

Paradigms of Change in the Study of Religion

My paper is another segment in an extended commentary on an insight of C. J. Bleeker's, an insight I first became aware of while listening to a paper Professor Bleeker gave in Turku, Finland, in 1973, in a meeting of the Methodology Study Section of the International Association for the History of Religions. In working to identify the principles of a sound method for the history of religions, Professor Bleeker made the following observation: He stated -- and I am paraphrasing -- that the methods that find sanction in the study of religion have one essential characteristic in common. All of them, without exception, focus on "arrested pictures" -- "arrested pictures" also described as "moments of stopped action. In saying this, Professor Bleeker was calling up the imagery of the slide show. He suggests that historians and scholars of religion have become adept in creating photographic slides, as it were, and then in offering slide shows. In other words, methods have been constructed to enable the scholar to stop the action, to reduce change to permanence, to transform the elusive into the accessible. The task then is to name the constants, whether essences, structures, patterns, natures, etc., all of them signatories of permanence, or components of stability, "arrested pictures," "moments of stopped action," as distinguished from the more fundamental dynamisms that are more characteristic of religion.

I am concerned in this paper, first of all, to raise some questions about the methodological accessibility of change in the study of religion. How does one study anything other than

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the methods that can be tested and have thus been set, but as difficult as the questions are conceptually, they are also exceedingly tricky historically. For, to try to argue that the scholarly study of religion is a dead system, origins in debates about the meaning of evolution, refer very quickly to the presuppositions of E. B. Tylor (1831-1917), whose book Primitive Culture is subtitled "An Inquiry into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom" (1889), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Andrew Lang (1884-1922), and R. R. Marett (1886-1943), and to mention Claude Lévy-Bruhl, and the host of precursors of the science of religion strictly so-called, cultural historians (or "cultural constructionists") such as Antoine Lavoisier de Saint-Condorcet (1743-1794), and Giambattista Vico (1686-1744), and Claude de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and Auguste Comte (1798-1857), all of whom placed religion within some comprehensive evolutionary schematic, reaching from the birth of consciousness far into humankind's future. I repeat that it is difficult to raise the question about analyses of change in the study of religion because you cannot simply speak of the subject as a vacuum, as though there were no history of commentary on the subject at all. To some extent, however, the answers provided



This is an exceedingly difficult subject methodologically speaking, for it raises a host of questions about the range and scope of analytical mapwork. Indeed, the very questions I am raising seem to suggest that there is a large range of information beyond that which can be made accessible through the methods that can be tested and have thus been sanctioned. But as difficult as the questions are conceptually, they are also exceedingly tricky historically. For, it is reasonable to argue that the scholarly study of religion has found its modern origins in debates about the meaning of evolution. I refer very quickly to the preoccupations of E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), whose book Primitive Culture is subtitled "Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom (1889)," and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Andrew Lang (1884-1922), and R. R. Marett (1866-1943), not to mention Claude Levy-Bruhl, and the host of precursors to the science of religion strictly so-called, cultural historians (or "cultural constructionists") such as Antoine Nicholas de ~~Condorcet~~ Condorcet (1743-1794), and Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), and Claude de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) and Auguste Comte (1798-1857), all of whom placed religion within some comprehensive evolutionary schematic, reaching from the birth of consciousness far into humankind's future. I repeat that it is difficult to raise the question about analyses of change in the study of religion because one cannot ~~xxxxx~~ speak of the subject in a vacuum, as though there were no history of commentary on the subject at all. To make matters more complicated, the academic study of



religion seems to have progressed precisely because it found ways of ~~xxxxxxx~~ overcoming its evolutionistic origins; that is, it found alternative ways of coming to terms with its subject than those designed by Tylor, Spencer, and the host of others who recognized that change ~~xxxxFundamentalx~~ must be a fundamental quotient in the analysis.

However, as has happened so frequently within western intellectual history, in ~~xxxxxxx~~ seeking improvement over approaches that were too closely tied to specific evolutionist theories, the scholarly study of religion also tended to lose methodological hold on the phenomenon of change. Thus, the history of the discipline is marked, alternatively, by attempts to identify the essence of religion -- a series of attempts that seem more theological than analytical in nature and temper. Or, alternatively, the field is marked by a series of attempts to explain the origins of religion, whether in human fear, a distinctive stage in the development of psychic awareness, or as an attempt to ~~an~~ devise some sense about the inexplicable. Or, alternatively, the field has given in to a series of efforts at adequate comprehensive description -- phenomenological portrayals that range from principled arguments about what is fundamental **to religion** (and thus fundamental to phenomenological accounts) to almost random collections of ingredients, assembled almost in the way that a book's table of contents is ordered. My suggestion is that each of these advances upon an evolutionist approach to religion have seized upon definitive permanent features, and have lost conceptual or critical touch with the dynamics of change. Professor Bleeker's observation is ~~xxxx~~ relevant one



more time: scholars of religion have been preoccupied with "arrested pictures," or "moments of stopped action," slide-show portrayals rather than, to follow the imagery, moving pictures.

Now before I make some proposals ~~about~~ of my own about what I think should be done about this situation, I wish briefly to refer to another area of scholarly activity in which work has been occurring for some time that bears directly upon the academic study of religion. I refer to the ~~work~~ work of the intellectual historians, the chroniclers of intellectual methods, the most notable of whom are Thomas Kuhn, author of The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Stephen Toulmin, who is currently at work on a three-volume series entitled Human Knowledge, and I would include the inclinations of Margaret Masterman, Karl Popper, ~~and~~ E. H. Gombrich, and George Kubler. What these ~~several~~ several analysts and chroniclers have in common is an interest in ~~correlating~~ correlating ~~intellectual~~ intellectual insight and discovery with altered perceptions, methods, techniques of analysis, or even, in some instances, with modified patterns of interest and attention. When one reads between the lines in ~~the~~ the suggestions of these ~~intellectual~~ intellectual historians, one can come to the impression that discovery occurs because the temper of attention has been significantly altered. And yet no one, to my mind, has provided an adequate genetic account of how this process of methodological transformation takes place.

Now, I have cited this range of scholarly activity simply to illustrate that there is very sophisticated literature on the subject of why things change. Historians of religion are certainly not the only group of scholars interested in, as George Kubler puts it, "the dynamics of the history of things." And yet even with the benefit of this parallel body of intellectual commentary, scholars of religion have not found it easy to adapt methodologies for tracking change to analyses and interpretations of religion. But now I have moved through the ~~preliminary~~ preamble stages of my papers to the place where I wish to offer some proposals.

The missing link in the subject -- and the reasons scholars in religion find the reality of change ~~elusive~~ elusive -- is that no decision has been made as to what the subject of religion is. I know this is a radical charge to make, and I would expect it to be received as a reckless comment, surely not made seriously, by one who perhaps has spent too much time beneath the sun in southern California. But I am ~~deadly serious~~ completely serious, and I have thought about the matter for the past several years.

When I suggest that there is as yet no consensus as to what the subject of religion is, I am, in the first place, observing that religion is a word that has many references. Among these references, there is no single one that is regarded as being either normative or fundamental. I am suggesting in the second



place that no scholar has yet found a way to study religion ~~directly~~ directly, or in isolation from other subjects. Indeed, what we find in the study of religion are analyses of cultures, or societies, or religious traditions, or ~~patterns of belief~~ patterns of belief, or systems of worship, or the ~~integration of symbols~~ integration of symbols, or the makeup of the human psyche, or, alternatively, the construction of human aspiration or intentionality, or even ~~perhaps~~ perhaps all of the above. And when one takes these assorted foci of interest and attention, and inquires as to their common denominators, he comes up empty. There is no one essence or nature that is common to all of them, nor ~~are there evident~~ are there evident principles of organization by which all of them might be brought into significant correspondence.

I am suggesting that the study of religion is always the study of something else first -- whether a text, or literature, or the ways of a people, ~~or rationality~~ or rationality, or sociality, or ~~cultural consciousness~~ cultural consciousness. And there is no acknowledged referee to negotiate these alternatives, nor is there an infallible authority to tell us which of these should be given priority.

Consequently, the change-factor becomes elusive because it is usually offered in a ~~manner~~ manner that is too abstract. That is, it is not calibrated with any of the specific subjects to which the study of religion pertains. It is not enough to talk about how religion changes -- this is an infinitely difficult subject to address. It is ~~not~~ necessary first to decide upon



one's more specific focus, then ask how that reality or phenomenon changes, whether the interpretation of a text, or the evolution of a body of literature, or the ways of a people, or rationality, sociality, historical consciousness, cultural consciousness, and the like.

This, of course, is the way it was in the beginning. E. B. Tylor and Herbert Spencer offered analyses of the nature of religion while conducting inquiries. Herbert Spencer offered a depiction of the nature of religion while conducting an inquiry into the "process of organic ~~evolution~~ evolution through successive modifications." But it was "organic evolution" that ~~Spencer~~ Spencer focussed on first, and religion via that interest. Sir James Frazer associated and distinguished religion from magic ~~while~~ during the course of his analysis of a subject more primary for him, i.e., the analysis of what he called "the chemistry of the mind." ~~Lucien~~ Lucien Levy-Bruhl came to terms with religion after focusing upon "primitive mentality" and discovering there some implicit logic of ~~the~~ "collective representations." And so it has gone through the decades. The only means of access to religion has come from studying something else carefully. And to prove that my analysis need not be restricted to methodological habits of some by-gone age, I wish to point out that Mircea Eliade ~~describes~~ describes religion by focussing on the structures of human consciousness, Clifford Geertz treats religion

Mary Douglas



Emile Durkheim.

This is the way it has been. And, I trust I am not sounding too much like Walter Cronkite, this is the way it is. Scholars who come to religion by some more direct route -- seeking religion in its utter purity, perhaps -- tend to make dependence upon analysis and scholarship subservient to insights of a trans-methodological derivation. The products of their work may be theological and/or religion in nature and intention. But these, clearly, are good subjects for the academic study of religion; they are not examples of what religious studies is.

So, we return by another ~~xxx~~ route to the matter of change. My proposal is that change will not be reckoned adequately until it is acknowledged to be an intrinsic component of all of the subjects which serve as the academic study of religion's initial or preliminary foci. Or, to put the proposal more directly, change will not be acknowledged adequately until we stop asking, How does religion change, if it does? and begin asking How does society change? How does cultural consciousness change? How does personal identity change? How do means and methods of intelligence change? and the like. And the corollary to this is that intellectual progress will not occur in these areas until it is more firmly perceived that the primary subject and the more specific focus are inextricably interdependent methodologically speaking.

analytical short-cuts to ~~religion~~ the truth about religion.



But that insight can be turned in the other direction as well. And then it can be read as follows. There is no sound or good analysis of, say, society, or cultural consciousness, or personal identity, that isn't also an analysis of something else. Or, to make the observation more directly: there is no good analysis of any of the subjects with which religion is appropriately linked unless there is also analysis of the subjects linked as well as the linkages. Hence, just as one can propose that good analyses of religion are analyses that begin with some other subject, so also can it be observed that analyses of these other subjects can be strengthened to the extent that they keep the religious component in mind. The study of human culture is immensely enriched, for example, ~~a~~ when the study of human culture is also an analysis of the cultural dimensions of religion. And so it goes. And wherever the linkage is established directly and overtly, one can expect the analysis to include ~~an analysis of~~ a recognition of the power and substance of change.

To put all of this in another way: Change is missed when the subject of religion is made ~~singular~~ singular rather than at least dual. And it is significant that scholars who miss it are ones who treat religion itself as being single, or as having some permanent essence, perhaps even universal in scope and manifestation. And the scholars who proceed this way are also ones who sometime claim other than critical and analytical short-cuts to ~~the~~ the truth about religion.



What does it all mean?

That "arrested pictures" result from the cultivation  
of the techniques of single vision.

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