



## **The Church and Other Religions**

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Never before has the history of religion known so productive a period as the present one. Translations by Western scholars of the sacred books of the East now reveal to Christians a wealth of customs and creeds that was never dreamed to exist, let alone to have flourished thousands of years before the advent of Christ. Striking discoveries by archeologists have produced ancient manuscripts and artifacts which afford new insights into the beliefs and practices of the peoples of antiquity. These factors, combined with further research, study and writing have produced large quantities of information which are almost overwhelming to the historian of religion, whose field is all of human history as it is polarized around the sacred. One of the few methods in which this mass of material can be ar-

ranged in a meaningful pattern is the comparative method. This article will outline the mind of the Catholic Church on this study. However, before the Catholic viewpoint can be discussed fruitfully, it is necessary to take a brief glance at the nature of comparative religion, the method it employs, and the results obtained from it.

In theory at least, the comparative method is the unbiased co-ordination of all comparable data irrespective of content or age. It begins with a provisional descriptive definition of religion which does not beg any questions or presuppose any theories as to the nature or origin of religion. For example, religion can be defined as the sum total of beliefs, rules of conduct, and rites governing the relations of man with a power or powers looked upon as transcendent. Adopting some such working definition, the comparative way analyzes religion in its fundamental elements and then plays each element across the entire spectrum of cultures in order to determine what differences or agreements the various cultures produce. Step by step, the most rudimentary and the most advanced spiritual and physical phenomena are related and classified. The purpose of this process is to break down racial, social, intellectual and physical boundaries and to bring all classes of men into relation with one another, thus revealing remarkable resemblances among peoples all over the world.

The interpretation of the data provided by these studies has not always been harmonious. In fact, almost directly opposing views have been taken; but despite the diversity, the findings of comparative religionists can be reduced to two general positions: the evolutionary position and that of Judaeo-Christianity. The evolution theory envisages religious culture as only another phase of the evolutionary process of development from the less perfect to the more perfect. From this vantage point, monotheism is a late phenomenon of religion. Its adherents allege that the trend toward monotheism was a gradually evolving natural event originating on its credal side from animism, passing through the various stages of polytheism until it reached the monotheistic creed of the Hebrews and Christians; and springing on its ritual side from magic and fetishism, passing through ancestor and natural worship culminating in the adoration of the one, invisible God.

Judaeo-Christianity maintains that religion is much more than a natural event. It affirms that the religion of primitive man consisted

essentially in the acknowledgment of a personal God who was the creator of the world. In his pamphlet "The religion of Earliest Man," Father Schmidt observes that "the foremost mark of the religion of primitive peoples is its fundamental monotheism; the essence of their religion consisted in their belief in the one Supreme Being, the recognition of their dependence on him, and of their obedience to his laws." This position asserts that there has been in fact a revealed religion from the origin of the human race and that at first it was universal in the sense that it was known to all men. Gradually, this religion became corrupt, but God intervened and communicated new revelation and established norms which slowly restored, purified, and developed in one section of mankind which was to prepare the way for the advent of the Messiah. With the coming of Christ, this religion reached its highest expression, becoming once more the universal religion intended for all men.

Generally speaking, the attitude of the Catholic Church toward the study of comparative religion is one of approval. In his encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI clearly expressed the Church's desire to enter into dialogue with all men, non-Christian as well as Christian:

"... we should like to observe that the Church must be ever ready to carry on the dialogue with all men of good will, within or without its own sphere. . . . We recognize and respect the moral and spiritual values of the various non-Christian religions, and we join with them in promoting and defending common ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, good culture, social welfare and civil order. For our part, we are ready to enter into discussion on these common ideas, and will not fail to provide every opportunity for such discussion, conducted with genuine, mutual respect, where it would be well received." (par. 112)

Presupposed to any fruitful discussion with non-Christian faiths is a thorough knowledge of their religions and cultures. It is the function of comparative religion to provide this information. In the light of the modern world situation, there would seem to be three fundamental and urgent reasons why the Church sanctions the study of other religious faiths and practices.

First, there is the longing for unity among Christians. The ecumenical movement has stirred the leaders of the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Churches to desire the reunion of what was once a single Church and to heal what is regarded by many as a disgrace in the eyes of men and a sin in the sight of God. The very first words

of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism stress the importance of unity for the Catholic Church: "The restoration of unity among Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council." However, before any fruitful attempt can begin, there must be previous understanding of the positive elements and the common heritage still retained among the Churches and also a profound knowledge of the differences which still divide what should be the one Mystical Body of Christ. Such an understanding and knowledge can be achieved only through an honest and objective scrutiny of the other religious positions, or in other words through comparative religion. Here again Pope Paul has revealed the Church's willingness and desire to study these pressing problems. With reference to the common heritage, he says: "Let us stress what we have in common rather than what divides us." Turning his attention to the differences, he adds: "... on the many points of difference regarding tradition, spirituality, canon law and worship, we are ready to study how we can satisfy the legitimate desires of our Christian brothers still separated from us."

Secondly, comparative religion is essential to reach those who are outside Christianity but who still believe in and practice religion. If the Church is to fulfill the mandate given it by Christ to preach His message to all people, an understanding of the religious systems of the world is indispensable. Catholic missionaries cannot successfully communicate the truths they have received unless they first understand the people with whom they are working. But these people, especially those of the Near, Middle and Far East, cannot be understood unless their religion and culture is understood—for the religious element is not only present in their lives but is a dominant factor. The thorough knowledge of other religions and cultures acquired through comparative religion offers a balance to imprudent zeal which has often left a tainted image of Christianity in many parts of the world. Many of these people fail to see the true religion of Christianity but rather look upon it as a mixture of colonialism, business and piety. Mahatma Gandhi was a friend of Christianity, but he often wrote critically of Christian missionaries who see nothing of value in other peoples, who attempt to shape everything according to their own narrow, preconceived notion of society, and who are so far removed from reality as to think that Western civilization has a monopoly on culture and human intelligence. This need not

be the case. A Catholic can be absolutely convinced of the truth of his religion and consider it as a standard for others without belittling other religious systems or feeling that they are completely devoid of content. When speaking on how dialogue should be carried on, Pope Paul VI tells us in *Ecclesiam Suam* that “. . . before speaking, it is necessary to listen not only to a man's voice, but to his heart. A man must first be understood, and where he merits it, agreed with.” St. Thomas Aquinas is an excellent example of how the values of other cultures and religions can be incorporated into Christianity. When he organized Christian doctrine into one unified body of knowledge, the structure he used was that of the pagan philosopher Aristotle, together with borrowings from the Neo-Platonists, as well as from two Islamic writers, Averroes and Avicenna, and from the Jewish writer, Moses Maimonides.

The third reason why the Church approves the study of comparative religion is the existence of communism which denies the existence of a personal God and which now dominates about one quarter of the world's population. Armed resistance alone cannot subdue this force. Rather, the co-operative strength of believers of every religious tradition is required. This is especially true of Christians and Moslems whose faith is founded on pure monotheism and who are in a better position to understand that communism is a movement bent on the destruction of the inherent values of religion. In the face of such a formidable foe, religious groups cannot be disunited. Instead, they must foster and defend the ideals of religious liberty, human brotherhood, social welfare and civil order which they have in common. That the Islamic leaders share the Christian aspiration for unity on common ideals can be seen from the message that their observers had for Christians at the World Council of Churches in 1954: “It is a prime duty of our two monotheistic faiths to establish real and abiding friendship, not only among their own adherents, but also between themselves and the followers of the other faith as well. We should collaborate as believers in the one God in defending the world against the menaces of atheism and materialism.” However, it is futile to speak about unity of religious values and ideals if those values and ideals are not known; this takes us back to the necessity of comparative religion.

Although the Church approves of the study of comparative reli-



gion, it cannot accept all the interpretations which are offered. As indicated at the beginning of this article, comparative religion is supposed to be the unbiased co-ordination of religious facts. Unfortunately, strict objectivity has not always been observed. Too often, writers have allowed their philosophical presuppositions and religious prejudices to influence them in their empirical study of the facts. Consequently they have seen only what they have wanted to see and have pronounced as non-existent the things that they did not want to see. The writings of the evolutionists of the last century exemplify this attitude perfectly. Convinced that man had evolved body and soul from some type of brute, they believed that religion also must have evolved from some brutish sentiment such as fear and kept evolving until it reached the highest stage, that of monotheism. The first men then could not have been monotheists. They supported their theory with empirical evidence found among primitive tribes existing at that time, all of which has since been proven to be false. It seems clear that in this case a philosophical preconception was not only directing the search for facts but also leading to a misinterpretation of the facts when discovered. This is not to say that Catholic writers have always been free from these faults. Unfortunately, one does not have to search far to find instances where Catholic writers have failed to let the facts dissolve the prejudices and presuppositions. However, the thought of individual theologians should not be equated with the mind of the Church. It can honestly be said that there is nothing in Catholic theology or philosophy which need affect an honest and objective endeavor to establish the real facts of comparative religion. There are two basic reasons why a Catholic never has to manipulate the facts in the interest of his creed.

First, a Catholic accepts and believes the truths taught by the Church not because he thinks that they can be proven by an appeal to the facts of experience, but because they are taught to him by an authority which he believes to be reasonable and right. Likewise, he accepts his philosophical presuppositions because of their own evident truth perceived by the light of reason. For this reason, he does not accept philosophical or theological truths merely because they can be established by comparative religion. He is not overly disturbed then if the facts as known fail to confirm any particular truth which he happens to hold on philosophical or theological grounds. As a

result, he is not compelled to stress or strain the available evidence in any way.

A second factor which enables Catholics to be impartial in their study of the facts of religion is their firm conviction that no fact can ever be discovered which will conflict in any way with a defined doctrine. They are convinced that all truth comes from God and that truth cannot contradict truth. Moreover, they believe that the natural truths of creation constitute a real revelation from God, as is clear from St. Paul's teaching: "... seeing that what may be known about God is manifest to them. For God has manifested it to them. For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen—his everlasting power also and divinity—being understood through the things that are made." (Rom. 1:19-20) For this reason, Catholics study the facts of natural religion with avidity, certain that as there is only one God so also there can be only one truth.

Also, the Church cannot agree with the results of those studies which indicate that all religions are equal before God but maintains that Christianity is superior to all other forms of belief. Christ came on earth, assumed human nature, and died for the redemption of mankind, thus making it possible for man to attain to eternal happiness. While hoping to enter into dialogue with non-Christian faiths on common values and ideals, Pope Paul VI pointed out explicitly that there is not an equality between them and Christianity:

... we cannot share in these various forms of religion nor can we remain indifferent to the fact that each of them, in its own way, should regard itself as being the equal of any other and should authorize its followers not to seek to discover whether God has revealed the perfect and definitive form, free from all error, in which he wishes to be known, loved and served. Indeed, honesty compels us to declare openly that there is but one true religion, the religion of Christianity." (par. 111)

Likewise, Catholics assert the superiority of Catholicism over the other forms of Christianity. They believe that Christ founded one Church which was to perpetuate his doctrine throughout the ages and that this Church is the Catholic Church. Although affirming the right of an individual to follow the dictates of an upright conscience, the Second Vatican Council's declaration on religious freedom stresses this doctrine:

"First, the council professes its belief that God Himself has made known to mankind the way in which men are to serve Him, and thus be saved in Christ and come to blessedness. We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the spreading of it abroad among all men."

In conclusion, it may be said that comparative religion can be a valuable instrument for the Catholic Church. It can provide the knowledge necessary for helping to restore unity among Christians, for helping to make the missionary apostolate to those who have not received the message of Christ more productive, and for helping to effect a united religious front of all peoples against the evils of Communism. Caution must be exercised in order to insure that the search for facts is always honest and objective. The role of comparative religion is not to pass moral judgment but only to compile phenomena and to describe and evaluate them according to objective criterion. The results of this study can also help to acquire a greater appreciation for the transcendency of Christianity and of its fullest expression in Catholicism. This is not to deny that there are many great truths to be found in non-Christian religions. From the fact that the phenomena of comparative religion represent the content of a primitive revelation as well as a record of the action of God on the souls of men, we should expect that such truths be found. However, it still remains true that there is something found in Christianity that is not found in any other religion and that is Jesus Christ Himself. "This is life eternal, to know Thee, the one true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." (John 17:3)