

EDITORIAL

It was a happy thought that this number of *Religious Studies* should be associated with the meeting in Britain this year of the International Association for the History of Religions, and our thanks for this are due to the Organising Committee of the Association. It is also gratifying that notable scholars agreed to contribute, some of them having already honoured and enriched our pages on earlier occasions. Much that they say will have a close bearing on matters that will be much in our minds during the conference.

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The study of religion, in some form, is now a boom subject at the universities, and there seems also to be greater general interest in the subject than at any previous time. As an academic discipline the subject is by no means new. Plato insisted that education for the very young should begin with the inculcation of sound ideas about God and he believed that the strenuous intellectual discipline required of members of his Academy should culminate in the vision of an ultimate Good from which everything else derived its proper significance. In later centuries theology became the Queen of the Sciences. This position has long been abandoned and the various sciences have won their proper autonomy, but the study of Christian theology has remained, in most Western countries, a rounded discipline of its own which has its indispensable place in the study of Western culture. At times this was viewed with suspicion, not least among religious people themselves. It was thought that religion was essentially a private matter and that the proper place for it was in the denominational college or seminary. The *laissez faire* policies of the nineteenth century much favoured this attitude. Religion did not come within the things that belonged to Caesar, and those who had suffered from the imposition of religious tests for admission to the universities went to great lengths to ensure the exclusion of religion in all its forms from the new universities which developed in the nineteenth century. It was thus, under the presiding genius of Bentham and Mill, that the first college in the university I have the honour to serve came to be described at one time as 'the Godless institution', paying nonetheless a curious respect to the mummified body of its founder. All this has long been changed, not by the reinstatement of religious tests and privileges, but by the recognition that provision for the proper study of theology, as an intellectual discipline in its own right, is a distinct responsibility of State maintained institutions of learning. European culture cannot be effectively studied without the continuation of expert study of the history and traditions

of the Christian religion, and this by no means exhausts the proper reasons for the continuation of Christian theology at all levels of study in our universities. Those institutions which found that their charter forbade this have been looking for subtle remedies to bring them into line with the outlook and practices of our own times. Fewer people, at the moment, require a professional training in theology, but it will be a peculiarly sad deprivation if no provision is made at our main academic institutions for the systematic study and teaching of theology, including Biblical and doctrinal studies, as an important subject of study to be undertaken on its own account as an academic discipline on a level with all others.

No proper objection to this can be advanced on the grounds that a subject of this kind cannot be studied with complete detachment. Few of us manage to be wholly without bias in any study, though that is of course no reason for yielding to bias where we can avoid it. The aim should always be objectivity and detachment. But there is also a place for empathy and the sort of appreciation that can only come from personal involvement. How to balance these requirements is a further question, and readers of this journal will no doubt be helped by the wise and witty observations of Professor Galloway later in this number. But no one can seriously object to the study of theology today on the ground that the involvement it may require is not in all respects conducive to complete detachment. The Practical Wisdom, of which Aristotle spoke, should be our safeguard.

But our concern today is not just with Christian theology. Religious studies, in a much broader sense, has also come to stay, and with this a nest of additional problems. What is the relation of Religious Studies, as a general discipline within the universities, to theology, and what should it include? This is also too vast a topic for an editor to embark upon in preliminary notes. I will content myself here with the expression of a personal conviction, in which I have been confirmed by reflection and experience in teaching in both areas, that a mere conflation is no solution. The range of study and expertise involved in theology, using the term in its normal traditional sense for Christian theology, is wide, and as a part of European culture it has developed a rounded character of its own which would, in my opinion, be imperilled if it were wholly absorbed into general religious studies. Isolation would also be improper and harmful, but the universities should, in my view, tread carefully here in order to avoid disrupting the traditional balance and consistency of disparate but related elements which have now been very effectively and profitably attained in this area.

It is not surprising, however, that there should be a growing demand for Religious Studies in a much broader sense than Christian theology, not only because of the claims of other faiths but also because of the advances made in other disciplines which relate closely to Religious Studies and have an increasingly important place within it, such as anthropology,

sociology, and psychology. These have importance also of course for Christian theology, but they are almost certain to have a greater prominence and an assured place of their own in Religious Studies as a new and distinct discipline which is now making rapid advances in the universities. How precisely they should function, and what is the place of anthropology, for example, which in any form is bound to have much to do with religion, in Religious Studies proper is again a subject about which very careful thought will be required in the near future. That undergraduate courses should include a core of the study of the history and main characteristics of at least one major religion, and in my own view a minimum of two, together with some selected texts in translation, seems to me essential. The religion could indeed be Christianity, but treated without the degree of specialisation appropriate to a divinity course.

That these are live issues today, and that the interest and stimulus comes as much from the layman as from the professional scholar and student, is an encouraging and exciting sign of the times which have much to depress us in other ways. It is a curious paradox that, in a period which is alleged to be increasingly secular, there should be such an astonishing interest in religion. The precise significance of this has still to be assessed and we must not draw conclusions too hastily before the depth and permanence of this new interest has been better established. But I find it not insignificant that young scholars at their interviews give their own concern and anxiety as one of their reasons for wanting to be admitted to courses in Religious Studies. They and the laymen who devour books about religion, not all of them as reliable and balanced as they should be, are clearly looking for something beyond the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity alone. They must not be encouraged to have false expectations or to suppose that the study of religion can lead them straightaway to elevated or peculiar experiences or give them simple answers to the problems which disturb them. All the same it is not improper to have regard to various deep concerns, a hunger perhaps which existence in the world as we find it today does not easily satisfy, in the provision of appropriate studies. Where creative insight plays its part and how to balance involvement and concern with the essential first requirement of regard for truth and sensitive judgment are again issues to which we need to remain continuously alert. That there are pitfalls, follies and delusions is no reason for being crassly pedestrian and shunning the illumination which the study of religion may properly bring. Creativity and wisdom are not incapable of being properly matched.

A subsidiary problem which immediately presents itself here is that of language study and translation. Here again we need a balance of the strict requirements of scholarship and the practical possibilities of study and teaching. Even the experts have to rely extensively on one another's translations in fields other than that of their own speciality, and the average under-

graduate in Western countries cannot normally be expected to have any knowledge at all of non-European languages when he starts his course. The most that can be acquired, in the course of undergraduate study, is a smattering of new languages. If more is insisted upon the study of religions is closed to many of those who are most eager to embark upon it.

The proper course, if I may quote what I have written elsewhere¹ 'is to make the best use of translation and secondary sources' while taking all the care we can 'to be sure that expert translations are available together with suitable guides and commentaries to bring out subtle nuances of meaning. Those who teach the subject at the universities, and who are thus teachers of teachers, should have reasonable command of the original language of their speciality and thus inspire confidence in their pupils. But where universities and colleges are unable to finance posts in all the main religions, there will have to be a compromise whereby even in universities much will have to be studied and taught from secondary sources. It will be that or nothing, and it is much better that religions should be studied in competent translations of appropriate texts than that they should be neglected'.

'For my own part, I suspect that the fear of deep misrepresentation is much exaggerated. The onus lies on the linguistic experts to serve us all to the best of their capacity. It would be strange to claim that the Bible, for example, is a book which no one can read with profit and understanding without a sound knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. Millions of people have nourished their souls upon it over the years. The nuances may be greater where the difference of cultural background is greater, but here again it is possible for the expert, with an appropriate and estimable concern for his speciality, to be unduly nervous about the possibility of misunderstanding. My impression is that there is being steadily acquired an extensive reliable knowledge of various religions by eager young laymen, at the universities and elsewhere. And this can prove to be of inestimable value.'

A further topic, in the present ripening of Religious Studies, is that of the place of conceptual study, and above all of the philosophy of religion, in the general study of religion. Traditionally there has been a very close relation between philosophy and religion, in the East as much as in the West. In Western countries, and in the context of Christian claims, the challenge of a searching critical agnosticism has been very sharply felt. This has sometimes led to scepticism and crude attenuations. But on the whole the Christian religion has emerged with a much sounder grasp of its own essential principles. The insistence on clarity, while 'not enough', has been highly advantageous. This has not been felt to the same extent in the practice and

¹ 'The Study of Religion in the Universities' in *The Dynamics of Education, Essays in Honour of Vice-Chancellor Padma Sri Thiru N. D. Sundaravadivelu*, Ed. by Professor G. R. Damodaran and H. D. Lewis.

study of other faiths, and for this reason the closer alignment of the philosophy of religion with the general study of religion, and the detached examination of other faiths than one's own, need to be further encouraged in places and contexts where this has not yet come about. The philosophy of religion is not a luxury, but an essential ingredient of growing importance, in all study of religions. This does not mean that all fashions in philosophy have the same importance or that all professional students of philosophy display the judiciousness we should expect. There are indeed, as Plato stressed, 'charlatans and shams'. But that is no reason for avoiding the company of the proper practitioners or the midwife, in the famous analogy, who can bring our intellectual offspring to birth and care for them.

This consideration seems to be peculiarly important where we are confronted with the attraction of syncretism on the one hand or, on the other, the uncompromising opposition of conflicting claims. Exceptional skill is required, for example, to grasp the true import of what seems to be the severely sceptical character of much of the teaching of the Pali Canon. Likewise, we need much care and subtlety when we consider what is the genuine common element in the theism of Hinduism and of Christianity. Travesties of the central items of the Christian religion are widespread. In all this the patient work of the philosopher, climbing up 'the steep and rugged ascent' without coming hastily to facile conclusions, is of increasing importance to ensure that the boom in the Study of Religions does not exhaust itself or wreck itself on the rocks of a superficial understanding. Caution and subtlety can be exaggerated, and it is not the business of philosophy to argue the world into existence; from Plato to Wittgenstein the secret of attainment in philosophy has been to learn just how to look at the world, not to manufacture it or shape it to our own desires. But this is a very special looking, hard indeed of attainment but profoundly rewarding when achieved. I hope I may be allowed some professional pride in stressing, as Professor Werblowsky has done very handsomely in his article below, the inestimable value of the right philosophical way of 'looking' in the present state of the study of religion. But I must also restrain myself here, the more readily as I shall be returning to the topic soon in another connection.

Perhaps it will not be inappropriate to add one further word of warning. A temptation to which a boom subject is much exposed, not least when many new teaching posts have to be rapidly filled, is that a premium should be placed on easy mediocrity and the productivity that has not been sufficiently mindful of the 'infinite capacity for taking pains'. This latter may not be an exhaustive definition of genius, but the highest intellectual attainment is not easily ensured in its absence, least of all in the world of thought and scholarship. An association for the Study of Religions today needs to be peculiarly insistent on the highest standards of scholarship even in popular

writings which may not directly reflect it, and a determined unswerving regard for the truth at all costs. We must make no place for the bandwaggon.

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It is impossible to end these observations without a note of sadness. Since the last quinquennial meeting of the Association for the History of Religions the ranks of British scholars in this field have been sadly depleted. In an earlier number (Vol. 9, June 1973) tribute was paid to several of our erst-while friends and colleagues, my own distinguished predecessor in London, E. O. James (for many years President of the British section of the Association and a scholar to whom the subject owes a debt it is not easy to estimate), S. G. F. Brandon, I. T. Ramsey, William Maclagan, C. A. Campbell, all men of considerable stature. Since then A. C. Ewing has died, a thinker whose place in general philosophy and the study of religion will long outlast that of more colourful figures who enjoyed more of the limelight. A careful assessment of Ewing's recent work, especially his posthumous, *Value and Reality*, will be found elsewhere in this number of *Religious Studies*. And now, as a most unexpected shock, we have lost, in the passing of R. C. Zaehner a few months ago, one of the most eminent and distinctive scholars the subject has ever produced. The range of Zaehner's capabilities was remarkable, and he combined with this a rare capacity for work and a fertile imagination. Nothing that he wrote failed to stir our interest. He had in addition an impish humour and an ability to tease our intellects into startled reappraisal of some of our most cherished assumptions. All these qualities are reflected in the article from his pen which reached me a few days before his death and which is available now to readers of this journal.¹ In particular Zaehner had exceptionally high standards in matters of scholarship. Nothing shoddy left his hands and he could not pretend to approve of work which failed in the rigour of scholarship and fair appreciation which he always set himself. He was, in his chosen field and over a wide range of related concerns, a model for us all; and it is comforting to think that, while his pupils were not exceptionally numerous, he has left among them some who have drunk deep of his own spirit and will in due course help to reassure us about the future of the subject when their time comes to influence it in the same way.

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Owing to the space required for contributions to this special number of *Religious Studies*, there are no reviews, except for one review article. Amends for this, and a slight adjustment in length, will be made in the next number in September.

¹ p. 167 below.