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# The Study of Religion: Luxury or Necessity?

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This series of lectures must begin with something of a confession. I will quite readily admit that my stance towards the subject I have chosen is not neutral. Any of you who may be acquainted even casually with my activities over the past forty years in connection with McGill's Faculty of Divinity and later its Faculty of Religious Studies and its Institute of Islamic Studies must easily have guessed my response to the question posed by the title of this lecture series before a word was said. You will know how much I have been involved in the study of world religions and that I have a great deal at stake in the matters to be discussed.

These lectures are thus something of an *apologia*, an attempt to lay out in brief fashion issues that have concerned me over many years. What is said, therefore, will be colored by my enduring interest in world religions, especially Islam, and the developing history of the Muslim community. I trust, however, that I shall not be guilty only of self-indulgence, that is, merely of making an effort to justify the direction my career has taken. There are reasons for the pursuit of religious studies that are far more basic than the merely personal satisfaction one may derive from plunging into a fascinating and sometimes exotic subject. For religious studies, understood as the disciplined academic investigation of human religiousness in all its manifestations, deal with some of the most profound and most pervasive of all human experiences. Serious encoun-

ter with the religion of a people or even of an individual, when pursued in depth and with sensitivity, must finally bring one face to face with their ultimate values, those things that reflect their view of the universe and their understanding of human life and its purposes.

Admittedly the task of penetrating any religious perspective, especially a perspective that differs from one's own, is beset with many pitfalls and problems. If the effort is made—as I think it must—to comprehend and appreciate the other, the reward is great. There is no more effective key to unlocking the secrets of an alien culture than what we call its religion. In their religion we may hope to find the basic convictions underlying a people's world-view. Given a world as fragmented and conflict-ridden as ours, where the need for understanding across national, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries is so pressing, few enterprises can be of more importance than that of uncovering the foundational values and understandings of our fellow human beings. The matter becomes all the more significant and pressing as the world grows smaller through the advance of technology and the contacts of its various peoples become closer and more frequent.

It is difficult, therefore, to understand why the explicit recognition and the role of religious studies in the university should be surrounded by controversy as it has been in recent days at McGill. On the face of things it would seem evident that the disciplined study of religion, and not only the religion of one's own tradition, should be among the constitutive elements of a liberal, humanistic education. Given the role of religion in the various great cultures history has produced, any other stance seems absurd. To consider briefly only two examples, how can one make sense of the authority of the Egyptian Pharaoh and the social-political system of ancient Egypt without placing them in the context of the religious system of which they were so integral a part? The Pharaoh's designation as the god who sits upon the throne of Egypt and who is transformed upon his death into Osiris, the deity and king of the realm of the afterlife, shows clearly the integration of the cosmic and worldly orders. The life of society reflected and, indeed, duplicated the cosmic order and the world of the gods. Together they made up an integral unity such that one cannot be fully comprehended without the other.

As a second example we may ask whether it would be possible to comprehend the brilliant civilization that grew up and flourished in the Middle East under the Abbasid caliphs without considering the rise of Islam and its eventual function as one of the two foundational pillars of that civilization, the other being the Arabic language. Although life in both ancient Egypt and in the classical period of Islamic history was undoubtedly influenced by other factors in ways too numerous to men-

tion, ranging from geography and climate to economic considerations, religion played a crucially important role in each instance by providing its intellectual and spiritual grounding. Their religion took the role of what Walter Lippmann would have called their “public philosophy” (Lippmann 1955). For any thing like an adequate understanding of these civilizations to be achieved religion must be given a large and, indeed, a basic place in their study. To leave religious considerations aside would be to neglect one of the foundation stones upon which the entire structure of these civilizations was erected. A similar case could be made for our own European cultural heritage, which unquestionably has been massively influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, so much so that it is customary to speak of that tradition along with the heritage of the classical world as constituting the twin pillars of Western civilization.

As a glance at history will quickly show, religion has occupied a similar place of importance in every civilization of which we know. How then can the idea be entertained that religious studies as a distinct concern should disappear from the university’s offerings? It is perhaps easier to win assent to the crucial importance of religion in human life when one has reference to events that happened in the distant past or to cultures and peoples who are not of immediate concern today. Matters, however, are often different when we come to speak of things closer to home.

Inclusion of religious studies in the university curriculum has sometimes been opposed on the grounds that such studies cannot be neutral and objective, but necessarily issue into advocacy for narrow and exclusivist points of view. It is also asserted that religion is subjective and personal, a matter of faith that cannot be established or verified by rigorous intellectual analysis and whose study, therefore, is not a genuine science with a proper place in the university. Though these negative views are based on a misunderstanding of what religious studies are about, they continue to be held in some circles. Against them it must be insisted that religion is not only a universal phenomenon in human history—there are no known peoples who do not hold views or follow practices that we would recognize as religious—but that it has every claim upon scholarly attention as one of the most influential among the many elements in human existence, even when scholars judge some beliefs or practices to be irrational or unacceptable or think religion itself to be without foundation in reality. If it is considered important and legitimate to conduct systematic studies of political, social, and economic behavior, and to call such studies “sciences,” surely the same should hold for religion. It is true that the study of religion will never yield the precision and high probability that are demanded in the physical sciences, but neither can the social sciences or other humanistic studies conform to such standards. Yet

rarely are questions any longer posed concerning the “scientific” status of social-scientific investigations, much less queries about the justification of their inclusion in university curriculae or their representation in the institutional structure of the university as distinct disciplines. The fact is that the mathematical models of the physical sciences, which many would insist are the sole standard of truth for modern humanity, simply do not fit political, social, or religious studies, which must necessarily be content with lesser degrees of certainty. This is not to say, however, that these sciences are to be scorned as sources of knowledge about the conditions of human life because of their imprecision. All of these disciplines concern themselves with essential and universal aspects of human behavior. The results they achieve may be somewhat “softer” than those expected by a physical scientist, but they nonetheless make an invaluable, vital contribution to our understanding of the world around us.

Where religious studies are concerned the importance of this contribution has come generally to be recognized, as evidenced by the explosion in the number of departments of religion or programs in religious studies in universities and colleges across North America and elsewhere, and also by the large and growing numbers of scholars and students they attract. Such has been the case with McGill. One result of the transformation of the Faculty of Divinity into the Faculty of Religious Studies is a much greater emphasis on the great non-Western religious traditions of the world. In addition to scholars in the traditional areas of Judeo-Christian studies, we have seen the appointment of specialists in the religions of South, Southeast, and East Asia who, in cooperation with the Institute of Islamic Studies, have mounted a highly successful and increasingly attractive program of studies. Appointments made have also included several individuals who are not Christians, but Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. The program is now one of the most vital and successful offerings of the university. It should and must continue to exist and to rise to new heights.

There is no need to belabor the value and importance of religious studies to an audience such as this, but it does seem appropriate to recall their significance at a time when the McGill Faculty of Religious Studies faces possible changes that may radically alter its status in the university and damage the cause of religious studies generally. We need to remind ourselves of the significance of what the faculty does, and when it is necessary to come to its defense. With this long introduction I should now like to get down to the major content of this lecture series.

### **Methodological Considerations: A History-of-Religions Approach**

In much of what is to come I fear that I may be fighting the last intellectual war all over again by rehearsing matters that are already familiar to

most of you. My defense for doing so is simply that the issues we will discuss have been important to me as my thinking about religious studies has developed. My interest during long years has focused on the branch of religious studies that deals with the great non-Western religious traditions, but especially Islam. It is about this branch of intellectual inquiry that I wish to speak in these lectures. Such studies are sometimes called "comparative religions" but more often in North America they are known as the "history of religions" and their practitioners as "historians of religion." In German the discipline is designated as *Religionswissenschaft* and in French as *sciences religieuses*. Both designations are, perhaps, better indications of what scholars in the field undertake than is "comparative religions" or "history of religions," because of their implication of a wide-ranging study that employs several distinct methods, a study that seeks to bring system to the broad field of religion as a whole. Nonetheless on this occasion I prefer to employ the usual North American term and to speak of the history of religions and historians of religion.

Use of the word "history" is justified because historical investigation is a large part of what historians of religion must do. In fact our attention will fall largely on this aspect of their activity. Historical investigation, however, is far from being the whole of their task. There are also hermeneutic and systematic dimensions to the enterprise: to interpret and bring order to the data that historical digging might uncover. There is the necessity to compare traditions, to look for similarities and differences, to determine to the extent possible the universal features of religious experience and expression, and finally to attempt to systematize the entire vast array of the subject matter. All of these efforts are devoted to the end of discovering and describing the nature of religion, wherever and whenever it may be found.

This result should be a critical, impartial, and empirically based analysis of the phenomena of religion. The history of religions is essentially an intellectual undertaking; it is an effort to understand something vital in human life and to bring it into accord with other aspects of our existence. The purpose is largely descriptive. Thus the history of religions belongs at one end of a continuum that links normative approaches to religions with descriptive ones. As a science its purposes in no way include the intention to judge the truth, falsity, or relative merit of any particular religious tradition or phenomenon. It differs fundamentally, therefore, from such activities as theology or philosophy of religion, which seek to expound not only what people do believe or how they relate the realm of religion to the rest of human experience, but also how they ought to do so. These normative disciplines have their bases in religious commitment whose content, nature, truth, and significance they

set out to express. In contrast the history of religions is primarily an intellectual enterprise that aims to understand what religion is and what its significance has been in human history. Whereas the normative disciplines I have mentioned are grounded in a particular tradition, the history of religions has a broader perspective that seeks—some might say presumptuously—to embrace the whole of human religious experience.

It must be admitted, of course, that elements of valuation may and usually do creep into the judgments and descriptions of even the most scrupulous historians of religion. The question of whether a scholar can achieve complete objectivity, impartiality, and freedom from presuppositions has long been debated. It is generally conceded that the task is impossible. The goal of *full* objectivity, though an ideal of historians of religion, is usually granted to be unattainable. However, awareness of the desirability of impartiality and objectivity, and the deliberate effort of striving for them, can go far in eliminating the most egregious offenses against these modern values. In most instances historians of religion are themselves committed, practicing religious individuals. In such cases scholars must somehow come to terms with the demands of their faith on the one hand and those of their scholarship on the other. We will return to this matter at a later point. In the final analysis the attempt at a sharp division between normative and descriptive approaches to the study of religion may not be possible to maintain, but the history-of-religions approach seeks to be as faithful as possible to the objective of a wholly descriptive treatment of the fact of religion as an important element in human experience.

Such a goal and the activities in which the historian of religions must engage inevitably pose certain problems. I wish to suggest that there are three major categories of issues that arise in connection with a history-of-religions approach: scientific, moral, and theological. The scientific issues are those that arise from the study of religion: how it is conducted, its limitations, the validity of its results, and so on—in short, issues that have to do with method. The moral issues are those that emerge from the relationship between scholars and that which they study, and the implications of the former scientific issues for their own personal intellectual integrity. Finally the theological issues are those posed by the enormous religious diversity exhibited in the course of human history. While it is neither the intention nor the task of historians of religion to resolve these theological problems, there is no escape from the fact that their study must lead inevitably to the consideration of such issues. Of course we will not be able to explore all sides of these matters; to do so would require several books. But we will look at those matters that, in my opinion, are among the most important.

## Scientific Implications of the Study of Religion

I may begin the discussion of the major scientific problem by stating two propositions that are basic to the study of religions. They both relate to the significance of the word "history" in the phrase "history of religions." The first of these is the affirmation that *religion is a historical phenomenon*, an activity that has its realization in time as part of the stream of historical events. Because this is so, religion is open to rigorous study and analysis as are all other events. Its study, therefore, presents many of the same problems that investigation of other historical events may pose. It is true that religious people hold that their religion points above and beyond the historical plane to something greater that calls it into being. But it is my contention that the substance of religion itself lies in the ebb and flow of history. At first glance this assertion may seem banal, but I think that it holds important implications for the study of religion, which we will examine shortly. The second and obviously related proposition is that *religion is a human phenomenon*, a matter that falls within the domain of human experience. When one deals with religion one inescapably deals with people. I am well aware that these views will not be acceptable to some of you and that others may understand them in a context that I do not intend. What I mean, then, requires some explanation.

All genuinely religious people of whatever tradition, time, or place testify to the reality and the experience of something trans-human, trans-historical, or transcendental, which is the basis of their faith. The reality in question is one greater than themselves or anything in the world around them, something sharply set apart from the mundane and of such overwhelming significance that, once encountered, it cannot be ignored. It demands expression. Confrontation with such a reality, however it may be conceived, lies at the basis of all true religion; where it is lacking there can be no authentic religiousness, only sterile custom or pretense. The fact of such an experience must be taken with utmost seriousness by historians of religion. It is the primary datum for their understanding of *Homo religiosus*.

Further, the experience of transcendental reality must be accepted for what it is: something *sui generis* that is misunderstood when reduced to a function of something else. The vast majority of the theories of the origin and nature of religion that have been developed over the past 150 years have, in fact, been reductionist. One of the best known is the animist school founded by the famous E.B. Tylor whose views held almost undisputed sway for many years, especially among anthropologists. Tylor attributes the rise of religion to the ignorance of our earliest ancestors. Having misunderstood the nature of certain natural happenings such as sleep and dreams, they drew false conclusions about the causes of these things.

In turn this primitive failure led not only to the belief in spirits, which Tylor's school thinks to be the essential element in all religiousness, but more important to the eventual evolution of the great variety of religious beliefs and practices that history exhibits, including monotheism. From this standpoint the entire religious enterprise is thus faulted in its very foundation, and all those who hold to a religious perspective on life are in a certain way basing their convictions on that primitive error. The difficulty with such reductionist views, in scientific terms, is their failure to take seriously the testimony of people who regard experience of the transcendental as an objective fact that constitutes the basis of their religiousness.

I wish to emphasize here that I am not arguing for the existence and truth of a transcendental realm. Whether such a realm exists—whether God exists, to put it in other terms—is a metaphysical question for philosophers of religion to answer. My point, rather, relates to the analysis of human religiousness and to a conceptual scheme that may help to achieve such answers. The basic problem in trying to understand religion, as I see it, is how to deal with the transcendental by methods that are historical. How can historians handle something that, in the nature of the case, lies beyond history? For most secular historians such a question is simply ridiculous, but the peculiarity of religiousness is that it claims a transcendental basis. Historians of religion must give due place to that claim if they are to be good historians, to represent the religions they study as those religions present themselves. Some progress toward solving this knotty problem can be made, perhaps, by reflecting on the assertion that human beings are the prime subjects of religion. Something apprehended as transcendental—call it the divine, God, or whatever you wish—is witnessed to by religious people as that which demands a response, calls forth their commitment, and evokes the kind of behavior that we usually identify as religious.

Religion, as I understand it, is precisely the response to, reaction to, or expression of the experience of the transcendental. For religious individuals the transcendental is truly present in their experience as an objective, non-derived entity. Again I intend this statement as a historical, not a theological, judgment. The objectivity of the transcendental in the believer's experience must be accepted before all else, otherwise little progress will be made with regard to the nature of religion. For the religious person it can never be acceptable to characterize the transcendental as an illusion or as mere projection of human needs and desires. *Ergo* it is a mistake for scholars to do so as so often happens. All such reductionist explanations of religion are theoretical impositions "from the outside" that deprive religion of an independent and sound basis. In effect the

subject of such theorizing says to the religious person: "I know what has happened to you better than you know yourself. I understand you, while you do not understand yourself." Religious persons experience matters otherwise. That experience, of the transcendental, is the datum with which historians of religion must begin their inquiry.

Still, the transcendental cannot be explored directly or immediately, at least where the experiences of the great mass of other people are concerned. By definition the transcendental lies beyond the boundaries of the mundane and, therefore, beyond the capacity of the intellect or the senses to encompass and comprehend it. Yet it impinges on the workaday world, in the experience of religious persons, not as something fully graspable to be sure, but as awesomely present to consciousness. The experience of the transcendent is both real and powerful, and that is the decisive fact for the historian of religions. If investigating scholars are themselves religious, there is of course nothing to prevent them from exploring their own personal experiences. Indeed it would be surprising if committed scholars did not do so. Such exploration, however, is subject to the personal needs and limitations of the person conducting it, which may have no bearing on scientific inquiry. A history-of-religions approach is directed toward the understanding of religion in much broader terms than the merely individual. From the perspective of an attempt to construct a science of religion, the transcendental defies the capacity of the historian of religion to grasp or describe it; but the existence of the transcendental in the experience of religious individuals must be unambiguously affirmed as an axiom of the study of religion. The geography of that realm, which religious experience holds to lie beyond the worldly and the mundane, is inaccessible to sensory observation or rational inquiry, but the religious person attests to its presence. Were it possible to explain or describe the transcendental in rational categories, to order it according to a scheme devised in the human mind, it would no longer be transcendental.

What historians of religion can describe is the reaction to the transcendental, the human affirmation of having apprehended an awesome reality and the consequences that flow from it. The latter are events that happen in history. They should, therefore, be capable of being rationally ordered and understood, at least to some extent, by the methods applicable to the general investigation of human behavior.

It is here we find the meaning of the statements that religion is both a historical and a human phenomenon. It has its being in time and is a part of the unfolding of history with all that implies. Further, all of those things that we include in our definitions and studies of religion consist of the experiences and activities of human beings. It is humans who encoun-

ter the divine and humans who then act to express their apprehension of it through ritual forms, the development of intellectual systems, the creation of communities, and the formation of moral codes. Thus it follows that the study of religion is the study of a certain kind of human activity. While the transcendental or the divine remains ever present as the underlying assumption of all religiousness, the expression of its nature and significance is played out in our everyday world in the many things that men and women do in response to it.

In the prophetic religions, namely Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, it is common for many to speak of their own religion as a "divine religion" and then, for apologetic purposes, to contrast their own tradition with others that they consider to be merely human inventions. The judgment involved here is theological and valuational rather than scientific and descriptive. For that reason such affirmations have little use for the historian of religions besides their worth as data to be taken into consideration when describing the religious tradition under scrutiny. People think and speak in this way because of the role that the notion of revelation plays in their religious outlook. The divine is seen as disclosing, manifesting, showing, speaking, or opening itself to humankind through a series of special revelatory acts. These revelations become the basic element in the religious outlook from which all else flows. A religious perspective that gives the place of primacy to revelation tends by its very nature to be exclusivist in its understanding of religious truth. Exclusivist claims are, indeed, one of the all-but-inescapable implications of calling a religious tradition "divine" or "revealed." That is why proponents of the prophetic religions find it difficult to accept that those outside the revelatory tradition within which they take their stand can possess truth.

Along similar lines, followers of the prophetic religions often argue that the critical methods appropriate to the study of other religions cannot properly apply to their own, precisely because theirs is divine. Whereas the religious activities of other peoples may be subject to rational inquiry and analysis, due to their mundane origin, the divine religion is of an entirely different qualitative order. It is based, the argument goes, on something above and beyond the historical, and so approaches calculated to come to terms with the historical, including the history of religions, cannot penetrate its mystery.

The argument is expressed also in the claim that only believers may properly study their own tradition. Outsiders are excluded from the outset because they do not share the believer's faith. In a conference on Islam and the history of religions, held at the Arizona State University several years back, Dr. Muhammad 'Abd al-Ra'uf, then director of the Islamic Center in Washington, made an eloquent plea for Western schol-

ars to abandon their critical studies of the Qur'an and biographies of Muhammad. It is, he contended, often hurtful to Muslims to read what others write on these crucial subjects; but more important, it is illegitimate for non-Muslims to analyze or interpret the Qur'an or to write about the life of the Prophet, since they do not acknowledge the element of inspiration that gives these pillars of the Muslim faith their importance. A proper study, it is held, must necessarily begin with the recognition that Scripture and the prophetic example are truly inspired and in that sense divine. If acknowledgment of the most basic qualities of Islam is missing, scholars, no matter how well-intentioned or erudite they may be, are not addressing Islam as Muslims know it. The results of such scholarship distort, by necessity, the understanding of Islam. Studies of the Scripture and of the Prophet should, therefore, be left to committed Muslims, while others might content themselves with religiously neutral matters of lesser consequence like the history of the community and the later development of its thought.

There is here a serious issue. The proposition "You must be of my faith to understand my faith" has much to commend it; and it poses a challenge to the historian of religions. To meet that challenge the historian must, without reservation, recognize and accept the fundamental place of the transcendental in the life of Muslims. It is not enough for one to say that the experience of the transcendental is true for Muslims but not for oneself or for others. To be faithful to the Muslim experience, which is after all the point of the scholarly study of Islam, scholars must somehow transport the transcendental reality perceived by Muslims into their own consciousness. Scholars must by some means bring the transcendental and all that it means onto the historical plane, so that they may come to terms with it. Islam reflects an experience of the transcendental in its historical manifestation, and the scholar's effort must give the element of the transcendental its due. This is the methodological problem that phenomenologists seek to resolve by their insistence on the need to bracket one's own convictions and views when approaching the religion of another. The reality of the other must be allowed to shine through or its study will miss the most essential element of all.

Unfortunately Dr. 'Abd al-Ra'uf's plea is a counsel of despair. Not only does it put Islam beyond the pale of an outsider's understanding, but it also, as a general principle (were it accepted as such), renders impossible an understanding across religious lines. On this score a science of religion would be an absurdity. Such a plea seems to imply that there is no rational basis on which people can communicate with each other about their most fundamental concerns. Each religious community—if not, in the final analysis, each individual—is an island unto itself.

Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is said to be a revealed or divine religion. A moment's reflection, however, will disclose a problem. The very name that Muslims give to their tradition, *Islam*, might be taken to support the human and historical nature of what we call Islam. The word is usually translated as "submission" or "surrender," that is, submission to the will of God. For my part I prefer the translation "commitment." However it may be rendered, Islam signifies the relationship that human beings should have with their Sovereign Creator. That relationship is determined by the reaction to the revelations recorded in the Qur'an. The revelations themselves do not create Islam; they are its pre-conditions. What the revelations establish is the possibility of Islam as that which sets out the duty and privilege of submitting oneself to the Creator in humble gratitude. It is not God but men and women who make or do *Islam*.

*Islam*, in so far as it is known or can be known, is what human beings do to show their submission to the will of God as revealed in Scripture and the prophetic example. It is actualized at the moment when people recognize the revelations to be such and then determine to realize their implications in life. That decision and all that comes after it are fully human. The material that presents itself for observation and analysis in the study of Islam is in the realm of human activity: the apprehension of the revelation, the decision to act on what is apprehended, and the expression of that apprehension in intellectual, practical, and social ways. The true study of Islam, then, is the study of the Muslims: what they do and say, how they behave and believe. Muslims, I can assure you, are most decidedly human beings, and human beings can be studied. What historians of religion cannot deal with is the transcendental *per se*. As crucial to Muslim faith as the transcendental may be, it comes into historians' purview only as it impinges on some individual or group of people, becoming part of their experience too. In doing so, the transcendental enters history.

Again I should like to underline that to take this stance is neither to affirm nor to deny that the experiences of Muhammad, the Muslim Prophet, which Muslims recognize as revelations are genuinely so or not. It is rather an attempt to locate, with precision, that which historians of religion can observe and that which is the legitimate field of their study. It is not the business of scholars interested in the scientific study of religion to tell Muslims that what they hold to as revelations directly from God are genuine or otherwise. Neither is it their business to tell Muslims what the content of the revelations truly is, that is, whether the Muslim understanding of them is right or wrong. The transcendental element that lies at the heart of the Islam of our Muslim contemporaries is not

directly accessible to a history-of-religions approach, but the expressions that Muslims give to their experience of the transcendental—matters, as we saw, that fall well within the realm of the historical and human—can be observed and analyzed. The point I wish to make may perhaps be expressed by distinguishing between the Islam in the mind of God and its historical apprehension. If the former represents the eternal will of the Creator for the way men and women ought to live, the latter, what we may call “historical Islam,” may be seen as the actual comprehension of this will.

Somewhat similar exclusivist views find their expression in relatively recent Protestant thought, especially in the teachings of Karl Barth and his followers such as Hendrik Kraemer. Barth distinguishes sharply between the Word of God and religion. The former is regarded as divine, eternal, all-meaningful, the latter as a creation of fallible human beings. Nathan Söderblom makes a superficially similar distinction when he writes of the Religions of Revelation in contrast to the Nature Religions. Söderblom’s purpose, however, is to establish two neutral descriptive categories that allow for the classification of the world’s major religious traditions. In his distinction, on the other hand, Barth offers a judgment of value and truth. Of whatever interest it may be to the theologian, such a judgment is of little value to the historian of religions, except as a phenomenon to be noted and interpreted. In any case, it is difficult for the historian of religions to understand how the Word of God can become relevant to human beings without its being apprehended and transmitted through human agency. The Word does not declare itself in a vacuum. Someone must hear the Word and understand it with his or her own faculties before it can take on any meaning in the world. If human agency is necessarily involved in the encounter with the divine, as I think it must be, then even this theological judgment would seem to support the point we are endeavoring to make: religion is a historical and human enterprise. As Fritz Buri (1966) has remarked, “When spoken by a human tongue, the Word of God is still a human word.”

The proposition that religion is a historical phenomenon to be approached on the human scale has a number of implications. One of the most important is the fact that religiousness, wherever and whenever it occurs, is always conditioned by factors that condition other aspects of human history. There is no such animal as Religion in general or in the abstract; there exist only specific manifestations of religious responses. As Söderblom again has said, “Es gibt keine Religion; es gibt nur die Religionen.” There is no such thing as religion with a capital R, only the religions. Religion does not stand apart from broad historical processes. Religious experience is always someone’s religious experience, and wor-

ship is always someone's worship. That is to say, there is a particularity about religious events parallel to the particularity of all other events. Religious persons, whoever they may be, are always children of a specific culture, persons who speak a particular language, who have unique personal and intellectual endowments, who live at a particular time and in a particular environment, and who have been privileged or oppressed by experiences all their own.

It is not necessary to dwell on the point that every human being is different and that these differences are brought about by the differing circumstances of individual lives and biological inheritance. What is important to emphasize are the implications of this fact for understanding the nature of religion. Like everything else that constitutes human experience, our religiousness is also affected by the many forces that play on us. The people of one age differ in outlook from those of another, even within the bounds of the same culture. We of this age and of Western culture differ more from our ancestors and from our non-Western contemporaries than has any other group of people in history. The problems of yesteryear are not those of today. The world-view of generations to come will make our own seem outdated and naive. Human understanding has grown and continues to grow, with every generation coming to see things (to a certain extent) differently from its predecessors.

This fact poses a major problem for scholars who wish to come to terms with the religious expressions of people of distant places and times, or of different cultures; for in order to understand anything at all they must place those expressions in their proper context; that is, they must view such expressions as the peculiar products of designated times and places with their unique circumstances. The requirement is not only to set aside one's own viewpoints and perspectives (or bracket them as phenomenologists would have it), but, to the extent possible, to "think oneself" into the mind-set of the people who are being studied, to see the world as they saw or see it. This is very difficult to do and, perhaps, can never be fully carried through. The tendency is always to see things as our own growing personal experience has taught us to see them. As close as one may come to bringing oneself to think like another, it is impossible completely to share that other person's experience. The difficulty is compounded when the objects of study are people of a wholly different culture or people who lived in the very distant past. Nevertheless the effort must be made, for failure to put the object of one's study into its own peculiar context is a sure formula for misunderstanding it and distorting its meaning.

Thus if we study the Qur'an, for example, and wish to comprehend its impact on those who first heard its sonorous words, we must try to

enter the perspective characteristic of the inhabitants of seventh-century Arabia. But the religious meaning of the Qur'an, of course, is not restricted to what the first Muslims saw in it. With the passage of time the revelations have been given an enormous variety of readings as each successive generation of Muslims has sought to plumb the significance of the revelations for its own circumstances. These different interpretations reflect the situations of their authors who look at the text from their own standpoint, their own involvement in history. The Qur'an does not interpret itself any more than the Bible does; individual people, with all of their unique traits, are the indispensable agents for mediating the sense of the sacred text to the community. The process continues to this day as Muslims look to their Scripture for guidance in the vastly changed circumstances of the modern world. The case is no different with the Christian and Hebrew Bibles. There is no fixed or unalterable meaning of these Scriptures, though many have held that there is. The only thing that is "fixed" is the constant renewal and appropriation of scriptural meanings as each generation approaches them afresh in the light of its own circumstances and needs.

This fact brings us to another issue that arises from saying that religion is a historical phenomenon. Religion shares the general quality of history, namely that of constant change. If there is anything about the nature of history on which one can depend as an invariable absolute, that thing is change. What may be important and true for one generation may well prove insignificant and untrue for another. This applies to religion just as it does to every other sphere of human activity. Thus I have said to my classes in Islam over the years that had the Prophet Muhammad been able to read the writings of the much-revered medieval savant, al-Ghazali, who died in the early twelfth century, almost 500 years after the Prophet, he would not have understood them and would likely have considered al-Ghazali to be a heretic. Al-Ghazali's wholesale adoption of Greek categories of thought for the expression of Islam, something that was characteristic of the late classical period of Islamic history, was unknown in the time of the Prophet and totally absent from the pages of the Qur'an. Further, were the Prophet and al-Ghazali together to be in a position to study the works of some modern Muslim writers, they would hardly recognize these latter writings to be expressions of Islam at all. What we call "Islam" is not a monolithic entity. It is an emerging, developing, evolving perspective on the world and human life—a perspective, furthermore, that comprehends a vast range of differences within itself.

Precisely the same may be said of other religious traditions, including Christianity. There is nothing constant about Islam save the events surrounding its origins, from which an ever-renewed significance is drawn. It

must be kept in mind that our use of words such as “Islam” or “Christianity” involves a very high degree of abstraction. It may well be necessary to employ such terms in our normal discourse as a kind of intellectual shorthand to avoid having to recite a mass of details to indicate what we are talking about; but their unspoken implication, that Islam or Christianity or whatever tradition is a fixed and readily identifiable entity, is misleading. The Islam in the mind of God may be eternal and constant, but the historical Islam, which is the only one we can know, is caught up in a process of unending change. If we ask, “What is Islam?” in terms relevant to historians of religion, the answer must be that it consists of all that Muslims have felt, said, or done through the centuries in response to their apprehension of the divine. There is a frequently heard Muslim objection to some forms of Western scholarship about Islam that is premised on the notion that true Islam is a fixed and unchangeable ideal built into the very structure of the universe. As the true Islam, it is with this ideal that scholars should concern themselves, not with the actual conduct of Muslims who may or may not reflect that ideal. This objection must be dismissed, for the ideal has true significance only as reflected in the conduct of those who recognize it. Like everything else in the Muslim faith, the understanding of the ideal also changes and evolves. My point is that responses to the divine are ever different and will continue to change in the future. In the study of religion at the historical level, the scholar does not deal with an eternal truth but with the enormous richness and variety of ways in which an allegedly eternal truth has been experienced and found expression.

The last implication of the scientific model, which I wish to bring to your attention, has to do with historians of religion themselves and their own historicity. Those who study the history of religions are in no respect different from those who study what we may call “secular history,” so far as the requirements laid on them are concerned. They go through the same process of gathering and interpreting data, of reconstructing what the evidence available to them may suggest about the matter under consideration, and of forming judgments. Both must enjoy and exercise a radical autonomy in regard to their findings, rejecting any and every form of authority that might limit or determine the nature of their judgments. Instead they should follow where their evidence and their judgment lead them, always recognizing that the results of historical inquiry and reconstruction are less than completely certain. The critical attitude of posing persistent and never-ending questions to historical sources, to one’s own work, and to that of others is a hallmark of the historian’s craft. In the study of religion, as in secular history, the task is more than one of collecting data from generally accepted source materials, and stringing them

together into some kind of connected account. Even the most revered source materials must be examined and re-examined with a skeptical eye. There can be no area of inquiry that is held to be especially privileged and shielded from probing inspection. Contrary to the stand of Dr. 'Abd al-Ra'uf, whose views I noted earlier, nothing can be set aside as too holy to be studied and analyzed. Both the historian of religions and the secular historian must strive for objectivity and impartiality, subjecting all events that come within their field of interest to the same rules of criticism and interpretation. They must also apply a single standard for understanding events without exception. What does not accord with their common experience and view of reality cannot be accepted as a standard for the events and peoples of the past. If there is a difference between historians of religion and secular historians, it lies only in the choice of subject matter and the necessity of the former to deal with the experience of the transcendental as part of the data of their inquiry, a difference that arises from the nature of the subject matter, not from methods or approaches to be employed.

The question still remains concerning the extent to which the judgments and findings of historians of religion are affected by their own presuppositions and experience. Precisely like those whom they study, historians of religion are, as Van Austin Harvey (1966) puts it, "immersed in history like a fish in water." They are every bit as much the children of their time as the religious figures under their scrutiny. If the object of their study must be put into context, so also must the scholar who does the studying. All of the qualities that I have indicated as the marks of a critical historian are products of the modern evolution of thought, stemming from the nineteenth century. They differ radically from views held in medieval times, so much so that they represent a veritable revolution in the way people think. This revolution was an outcome of the Enlightenment, which is undoubtedly one of the principal watersheds in the intellectual history of humankind. Prior to the Enlightenment, the critical study of history, not to speak of the critical study of religion, was inconceivable. To treat religion as one treated all other matters would have been deemed disrespectful, if not blasphemous. The Enlightenment, however, wrought a profound change in Western consciousness, a change of immense consequences that are still being worked out today.

The discipline of history of religions is, as Charles Long (Adams 1977, 469) has reminded us, a "child of the Enlightenment." So, of course, are its devotees. One who professes to be a historian of religions stands in the Western, post-Enlightenment tradition. This context, I suggest, exercises a determinative influence on much of what we as scholars think and do. It is a major element of all modern Western scholarship.

However, many of those whom historians of religion study do not share this heritage, for the principles of the Enlightenment have not penetrated everywhere in the world. So powerful are the ideas and attitudes that have come to us from the Enlightenment that we are scarcely conscious of them. They are so integral to our thinking that they form the very furniture of our minds, the framework of concepts in and through which we think. This intellectual context decisively separates historians of religion from the people of the past and the present. The Enlightenment is perhaps the most significant of all the factors that set the context for historians of religion, for it determines in large part both the questions they ask and the results they achieve. Caught in the particularities of history, as they inevitably are, perhaps all that historians of religion can do is to become conscious of how they arrived at where they are; that is, to see themselves, like everything around them, as products of history. Only in this way can historians of religion hope to overcome some of the limitations which this fact imposes.

### **Moral Implications of the Study of Religion**

The Indian writer, journalist, and intellectual Khushwant Singh, who is a prominent member of India's Sikh community, tells a tale that should be cautionary for the historian of religions. In 1870 "Her Majesty's Government of India," believing the work to be important, invited well-known German philologist Ernst Trumpp, then Regius Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Munich, to prepare a study and translation of the Sikh community's Scripture. Though Trumpp apparently did not hold a very high opinion of the Sikh religion and saw little future for it, he agreed to undertake the task. Subsequently he went to Amritsar, the Sikh holy city, to carry out the work. He was, however, a Sanskritist by training, and he found difficulty with the language in which the Scripture was written. As a consequence he solicited help from some of the Sikh Granthis or Scripture readers of the community. Trumpp was a smoker, but he was seemingly unaware that Sikh religious teachings take a strong stand against tobacco. As he opened the Holy Book, he lit his cigar. Without offering any reason or explanation, the Sikh religious dignitaries vanished.

Singh goes on to cite some of Trumpp's remarks that prefaced the translation of the Sikh Scripture he eventually produced. Trumpp (Adams 1977, 224-6) describes the hymns in the book as "rather poor in conception, clumsy in style and wearisome to read." He was also nonchalant about expressing his opinion that the Sikh Scripture had nothing new to offer with regard to either content or style. As one can well imagine, the Sikhs were deeply offended by Trumpp's conduct, considering it

a provocation mischievously arranged by the British government. After some time the British, to whom the Sikhs were very important, tried to smooth over these ruffled feelings by entrusting the task of translation to another individual.

This story may be taken as an entry point for our consideration of the moral implications of a history-of-religions approach. The question here, illustrated quite well by the Ernst Trumpp incident, may be put as follows: how should one *act* towards those whose religiousness is the object of study? The attempt to answer this question is not simple, for it leads us back to the matter of the scientific requirements of a proper history of religions. What seems to be “the right way” of acting towards those whom one studies often poses itself as a problem for scholars of religion. Can they be true both to the requirements of critical scholarship and to the moral obligations required of them in their relations with the people they study? The truth is that the three kinds of issues that I have sought to distinguish (scientific, moral, and theological) cannot, in the final analysis, be neatly separated from each another; they are intricately related. Any effort to speak of one of them necessarily requires us to address the other aspects as well. This is very much the case with the ethical issues that present themselves in connection with the study of world religions.

The first issue to be considered has to do with simple respect for the values of other people. As I emphasized earlier, religion reflects the basic values of individuals and/or groups in a way that nothing else does. It reveals their world-view and their understanding of the purpose and meaning of human life. These convictions are expressed among other ways by the articulation of rules for conduct, of responsibilities and obligations, and also of sanctions that flow from the religious experience. They are thus the foundation of a value system that sets the norms for human behavior in whatever religious tradition under consideration. Indeed one well-known theologian of recent times, Paul Tillich (1951, 11–15), has defined religion as involving that which people hold to be of “ultimate concern.” It may be possible to construct an entirely rational system of values and, therefore, of morality that is not based on religion, as ethical humanists claim to do. That is a philosophical matter into which I do not wish to enter here. But if there is morality without religion, there can be nothing that we recognize as religion without an overpowering sense of values and the morality that accompanies them. Certainly in the case of great religious traditions of the past and present there can be no doubt concerning the close connection between religious faith and the affirmation of a set of values that have their basis in that faith. This would seem to be one of the most elementary observations

that one may advance concerning the great religions. Religion implies the recognition of determinate values. This relationship is so intimate that for many people it is quite impossible to draw a distinction between morality and religion, to separate the values that matter most from the encounter with the divine.

As a practical matter of everyday life, it is well known that disrespect for things that others consider precious can place one in a difficult, if not dangerous, situation. We are accustomed to tread softly when dealing with matters that others view as having great significance. Even when we treat things that are not of great consequence to people, we hope for—indeed, expect—civility. It is simply a matter of common courtesy to speak gently to those with whom we must deal, showing respect both for that individual and, by implication at least, for whatever outlook on the world they may cherish; that is, we do not gratuitously attack or impugn the values of fellow human beings. Unfortunately, one frequent exception to this rule occurs in regard to religious belief and practice. Where these very basic matters are at issue, restraint and respect often give way to disdain and scorn. To behave circumspectly in relation to other people lubricates the social process, and it makes life more pleasant. More important, however, such behavior implicitly recognizes the high value that must be placed on human sensibilities, according them the dignity they deserve.

If this is true in the ordinary relationships of life, how much more should we strive for a respectful and appreciative attitude in those things that matter most to people? If there is something of a moral obligation that impedes us from offending the feelings of others at the mundane level, is the obligation not greater when we discuss or react to those things that are truly of ultimate significance for them? Ironically human instinct often pushes us towards extreme attitudes and conduct when vitally important matters are at issue. The things that are most significant to us are also the most highly emotionally charged; they call forth the strongest reactions when they are disregarded or treated with disdain. Religion is precisely the place where ultimate values are mirrored most clearly. I would argue, therefore, that a moral responsibility devolves upon students of religion in particular to treat the feelings and convictions of others with a full measure of sensitivity and regard. The matters at issue are profound and the attitude of the scholar ought, correspondingly, to be serious. This is perhaps a consideration more immediately relevant to students of contemporary religious life who may meet daily with representatives of the faith community they have chosen to study. But it does not stop there, for historians also confront (in a sense) those in the past whom they seek to know. Scholars must meet past figures with an openness to what those figures have experienced if they are to present

such religiousness in its true dimensions and flavor. Whatever community, time, or aspect of religion may be the object of their interest, scholars must have both the capacity and the willingness to think themselves into the spiritual world of those they study, something they cannot do in the absence of a proper reverence for what they are studying. Here the scientific and moral questions that necessarily confront those who choose to study religion converge. Our present concern, however, is the moral implications of studying religion. When historians of religion take up the task of investigating faith commitments, they also contract a responsibility to act towards their subjects in a respectful and non-condemnatory way.

Awareness of this duty and the attempt to fulfill it are all the more important in our time because of the nature of the world in which we live. The barriers of travel and communication that in the past served so effectively to isolate peoples of different cultures have increasingly broken down. Modern means of transportation and communication have made the world into a global village. We all stand much closer to people with convictions at variance with our own than at any other time in history. As the contact grows so does the moral obligation that arises from it. One need go no farther than outside this building to be impressed by how small the world has become. In such a cosmopolitan city as Montreal we are likely—indeed almost bound—to encounter persons of diverse ethnic origins, cultural backgrounds, languages, and religions. *Ergo* the study of religion in its broader manifestations takes on a quite special significance; it is a potent means for understanding not only those who are far away or who lived long ago, but also our neighbors. Few things can be of more urgency in this afflicted world of ours than coming to terms with the deepest motivations and hopes of fellow human beings.

As we are all well aware, the relationships among religious groups have not always been based on mutual respect or good will. All too often the history of inter- and intra-religious encounters has developed into conflict. When outright fighting has been avoided, which is not always the case, relations between religious groups have, nevertheless, often been marred by nasty polemics as each party has sought to demonstrate its own superiority and the unworthiness of others. It should go without saying that polemics have no place in the academic study of religion, except, again, as a datum in the lives of certain individuals and communities that must be recorded and explained. In any case I do not know of any instance when deliberately polemical and hurtful assertions have succeeded either in convincing anyone of the merits of religious commitment or in changing a commitment already made. Polemics and the attitudes that accompany them are not only violations of the moral respons-

ibilities of those who foster them, but also quite simply unsuccessful strategies. Their major function seems to be a species of self-congratulation, a way of intellectually patting oneself on the back.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, of honored memory in this institution, suggested a criterion that scholars of religion might employ to judge both the accuracy and the moral appropriateness of their statements about the religious experiences of others. Smith argued that students of religion should not say or write anything concerning the religion of others that the others themselves would not accept as valid and true. This stance grew out of the hostile reaction to Smith's sharp criticism of the Indian Muslim community in the first of his books, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (1946). While that book, in spite of having been published more than fifty years ago, remains a standard reference for students of Indian Islam, it gave offense to those whose thought and activity were its subject matter. Seeking to avoid such reactions and further offense, Smith articulated the principle just cited. As an ideal it would be difficult to find a better formulation of the moral duty of students of religion, especially those who concern themselves with contemporary religious life in communities outside their own. Unfortunately it is an ideal that is exceedingly difficult, if not completely impossible, to attain—at least as things now stand. Something like it may eventually be achieved between equally informed, sophisticated, and open individuals. Yet even in such circumstances there are great difficulties to be overcome. If ever this ideal is realized, success will come at the price of great change on the part of those involved, even to the extent of loss of traditional identities. Clearly, however, the ideal cannot be applied across the board to all of the common believers of whatever community one may be interested to study. All caveats aside, however, it still underlines the moral duty of students of religions with great clarity.

A related point has to do with the relations of religion professors with their students. Presumably the reason why students enroll in a religious studies program or in a theological school is the desire to enlarge and deepen their understanding of religion. Many of them, perhaps especially theological students, come with strong religious commitments. Others hope that studies in religion will help them to make such a commitment, one that will bring spiritual satisfaction and peace. Often it is the task of the professor to challenge and even to break down these commitments and expectations in order that the enlargement of understanding and religious expression may take place. I remember my own reactions to biblical criticism when, as a newcomer to the University of Chicago many years ago, I encountered it for the first time. Not only was I confronted with a vast new subject matter to try to master, the religious convictions that I

held since childhood were also challenged by the assumptions, methods, and results of critical study. The result was a kind of personal crisis from which I emerged only after a long period of considerable confusion and much agonizing. Such an experience, which I am sure is duplicated many times in student life, raises the issue of moral obligation towards those whose religious convictions are questioned or assaulted. What right do we as teachers have to try to set aside, change, or undercut the religious convictions of those who fill our classrooms? The matter is all the more pointed when we consider that the professorial tendency is one that does not give positive solutions to the problems raised, but leaves the students with troubling questions and a variety of possible stances taken by thinkers past and present.

I find that the matter of moral obligation is even weightier when the students concerned are not of one's own tradition. If ethical doubts arise when professors confront a classroom of Western students, with whom they share something in common, how much more is that the case when the students are of another faith and hold to different convictions? Much of my teaching career in this university has involved me directly with Muslim students from a variety of countries and cultures. One is called upon by the very situation to respect the religious experience of such students whose entire purpose, while studying at a Western university, is to absorb attitudes and methods of study, some of which will inevitably contravene or undermine their religious convictions. The challenge for teachers is to learn to speak in two "languages" at the same time—that of their own tradition, the Western university, and that of the students' with whom they deal.

Can this be done without bringing to the fore and explicitly discussing matters that may strongly conflict with sincerely held and deeply felt religious positions? I, for one, have always been more comfortable in offering points of view that challenged the religious convictions of my audience when I have known that the audience consisted of persons with a Christian background like my own. Such intramural discussions have seemed legitimate as explorations of matters of mutual interest, even when they produced controversy. It is quite another matter, however, to address people of another faith as an outsider concerning their tradition and its meaning. For such a thing to be at all acceptable one must exercise great humility before the subject matter, recognizing that the matters under discussion are of profound significance to those who listen. Above all one must avoid any appearance of arrogance by claiming, whether explicitly or implicitly, that one possesses the only true answer to the matters in question.

The issues relating to the moral obligations of religion scholars have

been posed in a dramatic way by Edward Said. His book *Orientalism* (1978) is a vitriolic condemnation of Western studies of the Orient. While recognizing that for some people the notion of the Orient refers to the Far East, Said identifies it with the Arabs and Islam—a choice that is explained, no doubt, by his Near Eastern origin; he was born in Syria and raised in Egypt though educated in the West. Said is presently Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University. In addition to his work in literary criticism, Said is well known as one of the principal spokesmen for the Palestinian cause in the United States. *Orientalism* has evoked a tremendously enthusiastic response from Near Easterners, especially from Muslims. This reaction lends weight to what it says, for it seems to express, as perhaps no other piece of recent writing has done, the deeply felt grievances that many Muslims hold against Western scholarship. Although the book is clearly a polemic with all the faults that attend such writing, and although one may disagree with much of what it says, there is a sufficiency of truth in the work that it must be taken seriously.

Said defines Orientalism as, among other things, an academic discipline that is based on a centuries-long tradition of textual material (books, articles, journals, encyclopedias, etc.) supported by institutions such as universities, foundations, missionary organizations, corporations, and governments. It is a discipline that he believes has created its own object of study: the Orient and those who inhabit it, the Orientals. In his view this is a clear case of the knower creating the known. This Orient of the Orientalists, however, is not the brute physical geographical entity of the Near Orient, the countries of the Near East that are truly out there, but it is something that the Orientalists have imaged or created for themselves, a product of their own minds, and, furthermore, an abstraction of such generality that it can have no true meaning. History, he asserts, is made by human beings, not in the sense that human beings are the actors in history, in what really happened, but in the sense that the discipline of history involves a representation of the past in the mind of historians. Thus historians construct history by a process of projection that involves, of course, their own historicity, with all the limitations imposed on their understanding. In similar fashion, it is held, the Orientalists have created the Orient and having created it, they then study their own creation. In a kind of circular movement of thought, what is learned from the study of the Orient confirms and upholds the concept that the Orientalists have brought into being. It follows, therefore, that the Orient in the Orientalists' understanding is an essentialist concept; it is unchanging—indeed, unchangeable—as are the dogmas of the Orientalists. Like the concept of the Orient itself such dogmas are gross gener-

alizations without specific warrant in facts; they contain no hope or possibility of contacting the real life of the Near Orient with all of its messiness, variety, and vitality. Orientalists always speak from outside the real Orient, addressing those things that they have projected for themselves. The Orientalist system is closed; the facts "on the ground" can have no effect on it. Orientalism is thus radically anti-empirical. When speaking of the Orient, the Orientalists prefer to make reference to a classical ideal of Arab civilization or of Islam formulated on the basis of texts. Due to such reference the Orientalists even go so far as to judge much of contemporary Arab and Islamic life to be un-Arab or un-Islamic.

What is perhaps of the greatest significance for us is the charge that the Western tradition of Orientalism is dehumanizing, robbing the Arabs and the Muslims of their essential humanity and their reality in history. People and their reality, according to Said, become lost in the stereotypes of Orientalist thinking; the significance of their humanness finally eludes Orientalist sensibilities both at the intellectual and the moral levels.

The aim and object of Orientalist discourse, Said contends, are control, domination, and manipulation of the Orient; to assert and then to maintain the hegemony of the West over the Orient. However great may be the contributions of Orientalists to knowledge of Islam and the Arabs, there is, he believes, underlying it all, a contempt for the Orient, an unshakable belief in the superiority of the West—read this as Europe and America—over the Orient. Although scholarship about the Orient does not necessarily appear to have political ends in view or political implications, Orientalism is, nevertheless, in Said's view, fundamentally a political doctrine imposed on the Orient. This he thinks to be true even of such seemingly neutral things as text editions of sacred scriptures that may have nothing whatsoever to do with what we would recognize as explicitly political concerns. Orientalism is political, however, for the reason that all knowledge confers power. Knowledge can be and is used to assert the intellectual hegemony of the West over the Orient. Its power is massively apparent in the effects of Western technology on the lives of the people of the Orient. Nor has the knowledge acquired by Orientalists failed to be used at the explicitly political level. The great imperial powers—once principally the British and French, now the United States—have employed and do employ Orientalists as their agents, advisors, and informants. Thus Orientalist knowledge has been made to support conquest and outright political rule. As Said sees it Orientalism constitutes an effective instrument of domination, one that has had such support institutionally and academically that it is now literally irrefutable.

The content of the Orientalist attitude towards the Orient may be seen in the dogmas that Said attributes to it. They include: (1) belief in

an absolute and systematic difference between the West and the Orient, the former characterized as rational, humane, developed, and superior, the latter as irrational, aberrant, undeveloped, and inferior; (2) belief that generalizations based on texts that represent a "classical" civilization are preferable to evidence drawn from living realities; (3) belief that the Orient is eternal, uniform, unchanging, and incapable of representing itself to the world, which has made necessary the West's intellectual schemes and technical vocabularies to describe the Orient, something the Orient could not do for itself; and (4) belief that the Orient is something to be either feared or dominated (Said 1978, 300–1). What runs through all these dogmas is the consistent theme of Oriental inferiority, along with the contempt that accompanies it. Also evident are the hurt, the resentment, and the hopelessness that Said has felt as one of those whom Orientalism has so ill used.

Said is not a historian of religions, but much of what he says is directly relevant to what historians of religion do and how they do it. Most historians of religion have been specialists in one tradition or another—some of them Indologists, Sinologists, Buddhologists, Islamists, and so on. Given the vast variety and range of religious experience, specialization is the necessary portal of entry into the work of historians of religions. Having grounded themselves well in one area of study, they may, with trepidation and all due caution, venture into others—although in such cases they must, admittedly, place a large degree of trust in the work of others. It is, quite frankly, impossible for a single individual to come to terms with so many cultures and to learn the many languages required to deal with the whole of religious history. Choice is necessary if there is to be real depth of scholarship. When they become specialists, historians of religion inevitably participate in many of the things that Said attributes to the Orientalist. They do build on the scholarly tradition of the past, utilizing the insights of scholars in previous generations; they do edit and publish texts of the tradition of particular interest to them; they do write interpretive articles and books. Historians of religion do seem to be part of the Orientalist tradition; thus Said's criticisms are of importance to them as they consider their own activities.

Said's attack has significant methodological implications, but, more important for us here, it has clear moral implications in that it condemns the entire Orientalist enterprise as rotten and self-serving. He holds that Orientalism has been morally flawed from its inception. In the light of this accusation historians of religion must ask themselves whether they do desire to dominate those whom they study, in whatever way, and whether their work, at base, implies a fundamental contempt for those outside the Western cultural and religious traditions. Have studies in the

history of religions dehumanized the people whose experience is the professed object of study? Does the very effort to systematize religious experience and its expressions rationally, to bring them, as it were, under intellectual control, violate and savage the sensibilities of others? Can a form of study that applies categories developed in Western thought and influenced by the Enlightenment ever pay due respect to the reality others identify as holy? Is it possible to escape the ethno- or Eurocentrism of our studies? In short have we, who claim to be historians of religion, set our feet on a path that by its very nature must offend fellow human beings of other traditions?

So far I have discussed the moral responsibilities of historians of religion—and anyone else who may choose to study religious traditions other than their own—towards the people whom they study. I should like now to turn to the related but different issue of the responsibility of the student of religious matters qua scholar, and to the ways in which the need for a properly respectful attitude towards the religion of others may come into conflict with scholarly standards. The issues in this regard concern not only the historian of religions, for they are perhaps nowhere more strongly apparent than in New Testament studies. The application of critical standards to the New Testament has been vehemently opposed by many pious people as a form of presumption and irreverence.

I have vivid memories of such attitudes expressed by elders in my semi-fundamentalist background. To question anything with respect to the Bible seemed to such folk a sure sign of lack of faith and due respect. There can be no doubt that biblical criticism has wrought a great change in the way Scripture is understood or that it has posed a challenge to certain kinds of piety. Much of what was unquestioningly accepted as literal truth by our forebears is now viewed differently. The debates about “the historical Jesus,” whether or not it is possible for us to capture any part of either his historical personage or his personality, are a case in point. If I understand correctly, it is by and large agreed by New Testament specialists that these matters lie beyond the possibility of firm knowledge. The effects of critical scholarship in challenging traditional religious stances in this instance are quite clear: they give offense and are a source of profound disturbance to many people. If we all bear some responsibility not to harm or offend our neighbors, what are scholars to do when confronted with such results from their work?

Earlier I emphasized that historians of religion should exemplify the same methodological principles that secular historians are expected to observe. These include the requirements to be fair and impartial; to exercise unrelenting skepticism towards all sources of information with which they may deal; to make rational and balanced judgments supported by

evidence; to set their material in its proper context; and to apply a consistent standard for understanding events without exception. Another of the ineluctably necessary requirements for historians of whatever kind is that they enjoy complete autonomy, that they be free from the influence of any authority that might dictate the results of what they do. Such standards, I suggest, are more difficult to meet if one is studying religion rather than, say, economic history or the history of political institutions. Religion is a highly emotionally charged topic, and the very effort to speak of any of its aspects with objectivity and dispassion may be taken wrongly. One's religion implicates one's values. It is not surprising, then, when there are strong reactions towards activities that, in one way or another, seem to undermine the religious perspectives that people hold.

Scholars who wish to study a religion other than their own face a difficult choice. Should they go where the evidence seems to lead, observing the principles of historical inquiry, or should they yield to the sensibilities and beliefs of the people whose faith they endeavor to understand? To fail to do either would convict them of being bad historians. They must, therefore, somehow manage to do both. Abandonment of critical standards is simply unacceptable in the academy, but the results of critical study may and often do conflict sharply with those beliefs people consider most precious. On the other hand historians of religion must, to carry out their task properly, represent the religion of those whom they study in a manner that reflects, within possible limits, what is actually the case. If people deny something as forming their religious commitment, there is little to be gained by insisting that it is or ought to be. This is, in fact, what happens when appeals are made to a classical ideal as a way of judging what is legitimately part of a religious tradition and what is not. The outcome of critical consideration of a tradition pursued by outsiders, no matter how convincing to the scholarly world, cannot validly substitute for the testimony of people as regards their experience and faith. The latter are in every instance the primary data for the historian of religions. Here we come up against the challenge for the scholar to speak two languages or to pursue two kinds of discourse at the same time.

Andrew Rippin of the University of Calgary has warned against the dangers inherent in an irenic approach to the study of Islam, fearing that too much consideration for Muslim religious feelings will compromise the rigorous application of scholarly standards or even bring to a halt critical investigation in significant fields of research. Freedom from restrictions imposed by authority, any authority, is a vital condition for scholarship to flourish, and must be maintained at all costs. When one studies religion, however, it should also be remembered that at issue are matters of profound significance for those who experience them. Respect for the

faith of others is a *sine qua non* for the person who would understand religion. There is, in other words, a moral obligation for scholars to maintain their own integrity, and an obligation to honor the experience of those whom they study. All too often these two obligations seem to conflict with one another.

Study of the life of the Prophet Muhammad offers a splendid example of this problem. For centuries Muslims have been confident about their ability to know the events of Muhammad's life and prophetic career. Recent critical scholarship, however, has posed serious doubts about the reliability of much that was accepted in the past, which, for most Muslims, still forms an aspect of the Islamic faith. These doubts are the result of critical attention given to the source materials from which the materials for Muhammad's biography are derived. The sources consist principally of biographical writings and the collections of the reported sayings and actions of the Prophet (known as *hadith*). The biographical writings, however, were not authored by Muhammad's contemporaries. In fact we have no eye-witness accounts of his life by one who was alive in his time. The earliest extant biographies are dated roughly two hundred years after the Prophet's death. Following the form-critical approach to the New Testament, critical scholars now regard these biographies of Muhammad not as an effort to construct an accurate record of events, but as expositions of the religious significance that the Muslim community saw in its Prophet; they are, in other words, "salvation histories." These biographies served the needs of a believing community, reflecting the faith of that community. Barring some unexpected discovery of new materials, it is highly questionable whether we will ever penetrate behind these biographies to get at what occurred. The situation regarding the historical Muhammad is very similar to that regarding the historical Jesus. In both instances the sources are faith documents and there is nothing in the way of corroborating outside evidence to help one extract whatever core of reliable historical information they may contain.

There is a similar problem with the *hadith* of the Prophet. In the late second and the third Islamic centuries these reports were systematically collected by scholars and written down in organized fashion. Though there are many such collections, six of them (known as "the Six Sound Books") became favored as holding great authority. The reports presented in these books are authenticated by the inclusion of the names of the individuals through whom they were transmitted to the collector. The role of these reports in the formation of Muslim law and theology can scarcely be exaggerated. Although the jurisprudential theory, which ranks the sources of the law, holds that the *hadith* take second place to the Scripture, in fact they have played a much greater role in the develop-

ment of Muslim religious life. The Qur'an is a relatively small book; it is far from containing all of the guidance for which the Muslim community has felt a need, especially for the multitude of new situations that arose after the Muslims burst out of the Arabian peninsula, overrunning the sophisticated peoples of surrounding regions. Looking beyond the Qur'an for guidance and authority to deal with the new circumstances was necessary. One of the principal resources employed was reports of the Prophet's behavior. Such reports became the building blocks of both Islamic law and theology, later playing a vital part in the emergence of the powerful Islamic mystical tradition. In purely quantitative terms the traditions of Muhammad have contributed more to the structure of Muslim life and thought than the Qur'an itself. So important are the reports in Muslim eyes that some mediaeval theologians considered them to be as inspired as Scripture. With the passage of time, an elaborate science emerged to authenticate, classify, and rank the *hadith* in terms of their authority. In institutions of higher learning throughout Muslim lands these traditions attributed to Muhammad continue to be a focus of study as one of the essentials of Muslim religious life.

In the light of this history a more damaging attack on Muslim religious sensibilities or a greater challenge to the Muslim tradition's understanding of religious authority can scarcely be imagined than one that impugns the authenticity of the *hadith*. Yet precisely such an assault has occurred, again through the agency of critical scholarship. In the second volume of his famous *Muslim Studies* (1971) the Hungarian scholar Ignac Goldziher subjected the *hadith* to close scrutiny. Among other things he found contradictory reports—even in the Six Sound Books. Other reports are said to be anachronistic, in that they make the Prophet comment on or take part in controversies that had not occurred in his time. The reports also show great tendentiousness, lending themselves either to the support or condemnation of one or another of the parties to controversies in the early community. Goldziher concluded that the *hadith* are not what they appear to be, that is, genuine reports about Muhammad. He saw them, rather, as reflective of the stages through which Muslim religious thought had passed to the time of the great collections of *hadith*, a testimonial to what Muslims held as normative at that time. The reports should not be taken as historical assertions or sources of reliable information about the Prophet's biography; they are rather a compendium of the religious doctrines to which the community was committed at the time of the collection of the *hadith*. Clearly Goldziher is not saying that the *hadith* should be discarded; on the contrary they are an invaluable deposit of information about the early Muslim community and the stages of its development. However, the *hadith* are not, in Goldziher's

view and that of most critical scholars who have come after him, genuine bits of information passed down from Muhammad's lifetime.

These are serious matters for Muslims. The Prophet's life is exemplary, one of the two substantive and infallible sources of divine guidance that is the heart of the Islamic experience. If there can be no firm confidence in our knowledge of the events and circumstances of Muhammad's life, much that is vital to the religious outlook of Muslims is cast under the shadow of suspicion. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is a historical tradition in the sense that it has its origins in definite historical events that are experienced as vehicles of divine self-revelation. Should it be decided that these events did not happen, or did not happen as they are generally held to have occurred, or that we cannot know them with certainty, the very foundation of the faith is called into question. Although a scholar such as Goldziher may be led to negative conclusions about the trustworthiness of received knowledge about the Prophet in obedience to purely scientific considerations, the consequences of his findings reach far beyond the scientific realm. As a scholar he must go where the evidence leads, even though he may scandalize those whose religious tradition is at issue.

It is difficult to see, then, how faithfulness to the scientific and scholarly tradition can avoid offending the feelings and commitments of those whose religion is placed under scrutiny. The problem seems inescapable. Yet in spite of the difficulties effort must be made to resolve it. Much depends upon the tone and attitude adopted by the scholar. Sensitivity and humility are in order when a subject so compelling as religion is under discussion; they are a necessary condition for any genuine exchange or dialogue between the scholar and members of the Muslim—or any other religious—community. In any case it seems to me incontrovertible that the student of religion stands under a moral obligation when analyzing the religiousness of another. How precisely that moral obligation should be fulfilled is difficult to say. But the moral dimension of work in the history of religions must always be present to consciousness. However necessary it may be for our thought processes to deal in such abstractions as "religion," historians of religion are, in the final analysis, dealing with individual people. Surely this is one of the more important meanings of saying that religion is a human phenomenon.

### **Theological Implications of the Study of Religion**

I wish now to turn to some of the theological implications that emerge from a history-of-religions approach. Although in previous sections I have insisted on the descriptive and non-normative character of the history of religions as an academic discipline, it must be acknowledged that

such study involves assumptions, and produces results that have great significance when considered from a theological perspective.

I must confess to a great uneasiness in undertaking this discussion. I am not a theologian either by training or by temperament, and I am distinctly uncomfortable with the prescriptive and normative claims of theology. Were theology empirical in nature, limiting itself to describing how the religious experience of a given individual or community has been put into words and concepts, I should feel more at home with it. As we all know, however, theology aims at laying down what is true belief and, therefore, what one ought to believe. As an activity of great import in the development of some of the higher religions, theology is, of course, of immense interest to historians of religion. In religions such as Judaism and Islam, but especially in Christianity, theology is one of the most powerful expressions of religious experience. If belief systems were ignored, giving an adequate account of the living tradition of any of the major religious communities would be impossible. At the same time it should be noted that for other great religions, specifically Hinduism and Buddhism, theology (in the technical sense) does not play the same role as it does in prophetic traditions. For them—as indeed perhaps for Islam and Judaism as well—the cultus is the more primary of religious responses. The first reaction of human beings to the experience of the transcendent is, I would suggest, to fall on one's knees in reverence, not abstract discussion about the nature of the experience. Describing the kind of intellectual response that religious persons may give to their experience, however, is quite different from expounding the true meaning of what has happened to them or precisely how its significance ought to be formulated. Historians of religion are not—or at least should not be—concerned with the truth or falsity of any of the expressions of religiousness that they may encounter. This is true even though historians must in some sense enter into the experience of those whom they study as a precondition of understanding them.

Let it be clear, then, that what I propose to discuss are some of the by-products of the history of religions, matters thrown up by the study that may take on great significance when viewed by someone with a different perspective, like that of theology. Further, my discussion will be limited to considerations bearing on Christian theology. Christianity is by and large identified with the West, out of which emerged the intellectual endeavor called “history of religions.” As I noted earlier, the history of religions as an academic pursuit is a child of the Enlightenment. Along with science, critical history, and biblical criticism such a pursuit can be understood only against the background of the European Enlightenment. Like all else in the history of thought, the endeavor to achieve a scientific

study of religion is conditioned by the circumstances in which it emerged. The discipline has its own historicity. It should be no source of surprise that the history of religions has been an all-but-exclusively Western enterprise. There are few if any departments or faculties of religious studies in universities outside the Western world, and few if any institutes or research organizations, devoted to the study of the religions of other people and places, equivalent to, for example, the McGill Institute of Islamic Studies. The issues in which we are interested have arisen in a largely Christian and Western context with some Jewish participation. Hence the reason for considering the implications of the history of religions in the light of strictly Christian theology, though some of what is involved might be applicable to other traditions as well.

It is ironic that one should speak of the theological implications of the history of religions at all, for scientific approaches to religion have always struggled to maintain their autonomy over against both theology and philosophy of religion. In the nineteenth century the tendency was to look on the study of non-Western religions as subservient to theology. Better knowledge of relatively unfamiliar religious traditions was seen as providing material for apologetics or was taken as a means to prove the superiority of Christianity. Consistent with this understanding were the several classifications of the major religious traditions produced, from those of the preliterate peoples to the most sophisticated. Many of these classifications reflected the evolutionary thinking so characteristic of the time by viewing the religions in a rank order with Christianity representing the apex of the development. Only in the twentieth century—and even then not altogether—did the history of religions assert its independence as a kind of academic pursuit with purposes and methods of its own, free of any authority and no longer involved with the normative concerns of theology. While it is true that even today complete clarity about the nature of the history of religions has not been achieved, there is general agreement that it envisages a domain of its own.

Two examples of the way in which the history of religions was employed as theological capital are afforded by the work of Nathan Söderblom and Rudolf Otto, both well-known figures in the development of a science of religion. Söderblom, who later in life was the Archbishop of the Swedish Lutheran Church and one of the founders of the ecumenical movement, was professor of theology in the University of Uppsala. Söderblom's scholarly works include a significant contribution to the debate about the origins and nature of religion, which occupied scholars greatly around the turn of the century. Söderblom (1916) argues that the concept of deity in the "higher" religions arises out of three factors present in "primitive" religions: (1) animistic beliefs; (2) the *mana* idea;

and (3) the belief in the *Urhebern* or *Allväter*, original ancestors, who taught the primitive peoples their cultus and certain life-sustaining ceremonies. The latter is Söderblom's main contribution to the discussion.

The great intellectual interest of Söderblom's career was undoubtedly the history of religions. He was one of the first to win a place for such studies in Europe. That the history of religions took root and flourished in Sweden is largely due to Söderblom's influence. What is important for present purposes is the manner in which he used his historical and scientific studies to buttress his Christian convictions. We may approach the matter by calling attention to two questions that Söderblom posed in his writings. Both concern the broad problem of the classification of religions, a subject to which he gave a great deal of attention. One question is to ask whether Christianity has characteristics that mark it off as unique in relation to other religious traditions. The second question is whether Christianity is unique in respect to value and truth. The first of these is clearly historical and descriptive in nature; to answer it close attention must be paid to the empirical reality of religion as it is lived in history and as it can be discovered through the use of critical methods. The answer requires detailed information about non-Christian traditions along with a penetrating grasp of Christianity itself. The second, however, is undeniably a theological question that may not be answered in the same manner.

Christian truth for Söderblom clearly does not depend on the results of scientific research; from the very beginning he held, as a convinced and pious Christian, that Christianity has a quality of truth that no other religious tradition could even approach. In Söderblom's thought these two questions bore on each other in a decisive way. To try to answer one led necessarily to consideration of the other, so that in the end the two questions became one. His ideal was a theological system that gave proper weight to both science and revelation. The ambition to construct such a system rested on a strongly held conviction concerning the unity of truth: there cannot be two parallel truths, one that derives from the special revelation that Christianity claims to have had and the other from scientific considerations. The claims to be a uniquely true religion must be borne out by scientific and historical studies that establish Christianity as a unique religion in phenomenological terms. Theology and the history of religions thus support one another. Or, to put the matter in terms that more truly reflect Söderblom's strong Christian commitments, the history of religions is a tool in the hands of the theologian both for supporting Christianity's uniqueness and for its understanding of itself. It leads to a knowledge of other religions and to the possibility of a deeper self-examination of the Christian life. As the knowledge gained through study

of the world's religions increases, so also does the evidence of Christianity's uniqueness and superiority.

The same point is also expressed in theological terms. Söderblom (1913) rejects the distinction made by many of his predecessors between non-Christian religions as representing natural religion and Christianity as the religion of revelation. He offers two reasons for this: (1) all religion is of the same nature, is of a single genus; and (2) all religion is a response to a revelation of God. It follows, then, that all religions have elements of truth. Both the history of religions and theology, it is argued, are concerned with the entire range of religious experience and activity. In the final analysis the theologian and the historian of religions are doing the same thing. In connection with the presentation of the ideas of general and special revelation Söderblom sets forth the bases on which he is convinced of a general revelation to humankind as a whole. The principal basis is the view that the defining quality of all religion is holiness—he was among the first to develop this notion. Second is the view that all human beings have the potential in their makeup for religious experience, from the preliterate savage to the most accomplished modern person. Third is the view that a similar kind of experience is involved in every religion, without exception.

Söderblom thus believed that all religiousness is based on truth and that every religion is a divine revelation. If this is the case, then on what basis can Christianity claim to be or to have a special revelation? In what does its "specialness" consist; what are the elements of which it is made up? These questions can best be answered by scientific and historical research, that is, what we have called the history of religions. An ever-deepening knowledge of both non-Christian religions and of Christianity itself should lead to the clarification of these unique and defining characteristics. There is, in other words, no escape for the theologian but to embrace and employ the methods and results of historians of religion. History of religions is not simply a tool of theology; it is an integral part of the theological enterprise in so far as Christianity must establish a firm basis for its claim to be a special revelation. The outcome of this reasoning is that there is a scientific basis for the belief in a special revelation given to Christians and, therefore, a scientific basis for proving the superiority of Christianity.

Obviously all kinds of problems arise from such a way of thinking. In spite of the erudition with which Söderblom argued his case one must, for example, ask how the transition is made from assertions of uniqueness, phenomenologically speaking, to assertions of superior value. Has the distinction between descriptive, historical concerns and normative, theological concerns not been lost somewhere in the reasoning process?

Further can the unique characteristics, which Söderblom held to be the defining elements of the Christian tradition, be as firmly established as he seemed to think? By his own testimony the more he studied the great non-Christian traditions the more he found that they shared in common with Christianity; the distinctions were hardly neat or decisive. He had finally to admit that Christianity is a mixture of those religions that he classified as culture religions and those that he classified as prophetic religions. Even the inclusion of Christianity in the category of prophetic religions was not without difficulties. After all there are, according to Söderblom, four great prophetic religions: Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Judaism. How is Christianity to be distinguished from the other three, especially from Judaism, which he thought to be the most representative of the prophetic type? Here there is a tendency to beg the question by appealing to aspects of Christian faith, rather than to descriptive categories. Also what is one to make of the internal diversity of Christianity itself?

Söderblom's personal predispositions reveal themselves quite clearly at this juncture. In the effort to pinpoint true and genuine Christianity, he rejects both the Roman Catholic tradition and Eastern Orthodoxy as reflecting the deepest nature of authentic Christianity. He has denied, in short, the majority report concerning "real" Christianity. Not surprisingly Söderblom found the true essence of Christian faith to lie in the evangelical Lutheran tradition. Once again there is a clear failure to separate theological and scientific concerns. The conclusion arrived at in consequence is unacceptable to critical historians of religion. It is also, at least in my view, a somewhat bewildering stance to have been taken by a leader of the ecumenical movement. At the same time it must be granted that these ambiguities in Söderblom's thinking are powerful witnesses to his personal and scholarly integrity. He did not suppress the implications of his analyses, even if they revealed inconsistencies at times.

In Rudolf Otto, Söderblom's contemporary, we encounter another influential thinker who saw the closest of connections between the history of religions and theology. In the latter part of his life Otto was professor of systematic theology in the University of Marburg. His contributions to the history of religions embrace not only his famous book *The Idea of the Holy* ([1917] 1923), which has been characterized as one of the two most important books in the field of religion this century—the other is Karl Barth's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* ([1919] 1932)—but also a variety of other works in comparative studies (Otto 1928, [1926] 1932). All these works were the outcome of a series of trips to the Orient during which Otto was inspired by the things he saw and the people, followers of other religions, with whom he came into con-

tact. During his own lifetime his views received relatively little attention because of the overwhelming popularity of the dialectical theology of Barth and his followers. In more recent times his works have begun to draw the attention that they deserve.

The book of greatest interest to us for tracing the relationship between the history of religions and Christian theology is *The Idea of the Holy*. Its essential thesis is that all religion rests on the feeling of the numinous, the apprehension of a non-rational reality that, though constitutively non-rational, nonetheless admits of rational analysis. Much of Otto's book consists precisely of this rational exposition or schematization of the holy in the familiar terms: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the tremendous and fascinating mystery). Experience of the numinous constitutes "recognition of a specific type of experience that is of its essence religious in nature, and, allied with this, the claim that such experience points beyond itself to its object and is therefore in itself 'experience of the grace of God'" (Almond 1984, 29). The study of religion and theology alike, therefore, focus on the analysis of religious consciousness. Further this sense of the numinous is not restricted to one religious community or tradition; it is recognized as the universal common element in every religion. It follows that, despite the variety of manifestations and conceptions of the holy, all religions are essentially a unity, for they all arise from the experience of the numinous. This does not mean that they are equal to one another in value, but it does mean that if elements of truth exist in one tradition as the result of its encounter with the holy, elements of truth must exist in all others as well.

Otto's theory of religion was at once a rejection of materialistic views of religion, which would make it into a function of something else and eventually destroy it, and a repudiation of the rationalistic understanding of religion characteristic of Enlightenment thinkers. Religion, he held, is a matter of feeling, not of thought. Even when the numinous object is analyzed to the best of our ability, there is always "something more" that cannot be captured and expressed in concepts and words. That something more will forever retain the qualities of mystery, majesty, and awesomeness in a manner and degree that are ineffable. This emphasis on feeling attracted the criticism that his understanding of religion was basically psychological, which was not at all the case. The fact that the sense of the numinous points beyond itself to the numinous object, Otto believed, affirms the objectivity of the reality at the foundation of all religiousness. Theology is the normative expression of that reality and the historical and comparative study of religion is the investigation of its manifestations in the world's religions. The sense of the numinous is the point at which theology and the history of religions converge.

Many scholars working in religious studies have taken Otto's *Idea of the Holy* as the effort to establish an empirical basis for the study of religion; that is, they have understood his primary interest to lie in the history and phenomenology of religion. Such views, I think, are mistaken. In his eyes the history of religions has no value in itself. It takes on meaning as providing a basis for understanding the nature of Christianity and ultimately for judging and demonstrating its superiority over other religious traditions. Otto is quite explicit in declaring that his primary interest is theology. His concern for the history of religions is only a prologue or preliminary preparation for the larger and more meaningful task of constructing a philosophically grounded theology. He even viewed his translations of Hindu religious texts in this light. Thus in the preface to one of his translations he wrote: "It will hopefully be perceived that the purpose of this book is not that of 'Indology' nor 'the history of religion' but...theology. It is as a theologian that I am interested in this religious form" (Otto 1917, 7). The same point was clearly stated in one of his comments about *The Idea of the Holy*: "Our line of inquiry in *Das Heilige* was directed towards Christian theology and not toward religious history or the psychology of religion" (Otto 1923, 136). As important as his insights have been for the historian of religions, Otto's work clearly did not aim to establish an autonomous science of religion for its own sake. His work can be understood only in the light of his theological concerns.

The misunderstanding of Otto, which is so prevalent among students of religion, is largely the result of a failure to come to terms with his philosophy of religion. In fact, those who value highly Otto's analysis of the holy do not really acknowledge him as a philosopher of religion. For Otto, however, a firm philosophical grounding is necessary for the advancement of the history and comparison of religions and the enunciation of a theology. First things have to come first; the place of religion in the scheme of things must be firmly delineated before there can be any reasonable discussion of particular religious phenomena. If such a solid foundation is not provided, the entire consideration of religion hangs, as it were, in the air. Without such a foundation inquirers do not know that of which they speak. Otto's first task, then, is to lay a solid philosophical foundation for what is to follow: discussion of religious phenomena. Consequently his corpus of writings contains several weighty volumes that treat philosophy of religion.

The predominant influences on Otto were Friedrich Schleiermacher, whom he studied in detail in his younger days, and, later in life, the neo-Kantian philosopher Jakob Fries. Both Schleiermacher and Fries emphasized the role of feeling in religious life, the element upon which Otto seized. Fries in particular was important as the mediator of a modified

form of Kantian philosophy. From Fries, Otto took the notion of the religious a priori, which became the cornerstone of Otto's philosophy of religion. The religious a priori, understood to be analogous to the categories of the understanding developed by Kant, refers to that innate capacity of human beings to be religious. It is on this a priori basis that the religious consciousness or feeling of the numinous arises. Human beings are constitutionally endowed with the capacity to be religious; the actual manifestations of religion are nothing more than the unfolding of the a priori or nothing more than attempts to realize the a priori in its fullness. From the a priori also derives the unity of all religions, since the a priori underpins them all. Religions are alike in so far as they manifest the a priori. Because all religions have a common basis, it is possible to compare and describe them. The scientific discipline that we call "history of religions" is thus made possible by the existence of the religious a priori. The fact of religious diversity, the existence of other religious faiths alongside Christianity, is not to be explained as a contrast between black and white, true and untrue, but in terms of the degree to which the sense of the religious a priori has been cultivated or realized.

It is evident that in the concept of the religious a priori we are dealing with a philosophical idea developed in German idealism. Such a philosophical basis had to be laid down, Otto felt, as the ineluctable prior condition for any inquiry into religion at historical, comparative, and theological levels of meaning. His thought appears something like a multi-storied structure. At its base is the philosophical underpinning; erected on this base is the scientific endeavor that investigates the history of religion, establishing the qualities of each historical community by comparing phenomena with one another. When this scientific work is carried out using religious categories of analysis it has, in fact, already become a theological enterprise. The history of religions is thus a kind of theology of religion. With the data of comparative study before them, inquirers may go on to elucidate the peculiar character of Christianity, its similarities and differences in relation to other religions. The final task is to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity to other religious dispensations that might be thought to rival it.

The scheme will not be clear, however, without making one other point. According to Otto the religious a priori also provides an objective criterion for the evaluation of religions. Ultimately it is the instrument that allows Otto to assert the superiority of Christianity. The value of religious phenomena can be judged by the extent to which the a priori is realized in them. It provides an objective standard against which the manifestations of religion can be measured in terms of that which possesses greater or lesser value. This evaluative standard is not purely arbitrary

and personal. It may be that Otto, like Söderblom, was responding to his own personal religious predispositions, especially where the evaluation of Christianity was at issue. But, if so, the process was certainly not conscious. In his philosophical thinking Otto believed himself to be dealing with things as they truly are. He suggested two ways in which one could view the a priori as providing legitimate objective grounds for the comparative assessment of various religions: (1) the a priori is an intrinsic category for the analysis of religion, without which one is prone to resort to extrinsic categories alien to religious consciousness; (2) the a priori, in its operation, is a real apprehension of the holy, which points to the numinous reality that makes itself evident in religious consciousness (Almond 1984, 129). In sum, the a priori is a philosophically based, objective criterion for the comparative assessment of religions.

The marks of superiority in a religion are several, which Otto thought the Christian faith to possess in incomparable abundance as proven by the history of religions. One of the factors that distinguishes Christianity from other faiths is its greater development of the concepts of "holiness," sin, and salvation. These elements of faith, he thought, signify a greater awareness of and sensitivity towards the holy than other religions exhibit. That is, the essentially religious is more perfectly realized in Christianity than in any other tradition. Another mark of Christianity's superiority is its pronounced possession of moral elements over that of other traditions. This factor played a considerable role in his comparison of Christianity with Hinduism, which in other respects he thought to bear close resemblance to the Christian faith. Another sign of superiority is the abundance of unparalleled conceptual clarity with regard to God, which, again, Otto thought Christianity to possess in unique abundance. All this emerged from his understanding of the nature of the religious a priori.

Otto is, like Söderblom, subject to criticism. He also does not allow true autonomy to the historical and comparative study of religions as a distinct activity worthy of pursuit in its own right. Further, in my opinion, few in our day would accept Otto's idealistic philosophy were it properly understood, and its central place in his religious thought fully appreciated. The argument of Otto's *Idea of the Holy* is based on the conception of the religious a priori. If that idea is doubtful, then so too are its consequent assertions. The description of religious consciousness needs to be studied against a different philosophical background. Doubtless many, especially non-Christians, would question Otto's claims for the greater richness of Christian conceptions of God, not to mention its superabundant possession of moral elements, in comparison with other religions. Moreover the judgment that the religious a priori is more fully and perfectly realized in Christianity involves an unmistakably personal,

subjective factor. Even if one were to grant that the religious a priori is an objective criterion for the evaluation of religions, the fact remains that someone using some other criterion must decide when the a priori has been best realized. I suspect that most Hindus, Muslims, or members of other religious communities would conceive the full realization of the religious potential quite differently from that proposed by Otto. Most of these problems arise from Otto's wish to evaluate world religions and to justify his own faith, though I would certainly not accuse him of being a self-conscious apologist. Nevertheless it must be said that the deliberate introduction of normative considerations into the supposedly historical and comparative study of religion renders suspect much of what Otto has done. I might also add that Otto's view concerning the merit of the history of religions, namely, that it derives from the discipline's contributions to theology, fails to grasp the significance of such studies, impeding the full development of an autonomous science of religion.

The matter that above all else illustrates the theological issues raised by the scientific and historical study of religion is the fact of religious diversity. Over the last century and a half, students of religion have amassed an enormous body of information about the variety of human religious responses and expressions. With every passing day this body of information grows larger and its significance is better understood. Historians of religion have no problem finding materials for their study. The problem, rather, is to devise some means, taxonomic or otherwise, to bring order to the inchoate masses of material that scholarship has made available and to avoid being overwhelmed by it.

As a result of all this activity, one thing that is unmistakably clear is that men and women differ in their religiousness and in the implications they draw from it. The broad human experience of religion cannot be reduced to a common denominator or to variations on a common theme, as thinkers such as Otto have attempted to do, except perhaps when this is done for analytical purposes. As it is lived in history, however, religion presents a virtual infinity of faces to the observer. Even religions that share a common spiritual ancestry and have many doctrinal themes in common such as Islam and Christianity, or Hinduism and Buddhism, prove on closer inspection to be markedly different. They see the human race confronted by different problems, envisage different solutions to those problems, and aim at different goals. The differences are not merely details of doctrinal disagreement, which may somehow be reconciled or overcome; they reflect, rather, basic differences in the religious experience of each community. While doctrines may be modified to some degree by contact and discussion with others, there is little hope for a basic, universal harmony.

Diversity is characteristic not only with regard to a comparison of larger traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, but also on other levels as well. Internal diversity is an important factor, so much so that it is difficult to decide whether it is legitimate to speak of a tradition at all. Consider, for example, the great variety of Buddhist sects that have appeared over time. They may have a common historical origin in the event of the Buddha, but the contents of their teachings and practices differ wildly. Think, too, of the division between Sunni and Shi'a schools in Islam. Superficially the same, the spirit or ethos of Sunni and Shi'a Islam differ to the extent that one might look on them as belonging to entirely different traditions. What is one to make of the Ahmadiyyah sect of contemporary Islam? Adherents to the group consider themselves Muslims and adopt that self-designation, while many other Sunni Muslims would deny their "Muslimness" because of differences concerning the doctrine of prophecy. This matter has grave practical, let alone intellectual, consequences, having led the government of Pakistan to deny certain civil rights to the Ahmadiyyah in response to public pressure. Again how is one to understand the sharp division within Muslim ranks between those with a strong legalistic bent and those with a mystic bent? The former see the primary religious duty as obedience to God through observation of the shari'a or divine law, while the latter seek immediate personal knowledge of God, even absorption into God, at times ignoring or breaking the injunctions of the shari'a. In the light of all these differences, we are faced with an issue raised earlier: What do we mean by the words "Islam," "Christianity," "Hinduism," and so forth? That we cannot readily define these terms is to say not only that diversity is a fact, but also that it is of enormous significance for every aspect of religious studies. It is also a fact that poses extraordinarily intractable problems. It should be evident that religious diversity is a matter to be dealt with from the perspective of each of the issues we have discussed: the scientific, the moral, and the theological.

In addition to the differences between major traditions and those that exist within each tradition, there is diversity of still another kind. It consists in the fact that every religious tradition, major or minor, because it is a part of history, is caught up in the process of constant change. Within the lifetime of a single individual and from generation to generation, the circumstances of life are transformed, more so now than at any other period of history. Religious traditions, like everything else, do not remain the same; they adapt and develop as new needs and situations arise. As I argued earlier, the discussion and study of religion is the study of people, who cannot be considered apart from the circumstances in which they live. Those circumstances are never identical.

When we set out to study Islam, then, which version of the richness and difference that the past and present offer us are we to adopt as truly Islam? Can such a choice be made without a powerful and distorting element of our own entering into the decision, without our ignorance and limitations strongly affecting the answer to such a question? Indeed can a defensible choice be made at all? I am sure the point will not be lost on you, but I would remind you that precisely the same question may be posed for Christianity or for any other tradition you care to name.

Presumably in whatever tradition religious people have been nurtured, they cling to that tradition because they find meaning and value in it. They believe the tradition to say things that are true and fundamentally important. It would be ridiculous to think that an individual or a community would adhere to a tradition considered as false, incomplete, or distorted. In consequence the history of religions, as it goes about accumulating more and more knowledge about human religiousness, confronts us with an enormous number of claims to truth. It is precisely here, of course, that the principal theological issue raised by the history of religions shows itself. How are theologians to respond to the fact that men and women in other traditions make claims to truth as strong as any they themselves might put forward? Are there not people outside our own tradition as pious, as upright, as intelligent, as learned, as morally sensitive as any within it? That such people exist in great numbers is witnessed to both by scholarship and by personal experience. There was a time when such questions did not exist or could be ignored because contact among people of different religious persuasions was rare. For the most part cultures and religious communities tended to live in sealed and self-satisfied isolation from each other, presenting no challenge to others and feeling none themselves.

The modern world, however, has changed all of that. It has brought peoples into intimate contact. We today may expect numerous encounters with those whose religious convictions differ radically from our own, even to develop warm friendships with such people. The history of religions has contributed greatly to the world's shrinking size by exposing the incalculable fecundity and variety of religious experience. Because of this new situation it is no longer possible to ignore the truth claims of religious traditions that are different from our own or to wrap ourselves in smug complacency that we have the confirmed truth with nothing more to learn from others. In the twentieth century no theology can be credible, to the thinking person anyway, if it does not acknowledge and take with all seriousness the competing claims that the history of religions has so clearly evidenced. The exclusivist claims characteristic of Christian theology are simply no longer tenable. The evidence of the history of reli-

gions compels all who consider it carefully to believe that if there is truth in one tradition, there must be truth in all. Despite the fact that theology and the demonstration of the superiority of Christianity were their primary aims, both Söderblom and Otto were adamant on this point. It has been slow in coming, but the Christian church, in at least some of its branches, now acknowledges the religious value and truth content of other traditions. In its 1966 World Mission statement the United Church of Canada spoke of God's creative and redemptive work in other religions. But perhaps of more significance is the Second Vatican Council's open declaration concerning the attainment of salvation by those outside the Church who sincerely seek for, and strive to obey, the will of God. The same Dogmatic Constitution makes specific mention of the Muslims as among those embraced by God's universal salvific will (LG 16). Such a stance is a far cry from the rigid exclusivism, disdain, and hostility the church has shown towards non-Christians for the greater part of its history. "The boundary between true and false today, even as Christians see it, no longer runs simply between Christianity and the other religions, but at least in part within each of the religions" (Küng, van Ess, von Stietencron, and Bechert 1986, xviii). Knowledge of the history of religions leaves the theologian with no alternative but to grant, and to treat with all gravity, the truth claims and elements of truth in the world's religions.

Contemplation of the history of religions also throws up a related but somewhat different issue for the theologian. The multifariousness of the human involvement with religion is overwhelmingly obvious and quite undeniable. But how is one to explain the existence of this vast range of differences? What accounts for the fact of so many different religious communities, beliefs, and practices? As part of the effort towards its own self-understanding, every religious community has to provide itself with an account of why other understandings of God, humanity, and the world are radically different from, even in conflict with, its own. This is so especially in the case where the religious traditions that consider themselves to be revealed puzzle over the Creator's intention in allowing other religious perspectives to exist and even to prevail. This problem has preoccupied the Christian church from its inception. Historically many answers have been offered, ranging from the view that other religions are the work of the devil or stages in the divine education of humankind culminating in Christianity, to the view that other religions are merely expressions of the general revelation vouchsafed to the human race by God.

My point, for present purposes, is to underline that the history of religions poses a theological issue of first importance. The growing knowledge and understanding of religions external to the Christian tradition

not only creates the need for an informed apologetics, but also makes it a matter of urgency. For more than a century now one of the prime tasks of theology has been to translate religious experience into concepts and language understandable in a world committed to the scientific perspective. Presently theology is also challenged to create a self-understanding that does justice to the fact of other religious perspectives, paving the way to sympathetic understanding and, ultimately, to community among world religions. This problem is posed all the more sharply because of the emergence of a science of religion that demonstrates the scope and the significance of religious diversity as never before.

### **Concluding Remarks**

My purpose in these lectures has been to explore some aspects of the study of the world's religions. We have seen that the creation of a proper science of religion is no easy matter. It is made more difficult by the need to observe the strictest criteria of critical-historical study while acknowledging that religion has its origin and basis in something that lies beyond history. The very nature of the subject leads beyond wholly scientific considerations. The attempt at understanding ultimately proves incapable of being pursued from a purely intellectual perspective. In the final analysis the scientific study of religion cannot avoid bringing the scholar face to face with the great normative issues that lie at the basis of religious life.

Religion is one of the most fundamental of all the factors affecting individuals and history as a whole. It cannot be observed as one would observe a specimen under a microscope, but it must be seen as a force pulsing through human existence, a living reality of the utmost importance for people of faith. Its historical influence is incalculable. Religion has implications of a profound kind for relations among people, as well as for scholars who make the effort to understand it. The study of religion, therefore, is one of the most vital activities of our time. Without a genuine appreciation of the fundamental convictions of those who differ from us, little hope exists of progress towards the world community that is so ardently desired. It is in this light that the study of religion achieves its importance and its urgency. The scholarly study of religion offers a means by which some of the barriers that separate people may be torn down. Far from being the jam on the bread of humanistic learning, the study of religion is integral to the very substance of the bread, one of its constituent and ineluctable elements. Religious studies are no mere luxury to be enjoyed as a kind of hobby when funds happen to be available or circumstances are convenient. On the contrary, religious studies address themselves to some of the most enduring and fundamental human concerns, deserving an assured and firm place within the university.

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