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Comparative Religion

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Comparative religion: Introduction and call for papers

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The modern comparative study of religions began with Max Müller who published his two classics: *Comparative Mythology* in 1856, and *Introduction to the Science of Religions* in 1870. The term 'science of religion' (religionswissenschaft) was used to denote the emancipation of the study of religion from theology and from philosophy of religion. *The Sacred Books of the East*, edited by Max Müller marked the beginning of this independent step towards the new science of comparative religions. In this development, philological and historical concerns were dominating. Description of religious phenomena took the place of evaluation. Norms and values were explained in historical, psychological and sociological terms. This development was marked by two main characteristics: specialization and objectivity. Another important characteristic was the search for parallels, similarities and dissimilarities among religious phenomena in world religions [1].

The work of Rudolf Otto put the foundation for the science of comparative religion, which gave much concern for historical, philological and critical aspects. As explained by Wach, Otto's work "lays powerful stress upon the objective character of ultimate reality, and thus refutes all subjective and illusionist theories of religion" [2].

Many new elements were introduced in the study of religion(s): interest in both the rational and non-rational elements, search for help among scholars who grew up in other religious traditions, giving importance to 'native' explanations and commentaries, avoidance of skepticism, relativism, and historicism [3].

The term 'comparative religion' is also shorthand for the method of comparative, cross-cultural, historical study of religions. With the increase of religious data provided by historical and archaeological studies, the science of comparative religion has emerged in order to compare similar religious phenomena in various religions and to draw certain results and conclusions from the similarities and differences between religions.

Certain elements were suggested by Joachim Wach to characterize the comparative study of religion. First, to achieve understanding based on data provided by all scholarly disciplines and in different languages. Second: an emotional attitude of appreciation of how religion encompasses the entire person. Third: comprehension of various types of religiosity. Fourth: varied engagement in different religious experiences [4].

Comparative religion denotes the application of the comparative method (the scientific method) to the data provided by the religions of the world, past and present [5]. Each religion was given a place within a scheme of progress, development, or evolution in addition to the assessment of its value. Comparative religion was also understood as to compare and contrast the religions of the world, and to estimate their respective claims and values [6]. The theory of evolution (progress or development) was highly used and effectively in the study and understanding of the religions of the world [7]. A universal law of development was applied by comparative religion which claimed, then, to be a science and had to build "a comprehensive picture of the natural history of religion on evolutionary lines" [8].

This line of evolutionary thought in the study of religion was not accepted by Christian thinkers (and before that by Islam) because it relativized Christianity and tended to discount revelation. However, many scholars recognized the need to locate the evolution of religion within the broader categories of the evolution of human society [9]. According to this theory religion was developed from lowly beginning to the high point of ethical monotheism.

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After the first world war, the evolutionism that had shaped comparative religion fell apart. Comparative religion was separated into a number of interrelated disciplines, such as history, psychology, sociology and phenomenology.

Value judgment, which originally shaped comparative religion, was called into question. Instead of value judgment, the believing community was left to speak for itself, interpreted more in terms of sociology, ecology, and economics than in developmental categories [10]. Many names were given to indicate to the term “comparative religion”, such as history of religions, world religions, religious studies, and studies in religion.

Comparative religion is a study of interrelationships of the major systems of religious thought and 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 [11]. There are many dimensions for the comparative study of religion which must be taken into consideration. First, the historical dimension which means the necessity to be aware of the changes which particular religious traditions and institutions have undergone. The study of religious traditions means the study of their actual historical records, their ideas and teachings, the type of personality they produce, and the kinds of societies they build [12]. In addition to the historical aspect, there is the sociological element which means the study of religious ideas in society and the study of the religious behavior of men and its effect upon economic and social structures and its impact on religious behavior. Part of the sociological aspect has to do, generally, with the interaction of religions and society and the place of religion in the modern world. One other aspect in the comparative study of religion is the philosophical aspect which concentrates on the religious ideas and the thought given by the religions of the world. Comparative religion benefits from the contributions made by other disciplines, such as anthropology, psychology, history, philosophy and theology in order to reach a better understanding of religion and of the religious life of man.

ISSUES OF METHODOLOGY

Comparative religion is a science which compares the origins, structure and characteristics of various religions of the world with the attempt to determine their agreements and differences, their relations with each other, and their interaction through history. The study of world religions implies the serious and critical examination of material drawn from the diverse religious traditions of the world [13].

With regard to methodology, the comparative study of religion has developed many methods and approaches to study of religion. The growth of various academic disciplines (especially the social sciences) helped the development of an objective, analytical approach to the study of world religions. The basic methodologies of history, sociology, psychology and phenomenology represent the application of modern critical techniques to the study of world religions. Each approach provided comparative religion with certain methodological elements necessary for understanding of the religious phenomenon in worldly context.

For example, philosophy of religion took care of the analysis of religious language, the nature and the essence of religion. Anthropology and sociology of religion made their serious contribution to the study of primitive religions and religious contribution to social integration and the importance of religion through its cultural symbols and expressions. Psychology of religion contributed much to the understanding of the religious personality, and the psychological elements in religious experience and in understanding religious behavior and the examination of religious symbols and practices and the effect of religious issues on the integration of personality [14]. Historians of religion study the origin and development of religion through history and record the changes and transformations that characterize the evolution of various religious traditions. Historians of religion benefit from the contributions made by historians, archeologist, philologists and other sciences in reaching this understanding of religions through history. All these methodological approaches are used by the comparative study of religion, and thus constituting a comprehensive methodological approach to the study of religion in their historical, anthropological, sociological, psychological, philosophical and phenomenological aspects in order to reach a total understanding of the religious phenomena in a worldly comparative context.

OUTLINES OF TOPICS FOR ARTICLES

Under comparative religions many general specific topics may be included, and we welcome submissions to the journal on such topics as:

- The Islamic science of comparative religion, its rise, its relation to other Islamic sciences, its main authors (for example: Al-Shahristānī, Ibn Hazm, Al-Birūnī), its main writings and main methodologies.
- The present status of comparative religion in the Muslim world.
- The western school of the history of religions; its rise and its main authors and their methodologies.
- The rise and development of modern religious sciences related to the humanities and social sciences such as, history of religions, theology of religion, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, psychology of religion, phenomenology of religion, philosophy of religion, geography of religion, religion and arts, religion and literature, religion and economics.
- Individual religions such as Judaism, Christianity Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism.
- Topics on religious sects and their relations to their original religions.
- Modern religious issues are also welcomed, such as studies on interfaith dialogue, fundamentalism, feminism, religion and politics, religion and science, religion and ethics, terrorism, extremism and other contemporary issues, such as religion and environment, religion and world peace, religion and economics.
- Methodological issues in the study of religion; such as issues of description, objectivity, value judgment, methods of comparison.

We look forward to receiving your articles for this section of the journal.

References

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- [14] Ibid, p. 7.