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Item Type	Article
Authors	Minor, Robert N.
Publisher	Evangelical Theological Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-06 06:56:24
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/163231

UNDERSTANDING AS THE FIRST STEP IN AN EVANGELICAL APPROACH TO WORLD RELIGIONS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Robert N. Minor*

Edmund Perry in *The Gospel in Dispute*[1] proposes to undertake the study of other religions in order to convert adherents of other faiths to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perry recognizes the preliminary step to such a witness to be the need to understand the religions of the people confronted in order to facilitate one's communication of the gospel to them in the realities of their existence. He also says that the man who has committed himself to Christ prior to the study of other religions has a settled conviction that makes him "the best possible prospect for accomplishing an impartial scientific investigation of religions."[2] This scientific investigation is committed to "analyzing and describing *things as they are* in contrast to what we might presuppose, imagine, or wish them to be."[3] It is not predicated on the absence of a prior commitment, but only attempts to understand what other people believe—that is, to construct propositions that state their beliefs and practice accurately.

The Christian is committed to such an attempt to understand others because the most accurate representation of these other religions is required in order to be able to approach their followers as they are.[4] Yet the evangelical community has often approached others without understanding their beliefs. Missionaries have gone into the field with an idea of "Hinduism" or "Buddhism" and have found that Buddhists know little or nothing about the "Buddhism" that exists in the mind of the missionary. It seems clear that something is wrong with our present approach. Understanding, as a goal of students of other religions, is not our problem only. It is one that faces any historian of religion whose goal is historical understanding.[5]

It is time, however, that someone from the evangelical community began to think about method in the understanding of other religions.

*Robert N. Minor is assistant professor of the history of religions at Allegheny College, Meadville, Pennsylvania.

[1]E. Perry, *The Gospel in Dispute* (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 86.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 84.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 87.

[5]See R. D. Baird, *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), for a discussion of these issues. His work is behind much of what is said in this paper.

When apology then begins it will not be arguing with straw men, and missionaries can improve their effectiveness because they will be dealing with people's actual belief systems.

An example of an argument with straw men was sent to me a few years ago by a student in one of the finest evangelical seminaries in our country. It was a mimeographed handout he had received in a class in apologetics entitled, "Salvation by Grace Outside of the Christian Faith? No!" It was not, of course, meant to be a finished piece of scholarship, but to show seminary students that there is no sense of grace outside of Christianity. The person who compiled it is in my opinion a first-rate scholar. In fairness to him I shall withhold his name, but let me use it as a starting point for some methodological considerations—not because it is worse than other presentations, but because, alas, it is typical.

I. The Stipulation of Definitions—The Beginning of Understanding

One of the religions analyzed in the handout is the Japanese religion Jodō Shinshū (often called "True Pure Land Buddhism"). Jodō Shinshū is reported in the handout to "claim that here ... salvation is attained by complete commitment to the grace of Amida." The handout then attempts to show the claim of grace to be false and thereby faces the first problem that should be dealt with by historians of religion and Christians who desire to understand: definition. Two definitions of "grace" are working in the argument. The first definition is the one found in the claim of the religion itself and usually reported by historians of religion: "Grace" means that a person attains the goal of his religion not by his own works, but by unmerited favor from outside of him. Given this definition of grace, there seems to be no question that some members of the Jodō Shinshū believe in grace. For example, Shinran Shōnin (1173-1263), the founder of this religion, believed that one could reach the Pure Land at death on the basis of the merits of Amida Buddha (a Perfect Being who had earned infinite merit to give away) and that all deeds done by oneself were of no avail. In fact, Shinran sings as follows in one of his compositions:

> Although the great chiliocosm may be filled with flames,
> Yet he who *hears* the Holy Name of the Buddha,
> Always in accord with steadfastness,
> Will freely pass [to the Pure Land].[6]

Shinran here teaches that merely to hear the name of Amida in faith brings salvation. He was therefore criticized by other Buddhists for

[6]Quoted in E. A. Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: Mentor, 1955), p. 222. Italics mine.

teaching a sinning religion, and scholars often compare him to Martin Luther.[7]

The argument in the handout, however, is working with a much more involved definition of "grace" and therefore finds that this group does not believe in salvation by grace when defined in this different sense. It argues that since Amida is "a human being who attained his divinity by his own efforts" this is not real grace. The argument of the handout hinges, then, on the origin of grace. It requires that grace must originate from a supreme, eternal god in order for it to be called grace.

The author of the handout is not arguing merely whether there is salvation by grace taught in this religion, but whether there is salvation by the true grace of the True God. Shinran, himself, would have agreed with the handout on this point. Amida Buddha, though thought by some to be close to an eternal god, was not considered by Shinran to be such at all. There is, therefore, no argument here. The disagreement seems to be involved in the question of Jodō Shinshū's doctrine of god.

What does the handout actually mean, then, when it asks whether there is grace in other religions? If by grace it means that salvation is by grace through faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, then I know of no religion other than Christianity that teaches that. But if by grace one means the teaching of salvation by unmerited favor bestowed on the believer, the Jodō Shinshū clearly teaches that. The importance of clear definitions in this matter is underlined. Words that have been used ambiguously in the past need to be clearly defined if any communication is to be possible.

The question of definition is so basic that it is often overlooked, but the distinction between different types of definition must be continually kept in mind if one is to argue cogently in any field, especially that of the history of religions. Every time one of our Christian brothers says, "Christianity is a faith and all other systems are religions," we feel that he is saying something that is meaningful to him and maybe to other believers. But we recognize that its profundity is not shared by someone who has not yet encountered Christ in salvation and, therefore, *"real"* grace. Instead, it all depends on what one means when one uses the word "religion" or, as in the handout, "grace."

Without going into the matter completely, let us note three types of definition.[8] The first type is "real definition," a thing-thing definition, a true statement about things that are. When one speaks of the real definition of religion, he is telling others what that thing in the world is which in fact is religion and, therefore, ought to be called "religion" by all who want to understand the true nature of reality. Such a definition, it seems to me, can come only from God himself. However, even the Living God has not given us the real definition of religion in general. His

[7]For example, see P. O. Ingram, "Shinran Shōnin and Martin Luther: A Soteriological Comparison," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 39 (December, 1971), pp. 430-447.

[8]For a full treatment see R. Robinson, *Definition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), on which these definitions are based.

Word gives us the real definition of true religion in James 1:27, but there is not a concern to define the word "religion" for us so as to bind us to a usage for all time or to tell us how to recognize a real religion when we encounter one. God's Word tells us which religion is true, but not what the true definition of the word "religion" is. The Bible gives us only a real definition of *true* religion.

That God has given us a real definition of grace, none of us would doubt, but that he has given us a definition of the word "grace" that binds us to its use for all time does not follow. The author of the handout has such a real definition in mind in his argument, but he failed to stipulate that that is what he meant by the word "grace" when he began the comparison. This may have been because a definition of "grace" had already been agreed upon in the class context, however.

A second type of definition is "lexical definition." This is defined as "that sort of word-thing definition in which we are explaining the actual way in which some actual word has been used by some actual persons."[9] It is the type of definition found in dictionaries. It is an historical statement about how a word has been used in the past and does not concern us here.

A third type of definition is "stipulative definition." This is word-thing definition which is the act of stipulating that a certain *word* means a certain thing (a thing meaning any objective reality including other words, the meanings of which are already known). Such a definition does not attempt to tell us truth but has the purpose of allowing a person to communicate by indicating what he means when he uses the word. It is a useful definition if it is applicable to the data available. An example of such a definition of "religion" would be: "Religion is that which concerns one ultimately." Under such a definition Biblical Christianity is treated as a religion as others are. However, this does not decide that Biblical Christianity is the same as other religions. It merely allows one to communicate his thesis to others and others to test his thesis.

Our first methodological concern, therefore, ought to be a clear stipulative definition of any terms that have been used ambiguously in the past in order to relieve them of any hidden meaning and to enable us to communicate with others. Had the author of the handout stipulated his definition of "grace" to include the fact that it must come from God, he would not have found himself disagreeing with a claim that the Jodō Shinshū religion never made, and any implied real definition would have been indicated. The difference between Jodō Shinshū and Biblical Christianity involves the larger real definition that would be identical with the total Biblical belief system.

II. Reified Isms—Inadequate Categories for Understanding

The second problem that arises in the handout is one that continually plagues those who attempt to understand other religions:

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 35.

the category of isms. We owe it to Wilfred Cantwell Smith in *The Meaning and End of Religion*[10] for definitively pointing out the uselessness of such categories as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and so on for an understanding of other peoples' religions. They are categories that become reified, giving those who dabble in world religions the feeling that, once they have found out what the five essential doctrines of each "ism" are, they then understand the religions of the world.

Such an approach, I would suggest, results instead in misunderstanding what the various followers think. The more one studies the religions of others, the more one finds that there is nothing that all people who call themselves Hindus, for example, hold in common. There is, therefore, no "essence" of Hinduism identifiable by historians. The "Hinduism" of the Indian thinker Shankara (788-820), Advaita Vedanta, which is often used in brief surveys as the presentation of Hindu doctrine,[11] is not to be found in a historical reading of the *Rigveda* (the earliest texts related to so-called "Hinduism"). The *Rigveda* is often called *shruti* ("that which is heard"), indicating that it is supposedly normative for "Hindus." Shankara considers the many gods believed in by some "Hindus" to be on a lower level of reality and not ultimately real, but the *Rigveda* believes the many gods to compose ultimate reality. The followers of Krishna *bhakti* ("devotion") in the main do not teach that the world is illusion at all, as Shankara did. Therefore, a Christian apology that has focused on the "Hindu" teaching that the world is *māyā* ("illusion") is wasted on any who know more about the beliefs of the religions of India than a western student who has read one book on "Hinduism." It is wasted on the "Hindu" who worships Krishna and believes that the world is as real as you or I do. When the one who desires first to understand others treats the category of "Hinduism" as a reified entity, he ignores the disagreements held on every point of doctrine among the followers of religions that are usually grouped under the term "Hinduism." The same can be said for the reification of all of the isms. Therefore, such an approach results in misunderstanding the one whom we would hope to convert to Christ.

III. The "True" Ism—Impossible Category for Understanding

The usual answer given in defense of such categories is that when one finds people who do not believe the essentials set forth, those found must not be considered true Hindus or true Buddhists. This is another reason why the category of isms results in misunderstanding, for it requires one who is not committed to the truth of a "Hindu" view to

[10]W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor, 1963).

[11]This religious position is the one usually refuted in Christian apologetics. It is a minority view in India, though the view is found in many university philosophy departments there. To treat it as typical or the highest eastern thought is to ignore views that are more widely held. O. Guinness (*The East, No Exit* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1974], p. 30) does this, possibly because it is the view that westerners with whom he has spoken have held. His works would have quite a limited appeal to "easterners."

decide what is true Hinduism, or true Buddhism, or whatever.

What is true "Buddhism"? Is it the earliest system of beliefs, as the Theravada community of south Asia would have us believe, or the most developed, as the committed Buddhist scholar Edward Conze claims?[12] How does the person who is not committed to the truth of "Buddhism" decide which "Buddhism" is true? We do know what true Christianity is, for God has told us in his Word. But what has he told us about true "Buddhism"? There is no basis for the uncommitted historian to decide what "true Buddhism" is, and the Christian has no Word about it!

Followers of various systems that trace their beliefs back to the Buddha, however, do tell the historian which view they believe is true. This brings us back to the handout, the author of which argues that there is no grace in Jodō Shinshū religion on the basis of quotations from modern followers of that faith. These followers tell him that there is no grace because they hold an idea of what the true doctrines of Jodō Shinshū are. The works quoted in the handout are based on interviews with "Japanese Buddhist leaders," and all of these leaders appear to be attempting to relate their faith to modern society and its belief systems. Buddhist leaders do to their religions what certain thinkers who identify with Christianity do. To approach them, however, as authorities on the question of grace might appear legitimate at first, but it is subtly confusing. One has only to go back to the founder, Shinran, as mentioned above, to find a disagreement with them. Such a method of approach, then, for finding out what the teachings of true Jodō Shinshū are is the same as would be the approach of a Buddhist who desires to find out if Christians feel that the historical Jesus is important to their faith. He would go to the leading seminaries of the Christian world and ask Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the like what true Christianity says about it. He would have to conclude that Christianity does not concern itself much with the historical Jesus.

The point is that the Buddhist would have no basis on which to decide what true Christianity is until he had been confronted with the facts God had revealed and was convinced God had revealed them. It would, therefore, be better for the evangelical who desires first to understand the religions of others to drop all such categories and to attempt instead to understand the possibilities that are set before him by those to whom he desires to witness to the true religion as found in relationship to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

IV. Knowledge of Each Religion—A Minimal Requirement

The isms, then, can get the historian of religion into trouble if he assumes that there is any agreement within the ism—that is, if he takes the ism to correspond to actual reality. Instead, the historian of religions as well as the Christian must recognize the infinite variety of religions in the field and must gear his method to attempting to understand that

[12]E. Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

variety. This would seem to require more work among evangelical scholars.

An example of a major error in the handout that combines the problem of isms with lack of knowledge in the field might be pointed out. Another religion of which the author asks the question of salvation by grace is the school of followers of the god Vishnu called Tengalai. The claim of that school as reported by our author is that "this school believes that the individual does nothing in achieving salvation but relies completely on the grace of God."

Tengalai is one group of the followers of the Indian religious thinker Ramanuja (1017-1137). His followers divided basically into two schools. The Tengalai school is found in south India, and the Vadagalai school developed in the north. The southern school emphasized the importance of the grace of Vishnu in attaining liberation. It held that no individual effort was necessary for divine grace to be exercised, but that Vishnu's action is like that of a cat toward its kittens. As the mother cat lifts its kittens and carries them to a safe place without any effort from the kitten, so does Vishnu bestow his grace on man. The northern school, Vadagalai, however, held that one had to purify himself before he would receive Vishnu's help. This came to be known as the monkey school, because the baby monkey carried by the mother must cling to the mother in the same way that the devotee must cling to Vishnu.

The distinction between these two schools must be maintained, even though they are often categorized under the name Vaishnavism since they both worship Vishnu. It is the southern school, Tengalai, that teaches grace. However, the quotations used in the handout to prove that Tengalai does not teach such grace are taken from books that are studied of devotees of Vishnu in northern India: Susil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal,*[13] and Kanai Lal Dutt and Kshetra M. Purkayastha, *The Bengal Vaishnavism and Modern Life.*[14] The fact is that all devotees of Vishnu do not believe the same thing. Therefore, to treat Vaishnavism as a category that exists in fact is to ignore differences and to fight straw men—reified entities.

Clearly, then, we who desire to confront these religions with the gospel of Jesus Christ as found in God's Word ought to be the first to correct such misconceptions and to eliminate false categories that correspond to nothing in life. If we do not, we misrepresent others and fail to meet them in witness where they are. As a group we are behind in the training of people in learning what these religions are saying, and we are using methodologies that will aid misunderstanding when missionaries reach the field. If we desire to be more effective witnesses in

[13]S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal,* 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961). This book is actually about followers of Krishna, not Vishnu, who strongly deny that Krishna is actually an *avatara* ("incarnation") of Vishnu.

[14]K. L. Dutt and K. M. Purkayastha, *The Bengal Vaishnavism and Modern Life* (Calcutta: Sribhumi Publishing Co., 1963).

a world where our neighbors may be "Krishna freaks," we ought to understand their beliefs before we reach for our Bibles and tell them what is wrong with their religion. If we plan to speak with understanding, as Paul did on Mars' Hill, we must first of all understand.