

# Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

## Comparative Religion Today

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Ling, T.
Publisher	Baptist Historical Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-08 08:06:52
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/153565">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/153565</a>

## Comparative Religion Today

SOME of Ernest Payne's earliest work was in the field of Comparative Religion. His book on the Śāktas of India,<sup>1</sup> published in Calcutta in 1933, is an original and notable contribution to studies in this field. Much of the work for it was done at Marburg which, as the author notes in his preface was, in the early 1930s, "making a name for itself among German universities for its interest in Comparative Religion". If one recalls that the book was written at the suggestion of that great scholar and student of Hindu religion, J. N. Farquar, and that it acknowledges indebtedness to Edward Thompson, W. Sutton Page and E. C. Dewick, it will easily be seen of what spirit it is—apart from the entirely characteristic imprint of carefulness, generosity, critical insight and deep Christian conviction which it owes to its author.

It was the present writer's privilege to begin studying Comparative Religion under Ernest Payne as tutor, after a period of three years in India (and with the added advantage of having Willie Wickramasinghe as tutorial partner). Looking back on the twenty years in which the study has been pursued since then it becomes clear that the guiding lines, aims and methods have been very largely those which were acquired under Ernest Payne's quiet but inspiring tutorship. During these years it has become increasingly clear to me that this is a subject which has its own special contribution to make to religious studies generally; it is the nature of this special contribution, as I see it, that I shall try to indicate in this article.

### I

An extremely pious clergyman, hearing from a student of mine that the comparative study of religion formed part of her university course, exclaimed with horror, "My dear, I would rather you read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* than that subject!" The desperate nature of the comparison shows how strong his feelings must have been. He added, by way of explanation, that at least you were *aware* the Devil was attacking you when you read D. H. Lawrence.

This attitude is by no means rare. The assumption is that the academic study of religion in a world context is destructive of Christian faith. Of course, if one's view of the nature and significance of religion is framed in such a way as to deliberately exclude a great deal of the relevant material, then the opening of windows on to Islamic, or Buddhist, or Hindu vistas may be an embarrassment. On the other hand, an appreciation of the many and varied

ways in which men have manifested their awareness of a dimension to human existence other than the temporal and "material" can be of the greatest value in an age that is increasingly menaced by total secularization. (I emphasize the word "menaced", and in doing so indicate where I stand in the current debate about religion and secularization.) What I am therefore concerned with here is to suggest that the comparative study of religion has a more positive and a more constructive role than nervous piety sometimes imagines, and one that does not come within the scope of any other single academic discipline.

In exploring the nature of Comparative Religion's role today one has first to consider whether in any sense it is a subordinate role. Does the subject belong to some other major discipline, such as theology, or philosophy, or history, or oriental studies, or sociology? In some universities it keeps company with theology; in some in Britain, such as Lancaster and Leeds, it forms part of more widely based programmes called "Religious Studies"; again, in some places, as at Leicester, it is pursued as a part of Philosophy, and in America, as well as all these possibilities, it is sometimes located within a department of History. Perhaps this is one reason why it is suspect to the pious; for while it is known to be associated with theology, it is felt by conservative theologians to be something of a cuckoo in the nest (or possibly a wolf in sheep's clothing), and more clearly recognizable for what it is when it associates with other secular (and? faith-destroying) subjects like philosophy and sociology. The view taken here is that while it may draw upon any or all of these disciplines for materials and methods, the limits of its area of concern do not coincide with the limits set for themselves by any of these other subjects, either individually or collectively.

What, then, is its role? First it must be made clear what, in the comparative study of religion, is being compared with what. Here we have to note in passing that there is a branch of Christian apologetics which is sometimes dressed up to look like comparative religion. This is the sort of study in which Christianity is compared with "other religions" or "the non-Christian religions"; these latter all-embracing and rather condescending terms are still in favour with some neo-orthodox theologians. In this kind of undertaking it is accepted from the start that the comparison is to be to the advantage of Christianity.

At a more respectable academic level Comparative Religion did mean, and to some extent still does mean, a study of the inter-relationships of the major systems of religious thought and of the way in which the diffusion of religious themes and ideas has taken place. For there is a great deal of intertwining among the great religious traditions, especially of Eurasia. Judaism was affected by Zoroastrianism, and together they both contributed to Islam. Islam, expanding eastwards, hastened the demise of Buddhism from India

and in turn was itself influenced by Hinduism. Christianity reaching India from Europe had its effects upon nineteenth-century Hindu and Islamic revival movements, and in Ceylon had the effect of an antibody to stimulate Buddhism to a recovery of its own intrinsic ideas. In recent decades Asian religious thought, particularly Buddhist, has had subtle effects upon Western theology. The issues are not so simple, of course, as this hasty summary of cross-currents suggests, and it is with the more complicated and delicate mechanism of the diffusion of ideas that Comparative Religion is partly concerned; this alone would provide it with a *raison d'être*.

The subject entails more, however, than the comparative study of religious ideas. Comparative Religion has in recent years, especially in the United States, begun to mean, and needs very much more to become, the relating of the findings of two separate disciplines, the philosophy of religion and the sociology of religion, *each pursued in a world-context*. These two subjects, as they are at present studied, are not always, and perhaps not often, pursued in a world context. The subject matter of courses labelled "the philosophy of religion" frequently consists only of the philosophy of Western religion, or, (even more partisan) philosophical Christian theology. The sociology of religion, moreover, much more advanced nowadays in the United States than in Europe, usually confines itself to the study of religion in contemporary American society, although there are notable exceptions, particularly in some of the studies of millenarian movements. The direction in which Comparative Religion has begun to develop is a corrective to this, and it is at the same time a logical advance from what was its earlier position, represented for example by the work of such scholars as E. O. James.

In this earlier period Comparative Religion relied to a considerable extent on the work of anthropologists; indeed it was often difficult to draw any clear line of demarcation between Comparative Religion and anthropology. Within the field of social science generally, sociology now tends to take over the position of importance which anthropology formally held, as more and more of the world's peoples become industrialized and urbanized, or at least, with the growth of new states, are organized in more complex societies. Certainly it is the sociologists today who are active in studying and reporting on the religious behaviour of men, on the effect which this has upon economic and social structures, and, conversely, the ways in which religious behaviour is affected by social and economic structures. However, in doing so, sociology has in recent years become increasingly empirical, to the exclusion of theory; facts are gathered from the results of field work and from sociological analysis of the data, and some kind of immediate conclusions are drawn relevant to the situation under scrutiny. There is much less concern with the construction of general theories of religion

and society than there was in the days of those giants and pioneers, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, upon whose work writers like R. H. Tawney were able to build. The recent tendency is understandable; intensive development of a subject inevitably leads to specialization, and where circumstances virtually compel all to become specialists, who has time for constructing general theories? Even though Weber claimed not to be formulating a general theory, the fact remains that he surveyed a very much wider field than any sociologist of religion has done since—seventeenth-century Puritanism, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and the religions of China all came within his purview. His American commentator and expositor, Talcott Parsons, may be a more thorough *sociological* system-builder with a lively awareness of the interaction of religion and society, but his work does not claim to have the breadth of Weber's. We may hear from Gerhard Lenski in great and very useful detail about the religious situation in the Detroit area, or from Herberg about over-all American values finding expression in the three major religious communities, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, but in what academic discipline are these related to similar researches in neo-Shintoist Japan, or Buddhist Burma, or the Islamic society of Pakistan? More important, what other discipline exists, apart from Comparative Religion, which is likely to lead not only to a synoptic view of such studies, but also to bring us a little nearer to a more accurate understanding of the place of religion in the modern world?

This might be thought to be the task of what, if it existed, could be called "the comparative sociology of religion". But such a discipline would have certain disadvantages and limitations. For the academic sociologist works, professionally at least, within certain self-imposed limits; if he were required to investigate other aspects of religion than the sociological he might consider that he was trespassing upon the province of the philosopher of religion—or he might simply not be interested in raising these other questions. Let the philosopher, or even the theologian raise them. But if the sociologist is not interested in at least the tentative answers or findings worked out by the philosopher, some of the potential value of the philosopher's work will be lost. And if, on the other hand, the philosophers and theologians have not really taken the pains to understand what the sociologist has been pointing out concerning the inter-relation of religion and society there may remain a suspicion that their account of religious belief and religious behaviour is as unsatisfactory as that of the purely empirical sociologist.

The argument thus seems to lead to the demand for an academic discipline that might be called "the philosophy and sociology of religion". Some means would have to be found, however, both for ensuring, and for making clear, that the subject was to be pursued by *comparative* study, and in a *world-context*. The title might

therefore be "the comparative philosophy and sociology of world religions". If such a long-winded title were ever used it would in fact indicate what I believe are the present proper concerns of Comparative Religion.

To return then to the question, What is being compared with what? we find that the word comparative has here a double reference; it refers to the fact that the findings of sociologists need to be compared with those of philosophers of religion; and also to the fact that in each case East must be compared with West; that is, the researches of sociologists in the U.S.A. are to be set alongside those of their colleagues in, say Japan, or India; and that a similar catholicity is to be encouraged in the case of the philosophy of religion.

There is, however, yet another approach to the subject without which a good deal of the contemporary evidence might not be properly interpreted, and that is the historical. One needs to be aware of the changes which particular religious traditions and institutions have undergone, changes which are evident from *historical* comparison. One does not understand the Hindu caste-system if one regards it as something which is eternally the same, having existed as it is today from time immemorial (the view which some Hindus take), and subject only to minor modifications here and there. A proper appreciation of the nature of caste in India demands an understanding of what it was (embryonically, perhaps) at the time of the Buddha, compared with what it had become some centuries later when the laws of Manu received their present codification, compared again with what it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and compared yet again with what it is today. Similarly one does not properly understand the religion of one's Pakistani immigrant neighbour if one attends only to the rise of Islam in seventh century Mecca and Medina. The modern Pakistani Muslim is heir also to centuries of tradition which have moulded the Islamic tradition of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent and have provided him with his present religious and cultural heritage. He cannot easily shake this off, nor can we properly understand his situation apart from this. One of the valuable qualities of Weber's work was his historical realism about religion; he studied religion as it actually existed—in seventeenth-century Europe, for example—and not in some ideal form which its adherents claimed for it and which they believed had existed in the past.

This, then, is the scope of Comparative Religion. The field begins to seem vast—perhaps too vast to be comprehended as a single area of study; too vast a subject for any one man to undertake to study or to teach. A little reflection shows, however, that the same is true of other academic subjects, including those with which this one has common frontiers, especially philosophy, sociology, history and theology. All these demand wide competence and all to some extent

overlap one another; yet each has its own special contribution to make to the understanding of the world and of the human situation. So too has Comparative Religion; the student who works in this field will be aware of his indebtedness to researchers in many other fields; he will, moreover, be encouraged in his own special research by the conviction that this area, too, has its own particular contribution to make, in the better understanding of religion, and of what is happening today in the religious life of man.

## 2

I propose to devote the remainder of this article to two examples of the kind of contribution which I believe the comparative study of religion can make in our present world religious situation. I dare to hope that they are the kind of contributions to the subject which might earn one of Ernest Payne's favourite epithets—"useful"! It would be impossible in the space remaining, however, to demonstrate these issues in detail; one can only indicate in each case the general area from which some valuable conclusions might be derived in the course of a more detailed study than is possible here.

The first has to do with the relation between religion and the state. From the important historical examples of the state patronage of religion provided by some Asian countries it might be assumed that religion flourishes best when it enjoys such patronage, and where there is a close link between the centre of government and the major religious institutions. To be more precise, this might be assumed from the case of Islam in India and that of Buddhism in South-east Asia.

The reasons behind the coming into existence in 1947 of the modern state of Pakistan were complex; political, economic, social, historical, and psychological factors were all present, as well as religious. But religion had an important part to play. The notion was widely held among Indian Muslims that Islamic religion must find fulfilment in the Islamic state. "The purpose of setting up the state," writes Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "was to enable Muslims here to take up once again the task of implementing their faith also in the political realm."<sup>2</sup> The Islamic state is held by many Muslims to be the ideal form of Islam; where Islam does not find expression in the Islamic state, it is argued, it remains incomplete. With this notion goes also the assumption that Islamic religious life will be found in its purest and healthiest form within the context of the Islamic state. By the latter is meant an independent political entity in which Muslims agree together to live and rule themselves *as Muslims*, so that their common life shall as nearly as possible be the expression of Islamic values. This was the vision which largely inspired the Muslim League before 1947 and brought Pakistan into existence, to be greeted in 1947 "with an elation that was religious".

The twenty years that have elapsed since then have provided very little evidence that Islamic religious life is healthier in Pakistan than in, say, Indonesia, which also has a predominantly Muslim population (90 per cent of the total) who have nevertheless decided against making their republic "Islamic". As in previous chapters of Islamic history, political struggles have vitiated the community's life in Pakistan. One of the features of its life, comments the Pakistan historian, I. H. Qureshi, has been "political corruption and bribery on a wide scale".<sup>3</sup> He goes on to say: "In the wake of chronic political instability, corruption, nepotism, and jobbery stepped in", so that "the Republican Chief Minister of West Pakistan admitted on the floor of the House that 'now, from top to bottom, there was hardly a person who was not corrupt'."<sup>4</sup>

Such developments as these, which have resulted in the increased activity of the protest movement led by Maulana Maududi for a "pure" Islamic state, do not offer much encouragement for the view that religion, in this case Islamic, necessarily thrives when it is given political embodiment in a modern state. In Indonesia, on the other hand, the religious vitality of Islam does not seem to have suffered notably from the fact that it is not in that country in the position of being the official ideology of the state. If Islam exerts an important influence in Indonesia it is through other channels than those of the Establishment. Two in particular stand out: the schools, especially the more recently founded *madrassa* type of school, and the voluntary religious organisations. The *madrassas* are, in the first instance, an expression of the concern of Indonesian pilgrims to Mecca who while in the Middle East have come under the influence of the religious movements in Arabia and Egypt, and who on their return to Indonesia have for some years now been actively engaged in providing and staffing schools where the instruction given is both liberal (in the sense of the range of subjects taught) and more purely Islamic, in the sense of being more closely and intelligibly related to the Quran and the Sunna. This has been the concern very largely of the urban middle and lower-middle class Muslims of Indonesia who are concerned with Islam as a personal religion, a moral code, and a source of values for a modern society. Roughly the same classes (tradesmen, schoolteachers, clerks, etc.) have supported the religious organisations, the most notable of which is the *Muhammadiyah*, and a notable feature of which has been the important place given to *reason* in the affairs of religion. The *Muhammadiyah* movement has sponsored a whole range of activities such as education, religious publications, orphanages and hospitals, organisations for women and girls, a boy-scout movement and mass open-air meetings. Through such media the strength of Islam has been built up in many villages and towns, in Java especially, and the village and small-town adherents have been made aware that they belong to a universal religion. It is perhaps significant that although

the idea of Indonesia becoming an Islamic state has had its champions, it has certainly not found widespread support: very largely, it has not been felt to be necessary or desirable.

In several countries of South-east Asia there is a strong tradition of state patronage of the Buddhist religion. In Ceylon the great days of the Sinhalese kings are regarded as Buddhism's most vital and creative period in that island. In Burma it was only in 1885 that the last Burmese king, Thibaw, who was also the protector of the Buddhist order, was defeated and dethroned by the British; before him the tradition of royal patronage of Buddhism in Burma runs back to Anawrahta, contemporary of William the Conqueror. In Thailand royal patronage, and all that that entails in the life of the country, is still the order of things. Since independence from British colonial rule was achieved by Ceylon and Burma the latter has attempted to restore something of the old pattern whereby Buddhism was the state religion; Ceylon, however, has not. It is noteworthy that the commission of six Buddhist laymen and six monks which was appointed in 1954 by the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress to inquire into the state of Buddhism in the island and to take recommendations for its revival and reform, did not propose a return to the old pattern of things. The last sentence of their very full report, *The Betrayal of Buddhism*, is worth quoting in this connection: "We ask (only) for . . . the right to be allowed to profess and practice our religion without let or hindrance, material or spiritual, secular or religious, *in a free and democratic Ceylon*" [my italics].

If one were to ask where, in South-east Asia, Buddhist thought, Buddhist missionary activity, the production and dissemination of Buddhist literature are most vigorous, and where the desire to recover the essence of Buddhism as a counter to the pressures of modern secularism is most noticeable, one would have to answer that it was not in Thailand where Buddhism enjoys official protection, nor in Burma, where a return to state Buddhism has been tried, but in Ceylon, where Buddhists have accepted the conditions of life in a modern democratic state and have avoided a return to the old pattern of state-protection for religion. Indeed, during the period of European rule in Ceylon it was because Buddhism was politically, educationally and economically deprived that its adherents were roused to work for its revival and recovery.

Those who are convinced already that the alliance of religion and the state bodes no good for true religion will perhaps not need such evidence as this which is available from modern Asia, and which could be elaborated in much greater detail. But for some who are inclined still to hanker after the principle of an established religion, this is evidence from the comparative study of religion which needs to be weighed very seriously.

The second of the contributions which I believe comparative

study can make to our understanding of the religious life of man is perhaps of a more controversial nature. It requires careful argument, and long and leisurely reflection. But there is space here only to mention it. It is this. The Christian conception of Christ has grown and deepened in the course of Christian history. One of the early stages in that process was the recognition that the Christ who is to come is a being identical with one whom men had, as it were, glimpsed briefly for a short time; the one who had come in great humility, but who was finally to appear to all men in his glorious majesty. And together with this went the recognition that the intimations which men elsewhere had had of the hidden beauty and harmony which they called the Logos could be welcomed as an intimation of the eternal Christ. Is it not possible that there are other such intimations; that other men in other places have perceived that which they in their turn (in China) have called the Tao, and (in India) the eternal Dharma? A. G. Hebert used to remind us that as the Christian understanding of Christ has been enriched by the heritage of Greece so too it may yet be enriched by the religious heritage of Asia. Those who have only a superficial knowledge of what the Buddhist, for example, has seen, even though remotely, when he speaks of the eternal Buddha-nature; those who have been satisfied by second-rate books written by men of partisan interest will not understand this. But I believe it need not be so, and I believe that an enhanced awareness and deepened understanding of Christ can come to men of the West from the kind of study in which they engage under the name of Comparative Religion. I must confess that it is with something of a numinous thrill that I hear the words of the Gospel on Christmas Day: "In the beginning was the Logos . . . and the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us . . ." because in "Logos" I hear also "Tao", "Dharma", "Buddha-nature" and all that these have meant to some men of Asia. And that is why I finish my first year lecture course to students in comparative religion with the words of the Apostle, words quoted also by Ernest Payne in the preface to his book on the Śāktas, the words of the motto of Regent's Park College: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

## NOTES

1. E. A. Payne, *The Śāktas*, Calcutta, 1933.
2. W. C. Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, Princeton, 1957, p. 217.
3. I. H. Qureshi, "The Development of Pakistan", in *The New Asia*, ed. by G. S. Métraux and F. Crouzet, New York and London, 1965, p. 250.
4. Qureshi, op. cit., p. 251.

T. LING