make us recognize the real state of affairs. It is nevertheless necessary to hold ourselves back for a moment and admit that "secularity" cannot mean anything, is indeed nonsense, except in contrast with and complementary to "religion." With the crisis temperament there is a soft adage ringing constantly in the background: ultimately, it does not mean anything that no people has ever been non-religious. For with this temperamental attitude, as with the former, religious phenomena are no more than a foil. Indeed, for all their contrast, the two attitudes are strangely similar. Radically

critical or perennially philosophical, the two resemble each other, in spite of their quibbles about details.

For the historian of religions, there are in the first place religious materials asking for interpretation. Neither of the two temperaments mentioned nor any other temperament can suffice. The history of religions, compared with hasty harmonization and a theological determination to deal with specific situations, is quite chaotic. To put it in a more scholarly fashion, the history of religions, to the extent that it deals with materials that are hard to arrange, is always inductive rather than deductive, empiricistic rather than aprioristic. As in all disciplines of knowledge, ultimate questions interfere with our work but they should be allowed later in the course of that work. The temperaments discussed are examples of premature interference in our work by metaphysical and theological determinations. In one case the unity of religious structure is posited and thereby the unity of the human race. In the other case the idea of the situation (or this secular moment) is hypostasized.

As historians of religions we do not want to be naive and suggest that we do our work without presupposing and presuppositions. Yet, the common character of our work and the natural order of it demand that we do our serious reflection on such matters later and abstain at all times from confusing the course of our work with the settling of final problems. In this sense we are like a biologist, for instance watching the behaviour of a turtle long before he gets around to asking the question, "What is life?". If we ask such crucial questions too soon, we obscure our observations and start talking nonsense. Penetrating questions are essential to an understanding of our presuppositions in the history of religions as in biology. But as a biologist in his field work is not helped by a metaphysician or a theologian, so we are not helped by either of them in much of our doings. When a theologian introduces a term like "ultimate reality" and habitually uses it in the singular, I for one am at a loss in the reading of the Tantras and a great many other Indian documents as well, because something that would qualify well as ultimate reality occurs in fact in the plural and in various ways at the same time. This is a problem that might still be open for discussion. Most instances of interfering theologians are much worse. What should be done with one who insists on the necessity of a theological hermeneutic in the history of religions and yet plays demonstrably false games with the evidence of Hinduism or Buddhism? The case is so common that one could not think of listing all the instances.

Let us admit that all difficulties of this nature are in the first place matters of temperament. It may be disappointing to do so; it seems almost impossible sometimes not to get excited. But the admission may save us much unnecessary trouble. Scholarly temperaments are human temperaments and can be understood. When Basham, for instance, casually refers to the *lingam* as a phallic emblem,<sup>3</sup> some of

<sup>3</sup> A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (New York: Grove Press 1959), p. 308.

us who know about the world-establishing and liturgical value of that symbol may get very upset. Surely a genetic hint could not illumine much of Saivism? When Laurens Vanderpost in his beautiful writings on the Bushmen of southern Africa<sup>4</sup> sees his own nostalgia for the first spirit side by side with the myths about "the early race," others will get equally upset. However, does not our excited reaction itself usually depend on our temperament?

The point may seem trivial. Still, I feel certain that this subject of individual, almost whimsical decisions in establishing a vantage point deserves some consideration, much more consideration than it is usually given. Many a theoretical exposition is built on no more than an impulse of an individual and confuses the discussion hopelessly by smuggling in a metaphysic which is not a good metaphysic, or a theology which is not a good theology. The problem of what is true is not broached only by the junior, immaturely and too soon. In a way which is often harder to detect the same thing is done by the adult scholar who is obliged to say something on religious phenomena.

Another altogether different temperament needs to be mentioned: that of the thorough, sceptical, historical-critical scholar. This type is supremely admirable because of its indefatigability. It goes on in endless researches, sometimes with the greatest subtlety; it goes on in interminable dialectics, without ever committing itself to any form of dialectic in particular. Perhaps it is more a tradition than a temperament, nourished in western learning. But it is a tradition of the very few and strong. In its wake the weaker ones tend to find themselves eventually in a particular dialectic, dialectical materialism perhaps; or even worse, they end up quantifying and computerizing things to their individual heart's content.

Quantification is the immediate result of suspending one's own religion or rather the illusion that one's own tradition can be suspended. Suspending one's own tradition is indeed an impossibility and a hermeneutical hoax. Whatever we may mean by *epochē*, we cannot mean this.<sup>5</sup> To advocate such a suspension in order to enable oneself to "get at" another religious tradition is like saying that the best way to get acquainted with another person is to divest one's own personal presence.

An excess of objectification and quantification are ruled out by the very nature of the history of religions. The interpretation of religious phenomena with reference to the living tradition of the investigator is very much to the point. I would like to make a case for this, be-

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., *The Heart of the Hunter* and *The Lost World of the Kalahari*.

<sup>5</sup> See R. Panikkar, "The Internal Dialogue — The Insufficiency of the So-called Phenomenological 'Epoche' in the Religious Encounter," reprinted in *Religion and Society*, XV, No. 3 (September, 1968). Admittedly, the occasion of Raymond Panikkar's article was a "family quarrel" with fellow Roman Catholics over terminology in the context of inter-faith dialogue, but his objections touch the present western academic tradition at a number of crucial points.

cause I believe what is generally considered as scientifically sound is little more than conformism to the fads of our day and often not to the point in our field. The ethos of our discipline makes it impossible to comprehend religious materials in terms of something beyond religion. This follows from a reflection on the nature of religious phenomena. Symbolism and mythology both have an authority beyond which no higher authority can exist. If such an authority is nevertheless posed, the phenomena are not understood for what they are in their total claim. Our reason can analyse and explain parts and sections, but not the totality which is essential to religious symbolism and mythology. For instance, I can see why lower-class women function in the ritual of the *tāntrika* (s): they form a "naturally" given contrast to the educated and "pure" *brāhman*. Indeed, a pair of opposites<sup>6</sup> could not be expressed more emphatically than by these data of an analyzable social order. But I can give no explanation on the same methodological level for the absolute unity reached through the ritual. All I can adduce to support by comprehension is my knowledge of such a unity in my own tradition; or, simply, my awareness that I too am religious.

Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of the growing recognition of the role of the religious individual and the religious community. Gottfried von Herder's "voices of the peoples" was a significant insight into the centrality of the human reaction to, and appropriation of, the hierophany of the divine in the midst of the human.<sup>7</sup> The "voices of the people" do tell the historian of religions something; their words, their stories, reveal something. If it is not the essence, "the thing in itself,"<sup>8</sup> it may very well be something of equal or greater importance

<sup>6</sup> For the central importance of the *coincidentia oppositorum* for the history of religions generally, see e.g., M. Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religions* (New York: Meridian Books, 1967), pp. 419 ff.; and for Indian religions in particular see, e.g., Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's study of *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973). This is too well known to need further elucidation here.

<sup>7</sup> See *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 1959 ed., s.v. "Herder, Johann Gottfried von," by Harold E. B. Speight. This insight was elaborated in two of Herder's best known works: *Stimmen der Völker Liedern* and *Vom Geist der ebraischen Poesie*.

<sup>8</sup> Though other thinkers had perhaps by the implication of their language come close to supposing rather incidentally something of the sort, Hegel seems to have been the first to assert with clarity and vigour that religion as seen in society is something real in itself, a great entity with which men and women have to reckon, a something that precedes all its historical manifestations. Though if formulated in these terms and ascribed explicitly to Hegel the idea would be consciously accepted by few, it has nonetheless in fact haunted western thinking ever since. This is seen particularly in the formulation set forth by one of his brilliant students, Ludwig Feuerbach, who in 1851 published a book entitled *Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion* (English edition, *The Essence of Religion*, 1873). Ten years earlier he had published *Das Wesen des*



in the search to understand the history of religion; a fuller comprehension of *homo religiosus* himself.

In his *The Idea of History*, R. G. Collingwood asks whether the historian can ever know the past.<sup>9</sup> And his well-known answer is that the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind. History is the re-enactment of past experience, and by such engagement it is possible, so he holds, for the past to be "known."

Despite the many dangers inherent in this understanding of historical methodology — but then what method does not have its dangers? — the historian of religions, seeking to understand both the past and the present of religion, must above all be engaged as an "actor." He must re-enact the past, engage in the religious longings of others now dead and of others who are his contemporaries. He must re-enact in his own being the religious striving, searching and response of that which he seeks to understand.

However, we should be clear that this contribution to our existential orientation cannot easily be made into an object of academic research. Contributions of this order are more like astonishing and unexpected gifts. We cannot make the re-enactment of the religious strivings, searches and responses of others, the interpretations of the multitude of religious phenomena with reference to our own life and tradition into an applicable system. The discovery of the sense of a symbol as "making sense" for ourselves is indeed astonishing. It "rectifies" us and may even humble us or judge us. Such orientations or reorientations could not be an "object" in the common meaning of that word.

The function of recognizing and — if we may use this word — assimilating religious phenomena can be underlined in another, different way. There is no empirical way to find out about the origin of religion and thus establish a pristine, pure form. Every religion about which we know today is a syncretism in the most literal sense of the word.<sup>10</sup> Apprehension of alien religious elements did not have to wait for considerations of modern western scholarship. Religions with a great vital power have all absorbed numerous cults, symbols, and myths. Such absorption is not to be understood in the sense of the addition of alien elements to an existing tradition. There has always been an apprehension which was indeed more than a quantification process. The "assimilated" forms continued to live and were often even intensified because of the power of the assimilating

*Christenthums* (English edition *The Essence of Christianity*, 1853). The important point is not what he considered the essences to be, so much as the fact that he was suggesting that religion, and a religion, have an essence. Ever since the hunt has been on.

<sup>9</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 282.

<sup>10</sup> See J. Wach, *Religionswissenschaft*, quoted in J. Wach *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 29.

tradition. Such a process of understanding can be called "transmythologizing." The word was coined by Raymond Panikkar to convey the proper means of understanding religious phenomena, that is, not by reducing, but by renewing, their sense of orientation within the process of understanding which itself functions as a cross-fertilization of traditions.<sup>11</sup> It should be admitted that a transmythologizing is indeed what is commensurate with the form of the religious phenomena as we know them, viz. their historical form. The term seems excellent to me. It is clearly differentiated from "demythologizing," which suggests an activity without support in historical phenomena; moreover, "demythologizing" suggests the possibility of expressing at a certain moment non-mythologically what was said only mythologically until that moment; when that moment is or was remains enigmatic and is largely a decision of an individual temperament.<sup>12</sup>

Transmythologizing, then, is more than translating; it is more than linguistic know-how; it is more than identifying the Latin *deus* with the Sanskrit *deva*. The work of hermeneutics is not limited to a thorough understanding of the structure of another religion. It is at the same time a matter of recognizing the shape and the power in your own — its shape being revealed in the sudden light thrown on it by the other tradition; its power manifesting itself in providing vital resources in places where we had not even expected life. What I am attempting to describe here is not only a hermeneutical vision of the future. Having its prototype in the life of religious phenomena themselves, it is a human experience that has never been totally absent, even in the darkest pages of evolutionism.<sup>13</sup>

To sum up thus far, I have in the first place argued that none of us can be freed from hermeneutical involvement and that individually conceived interpretative schemes tend to fall short of the goal: I have suggested that many theories which are offered with the intention of presenting a philosophically or a theologically solid vantage point are in fact no more than whims. Second, I have endeavoured to indicate that hermeneutics does not demand a foolproof system but a direction; such a direction can be found in certain viable types of approach, but none of these can be made obligatory.

Having said this I want to return to that problem which goes against the very grain of our "scientific" mentality. Something is true. Is it still the novice's premature exclamation? Is not, in all seriousness,

<sup>11</sup> See R. Panikkar, "Unmythologisierung," *Kultmysterium in Hinduismus und Christentum* (Freiburg: Alber, 1964), pp. 176 ff.

<sup>12</sup> The term "transmythologizing" is also better than the more mechanistic term "re-mythologizing," for the simple reason that symbols and myths change in the course of history without ever returning to their "original" meaning. The term "re-mythologizing" might perhaps be reserved for the activity of interpreters who think they render the original sense (certain types of depth-psychology and sociology).

<sup>13</sup> See Geo Widerrgen, "Evolutionism and the Problem of the Origin of Religion," *Ethnos*, X, Nos. 2-3 (1945).

something to be considered certain by me before I can honestly adhere to my own tradition, that is to say, to that on which my hermeneutics hinges? I do not propose to say that my certainty lies in the circumstances and contingencies which caused me to be educated in a certain tradition. I do not want to say that the last word in hermeneutics is assimilation, or more precisely and more threateningly, assimilation (understood with respect to my own tradition—which is itself an assimilation) of an assimilation (a religious symbol) of an assimilation of an assimilation *ad infinitum*. The recognition of the existence of structures rather than merely genetically conceived assimilations (or in Wach's spirit, the "genius" of a religion rather than its "syncretism"<sup>14</sup>) is no consolation, for, as we know now the very interpretation of a structure does not show "what actually happened" but should be a "transmythologization" if it is to be anything at all. The question then is basically, "What is the identifiable 'stuff' of this transmythologizing?" Every advocate of a viable hermeneutics who knows what he is doing, and who also knows that his hermeneutics is unenforceable, has to make some philosophical decision. Since this philosophical decision is implied in his or her own tradition, the danger of reductionism in the study of religious phenomena continues to raise its head again and again. The danger may seem most conspicuous along Marxist lines of interpretation and so this can serve as a good example.

If religious structures are to be seen, like ideologies, resulting from social and economic conditionings, what chances could be left for an interpretation rectifying the tradition of the investigator? The implied philosophical decision seems bound to make a veritable transmythologizing impossible in the end: injustice is done to the phenomena and no new light is shed on the scholar's tradition. Thus on closer investigation the only virtue of the Marxist hermeneutics is that it fulfils some minimum requirements: it presents more than the scope of an individual and applies the same criteria to the other tradition and one's own. The same thing needs to be said of every hermeneutic. But our point is with regard to the implicit philosophical stance in a hermeneutics. All viable hermeneutics seem subject to the danger of reducing phenomena and misleading students because of a philosophical vantage point demanded and implied by the investigator's tradition.

However, the doubts levelled against various viable types of hermeneutics should not be exaggerated, for there are very few serious choices. The Christian faith may, for example, be called an interesting topic from a technical hermeneutical point of view since it presents a vantage point which is not given with a tradition and thus might seem to solve our fundamental problem. Nevertheless, it would be wide of the mark to identify a Christian theological perspective as an alternative hermeneutical choice. If a Christian theological orientation can be suggested, it has at least this much in common with other viable hermeneutics; it does not solve the problems on the level on which they are raised. Moreover, the subject cannot be broached painlessly.

<sup>14</sup> J. Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion*, p. 29.

I suppose that every Christian working in the history of religions must be fascinated at one time or another by the great figure of Giambattista Vico. He was not only one of the first modern men to discover that there is a certain order in human religious history and at the same time to posit a structural unity in the human race and thus make comparison of religious phenomena in different times and places a viable enterprise, he was a devout Christian. How did he do justice to the *homo religiosus* and to his own confession? Whatever interpretation of Vico's work is preferred, the answer will have to take into consideration Vico's peculiar use of the concept "Providence." In some contexts of the *Scienza nuova*,<sup>15</sup> it seems to refer to the guidance of God and thus to be in harmony with common Christian tradition. In other contexts, however, it refers to the line of development, the very pattern of human cultural and religious history, which is "natural" to human structure and capabilities and which can be detected by scholarly investigation. This concrete way of dealing with *homo religiosus* and one's own tradition at the same time seems to be confusing. Yet it is in principle the same method which is followed by most other hermeneutical attempts. The point is that, in order to deal with human religious phenomena in a sensible way, something sensible about human structure must be assumed. This sensible something must be in harmony with one's own tradition. Compared with other viable hermeneutics, Vico's work is still among the best. The ambiguity of his vantage point, "Providence," does not diminish but rather increases its value.

The real problem of transmythologizing, necessary as it is in all viable hermeneutics, comes in the category of faith. Faith after all cannot be equated with a religious tradition. As is well known, van der Leeuw raised objections to such an equation; van der Leeuw did not consider faith a phenomenon.<sup>16</sup> Theologically — that is to say, according to the discipline that should decide what can legitimately be said about faith — "faith" can certainly not be identified with "religion"; theologically, faith (*fides quae*) is a gift which may bring about great things — even move mountains — but it cannot be put side by side with a group of religious phenomena and, together with that group, be directed by something else, no matter how sensible that something else is. Theologically, it is out of the question to substitute our Christian tradition for faith, no matter how subtly the substitution is proposed: via a consideration of outdated world views, changing ideas in the earliest (prototypical) Christian churches, the empirical registration of changes in all religious consciousness, or what not. The Christian faith is not a general or generalizable something. It is as specific as the task of theology itself is inalienable and irreplaceable by the history of religions.

<sup>15</sup> Vico's principal work, the *Scienza nuova*, went almost unnoticed in his own time; it was to exert its great influence only much later. This "new science" is what we would call cultural history.

<sup>16</sup> G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, ch. 80.2.

The dangers are legion. But the one danger that must appear most frightening to a Christian historian of religions may be termed parochialism. The existence of *homo religiosus* poses a major question. How can the theologian answer this question without becoming parochial? The uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus, the Christ, the *sine qua non* of Christian faith, cannot be given up. At the same time there is the inescapable problem of "the pagan," the religiously outlandish person.<sup>17</sup> If the uniqueness of God's revelation is stressed it is often couched in incomprehensible jargon, which has little in common with the *skandalon* of the cross and yet is also quite strange to its surroundings; it is very much like the provincial dialect of self-identification, if not of smugness. If the existence of others enters into the picture, it is too easily broached in condescending terms which are worse than any of the methods advocated by the worldly but viable and sensible hermeneutics.

What can be done to put this unwieldy "Christian principle" to hermeneutical action? This is indeed the question which has been raised a number of times. Purposefully I put it in this wooden way. It is this wooden objectifying manner more than anything else which explains the terms which were invented and implied and are still operative. The common peculiarity of these terms is that they take for granted a difference between "the others" and "ourselves." Some of the terms are at the same time categories of thought.

"the others"	"we"
paganism, heathen	the true religion
natural religion	revealed religion
substructure	superstructure
nature	spiritual perfection
potentiality	actuality

No matter how different these (and others) contrasts are, they are all contrasts. Actually, when it comes to the problem of *homo religiosus*, the consideration that the vast majority of Christians, with a significant exception in the early Church, are in a real sense "heathens" has never received as much attention as these contrasts. Moreover, the best of these contrasting terms are condescending; this is also true of the most subtle pair, potentiality and actuality. Just as it is recognized that a religion would not be qualified sufficiently by saying that it is "non-Christian," so it is also not qualified by saying that it is potentially something.

No hermeneutic can be introduced along the line of such categories since they do not even come up to the level of ordinary human understanding.

<sup>17</sup> Need I remind the reader that the English word "pagan" derives from the Latin, *pagus*, a rural area or district, away from the city, where educated and civilized folk lived? Similarly, "heathen" was a person from the heath, the remote country districts. The pejorative connotation of the words "pagan" and "heathen" made them unfit for use.

The comedy of the concerns laid down in lectures and books on such topics as "Christianity and other religions" or "Believing and being religious" is usually twofold: The "others" are not understood for what they are (with all their universal claim and intent and validity) and the Christian faith, in the end, is not revealed as what it really is but as an object of a simple, rational scheme which is itself extraneous to the Christian faith. The external assumption of a contrast leads to the confusion of phenomenology (as the endeavour to demonstrate the structure of religious phenomena) and theology; such confusion is the order of the day. Now one would not suspect Karl Barth of this sort of confusion, because the "triumph of grace," in his theology seems to exclude all reliance on extraneous contrasts and thus all anxiety about the rescue operation of Christianity — in short, all parochialism. His anthropology (*Church Dogmatics*, III, 2) has as its real centre Jesus Christ. Strictly theologically, all anthropological notions from extraneous sources are irrelevant. But it is a good horse that never stumbles. Thus we can read in Barth's anthropology about the meaning of the human fear of death in the light of God's Word; we are told that the nothingness with which men and women are confronted "is not any ordinary type of nothing by which we are threatened in death"; and then we are presented with the following elucidation:

...It is not that nothing of which Buddhism and all its sympathizers have always dreamt, viz., a nothing which is harmless, neutral and in the final analysis even enjoyable, but on the contrary that nothing which is quite dangerous and painful, which goes with our nothingness in the sight of God.<sup>18</sup>

Whose interests are served by such an exposition? Only those who have already decided that Buddhism is somehow inferior in some exterior scale of values can get a boost out of it. Is any aspect of God's Word in need of being set off in such bold relief against an aspect of Buddhism? In fact, such an opinion would go against the grain of Barth's theology. The quoted exposition is indeed a rare exception in it. The point I am trying to make is that the best 20th century theologians have had a hard time avoiding the inclinations toward uncalled for contrasting, to say nothing of missionaries and evangelists. Somewhere a little phenomenological tirade — of a rather bookish nature — about some religious tradition pops up and the threat of parochialism is realized.

It is only with the greatest hesitation that I offer a suggestion. The only justification for doing so at all is the fact that in a real sense *homo religiosus* has been discovered very recently. He is not like a new continent or a new planet that has been discovered and mapped out and whose charts are right there before us, proving that our universe is thus and so. No, he is like every subject in the humanities — someone we will have to live with for a considerable time before any re-

<sup>18</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Harold Knight, et al., (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1960), Vol. III, Pt. 2, p. 608.

orientation becomes generally recognized and evaluated in terms of what we already know for certain. My suggestion is that lack of respect for "the other" is immediately related to the Christian's lack of humility in himself before God. I mean this both in a very concrete, practical way, and with respect to the formation of hermeneutical theories.

There is the illuminating and encouraging example of Fr Wilhelm Schmidt, an anthropologist and Roman Catholic priest, and his "school."<sup>19</sup> It is well-known that with him the first serious attempt was made to send out missionaries who were trained ethnologists to various parts of the world. It is also well-known that in that school the expectation that pure ideas concerning a "high god" would be found among the most primitive peoples formed a great stimulus. Moreover, it was assumed that the occurrence of a "high god" would have something to teach us about the earliest religion of the human race. Schmidt has been criticized severely for his method, but that does not concern us here. Rather, I should like to point to the astounding number of good ethnological materials that have been collected by a group of people who were not just faithful Christians, but who expected to learn something of the utmost theological importance from the people with whom they lived and worked. What is more natural than that this expectation to be educated gained them the confidence of many and that for that reason their work has been so fruitful? It would be picayune at this point to say that the theology that was spelled out in the background of this movement was somewhat too scholastic and mechanical, or that a word like *Uroffenbarung* ("primal revelation") was utterly wrong. It worked, and this fact should give every historian of religions substance for thought and should certainly raise a serious question for theology. It could be that the question of "the others," "paganism," or whatever it is called, has usually been broached on too high a level. Or, more precisely, it could be that especially within the framework of theology we should be aware of the temptation to "solve" the problem prematurely, with the dubious help of extraneous contrasts that serve our vanity rather than the Lord. Let us not forget that in a very concrete manner our problems of hermeneutics are problems of life and death. Dare we raise the question whether the fact that many tribes have become extinct or are heading for extinction now is related to our incapability to understand them, our inability to imagine a cure for their decreasing self-respect and for the physical decline that goes with it? Is their death somehow linked up with our own spiritual death?<sup>20</sup> Here is a re-

<sup>19</sup> See W. Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (London: Methuen, 1931) and *The Culture-historical Method of Ethnology* (New York: Fortune's, 1939).

<sup>20</sup> This is no mere hypothetical question. For example, at present I have a couple of Naga students for whom this is an extremely existential concern. Swami Abhishiktananda has raised similar questions with regard to Hinduism in his study of *The Church in India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969).

ligious problem and a theological problem in one. To transmythologize requires indeed more power than we can command in a hermeneutical system. It is a ghastly symptom that some contemporary Christians, paying attention to *homo religiosus*, can consider the subject closed with a few lines on Buddhism or Hinduism, the only concern being to safeguard the Christian faith on an intellectual plane by comparing it to other, superficially conceived religious notions. Indeed, the search for a hermeneutic is a matter of life and death, for ourselves as well as for "the others."

I wish to present the second part of my suggestion, no matter how vulnerable it may be, in the following manner. What the general historian may be forced to admit by experience with his subject matter — that he must serve humanity by contributing to the orientation of his own world — should be self-evident for the historian of religions who has any inkling of theology. His occupation, which from a certain perspective may seem an assimilation *ad infinitum*, is a *diakonia* in a sense. It is not just a task that is insuperable, but one that is delightful. If any contribution to our orientation takes place — it is a serious affair, and admittedly we expect to contribute something — it takes place as if by chance. I think that it is still responsible to say out loud why this is so. It is because of a *diakonia* that turned out to be different from what was generally expected — a *diakonia* that until this very day is difficult to systematize, no matter how hard we have tried to give the footwashing an acceptable liturgical form. There are still encouraging "loose ends," such as the meeting of the Lord with the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman who turned out to be able to cause surprise to the Lord himself.<sup>21</sup> There are also encouraging surprises in the lives of the disciples. There is the one apostle who was taught to set aside his rule of contrasting his own and the other tradition and who entered the house of the centurion Cornelius.<sup>22</sup> What is significant is that the apostle learned his lesson without taking refuge in any "higher" extraneous contrast. He only raises a question: "This is what I have learned and now I want to ask you, Why did you send for me?". Is this not the question the historian of religions might well ask his subject matter? Paul's mission to the gentiles begins with the vision of a man who beckons him. It is my hope that historians of religion might come to see the people of our subject matter inviting us and even that we might have dreams in which some one beckons us.

Is faith indeed not a phenomenon? Perhaps it really is not, but who cares at this point? The only thing to watch out for is that no theologian gets hold of such a phenomenologically intended statement and uses it to perform a rescue operation on "his own tradition." I do not know exactly what happens to faith when it gets mixed up in this, that, and the other tradition, or how many other things it may run into that look like copies or even models of itself. For all I know

<sup>21</sup> Mark 7:24-30.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 10:9-43.



a religio-historical hermeneutic which sees a "Christ-centred syncretic process," the "eagerness to seek in the beliefs and expressions of the peoples of the world the elements that can serve as a human starting point for the unveiling of the Christ and His significance,"<sup>23</sup> as its highest and final goal may express our common concern most precisely. Perhaps it is "creative transformation," that process "in which our imagination and life orientation can be transformed by lucidity of vision and openness to what we see" that can provide "a unity within which the many centres of meaning and existence can be appreciated and encouraged and through which openness to the great ways of mankind can lead to a deepening of Christian existence."<sup>24</sup> Yet not transmythologization, Christ-centred syncretism, creative transformation, nor any goal of a viable hermeneutic is theologically decisive. In spite of all gropings for words, the study of *homo religiosus* requires a constant remoulding and sacrificing of things we were sure of. What we call transformation of religious symbols in their history is a matter of death and resurrection, of dying and being born again. This is also true for our hermeneutics. What is and remains at stake is the *imago dei* of the *homo religiosus*. Whatever one's theological framework is, it seems to me that waiting until one is beckoned can best be identified as comprehensive and painstaking research.

In conclusion, the significance of the fundamental hermeneutical question must be underlined again. It may be a great gain to recognize that no viable hermeneutic in our field can be enforced. This is not a weakness but a strength. It indicates that the history of religions is by nature a discipline of orientation and reorientation, of study and teaching. A fitting Christian theology, fruitful to the extent that it is deparochializing according to its kind, cannot be enforced either. This, too, is not a negative result but a great gain.

<sup>23</sup> M. M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1975), p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> J. B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 21.