

# Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Theology

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## I. FIVE STAGES OF THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Religion has been defined as the experience of a reality that is assumed to be ultimate as well as personal, thus making the experience an encounter.<sup>1</sup> This modern definition is not without merit; for in religion, the object of experience is indeed regarded as ultimate and in most cases as a commanding person. It is inadequate, however, because it does not specify the experience. In order to fulfill the meaning of religion, one has to add that the ultimate reality experienced must be apprehended and understood, expressed and proclaimed, its commandments acquiesced in and responded to with individual and collective action.

Religion therefore is the most important constituent of man's humanity. First, it includes the vision of reality and the articulation of that vision, its expression in concepts for the understanding and percepts for the imagination. This vision and its expression have constituted most of man's intellectual output throughout history. Second, it includes acquiescence in the commanding nature of Ultimate Reality and actualization of its commandments, and hence includes most of man's subjective conditions and personalist values. Third, since the commandments have as their goal the actualization of the highest good, religion includes most or all of man's action as it relates to

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) p. 30 ff.

himself, to other men, and to nature. Evidently, the study of man's religion is that of all humans, of their legacies of thought and action, of human history.

The fact that the object of experience is ultimate implies understanding of it as transcendent in both the theoretical (that is, metaphysical and epistemological) and the practical (valuational, ethical) senses. On the metaphysical level, Ultimate Reality is perceived as the first cause, or principle of sufficient reason, which explains all beings and all events. On the axiological level, it is perceived as the last end, or principle, which justifies all beings and all events. Its relevance therefore is total. All aspects of reality and history are understood as effects and instruments of the activity of a being perceived in experience as Ultimate Reality.

Under these terms, likewise, religion is the very essence and core of culture. For the content of religion is the lens through which all understanding and thinking take place, the realm of meditation and contemplation, of admiration and adoration. It is the sublime aesthetic expression. Finally, religion is the essence and core of civilization in that it is the ground of all decisions and actions, the ultimate explanation of civilization with all its inventions and artifacts, its social, political, and economic systems, its past and future promise in history. For it constitutes the spirit of which the facets of civilization are the concrete manifestations. Though in an earlier age religious ideas and/or practices were at the center of human activities, the realization that religion lies at the center of culture and civilization is recent. It came about only when an explanation of history as an integral unity of all its facets and constituents was sought, a need which did not arise before the modern period. And yet it was in the modern period itself that religion and its role were subjected to the greatest misunderstanding, as we shall see below.

### *A. STAGE 1. CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY*

Although the greatest care must have been given to the indoctrination of priests and to their training to perform the requisite functions, classical antiquity knows little or nothing of the study of one religion by the adherents of another. The followers of the other religion may have been enemies, vassals, or allies, but they were all certainly strangers. Their religious doctrines and practices were inseparable from their identity as aliens, or more properly "barbarians," and were not worthy of study. It was only in the sixth century B.C., when Greek thinkers had lost faith in their own religion and began to criticize its incoherence and false claims and to condemn the immorality of its gods, that some tolerance and curiosity for other religions developed. In the first decades of the sixth century, Thales denied that the Greek gods had any authority; Anaximander declared the sun and the moon to be not the deities the Greeks

had thought them to be, but balls of fire; and Xenophanes, as the exemplar of skepticism, taught that all religious claims were unfounded.<sup>2</sup> Two centuries later, when the notables had nearly completely lost their faith in the Olympian deities and their religion, Herodotus (484–425 B.C.) could give accounts of the religions of other peoples (Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Persians) with some measure of detachment or objectivity. Even then, Herodotus painted pictures of these alien religions in the likeness of the Greek religion and its gods, indeed identifying Zeus, Apollo, and Hephaistos with Amon, Horus, and Ptah, respectively. In the period following Alexander, the fusion of religions and cultures and the general skepticism of the elite enabled Berosus, a Babylonian, Megasthenes, a Syrian, and Manetho, an Egyptian, to produce similar works on their and other peoples' religions reflecting the same skepticism and syncretism.

The initial antagonism to the religions of others of the earlier ages persisted. If it was not dictated by the attitude of faith, it was done so by a complex of superiority of one's faith or unfaith to the faith studied or reported. Cicero's *De natura deorum*, Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, Strabo's references to the Celtic Druids and Indian Brahmins in his *Geography*, Tacitus's discussion of Teutonic religion in his *Germania*, and Euhemerus's *Hiera anagraphé* all found something to transform into classical form and cite approvingly, and much to contrast therewith and cite condemningly.

## B. STAGE 2. JUDAEO-CHRISTIANITY

The religion of the Hebrew patriarchs, and of their states of Israel and Judah down to the Assyrian invasion which blotted out the former, developed with awareness of other religions. The patriarchs regarded them as legitimate for their adherents. If the Old Testament reports are to be trusted, Solomon must at one time have thought a combination of Hebrew and Canaanite religion (and deities) possible. At later times, however, when the existence of Judah was threatened, the other religions and their gods were severely condemned and any Hebrew participation in them was prohibited. Since insecurity has been the hallmark of Jewish existence ever since, and because all the materials we have about Judaism date from the post-Exilic period and went through a sieve of Jewish hatred for and fear of all *goyim* (non-Jews), we may characterize the attitude of Judaism toward the other religions as one of hatred, fear, and a false complex of superiority or election. The other religions, their gods and rituals, were given the worst possible presentation, the most em-

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co, 1951) p. 73 ff.

phatic condemnation and derision. To Canaan, Egypt, Moab, Edom, Babylon, and Assyria, the redactors of the Old Testament text reserved the worst possible abuse. For the Jew, any consideration of these religions was "adulterous," a piece of "a-whoring" after the other gods, to use the expression of Hoseah.

Christianity inherited this Jewish attitude and saw in the religions of Greece, Rome, and the Near East what Judaism saw in its neighbors. For both Judaism and Christianity were formed in an atmosphere of struggle against overwhelming odds, a struggle lasting for centuries during which the religions gained and crystallized their doctrines and world-views.

The only religion on which Christianity looked with any kind of favor was Judaism. But it interpreted it so radically as to transform it into something else in order to make of it a *preparatio evangelica*, an Old Testament in contrast to which Christianity could establish itself as a "New Testament" and a "New Israel." Consequently, the on-going, living Judaism that did not dissolve into Christianity and all other religions were evil, demonic, to be utterly rejected and vanquished.<sup>3</sup> The gnostic theologians of Alexandria were less inclined to total condemnation than the Semitic or Roman Christians. Some of them, particularly Clement and Origen, saw the gods of other religions as "fallen angels," "evil spirits," "wild beasts,"<sup>4</sup> and the god of Judaism as "Demiurge."<sup>5</sup> If they saw any good in those religions, they conceived of it as the work or presence of the *logos spermatikos* of the Holy Trinity.<sup>6</sup>

This attitude of hatred and condemnation of the other religions on the part of both Judaism and Christianity, including their relation to each other, has persisted for millennia. In Judaism, the same attitude continued to this century, when a handful of Jews who had lost faith in the Holy, and regarded Judaism merely as an ethnicity and a political program or platform, began to see in the person of Jesus a rabbi bent on self-purification, altruism, and charity (a far cry from the third person of a holy trinity). Also in this century, some Christians began to see Judaism as a religion justified in itself, but reduced to an ethic subsumable under the Christian dispensation. The other Christians, for whom Christianity had not lost its essence [namely, the mysteries of Trinity, Incarnation, and Redemption, the paradoxes of peccatism (sin and fall) and saviorism (salvation as *fait accompli*) and of the church as Christ's "body" being the only avenue to salvation] continue to see in Judaism not a religion *de jure* but the mere preparation for religion which became obsolete with the advent of Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 10:20.

<sup>4</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortations* I, II.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Martyre, *Apology* I, 16:1-4; Ireneus, *Against Heresies*, I, 24:1-2. This apologete of Christianity identified Socrates as a Christian following his gnostic assertion that Jesus was *logos* (Mind or reason) and Socrates participated in Jesus as rational faculty.

<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromathais* I, 13.

When Islam came to the scene in the seventh century, Christian hatred and condemnation combined with fear of Islam's expansion and conversion of Christians. Already, the loss of the Eastern and African shores to Islam and its march on Byzantium, Spain, and France produced a terror at once political-military and religious. Christians poured out their genius in vituperating and vilifying Islam, its God, its Prophet, and its scripture. They sent out their men to fight it in the Crusades (numerous campaigns ranging from 1095 to 1270) and in the colonialist expansions of the last two centuries. Their condemnation of Islam continues to this day, though for some of them the ground and motivation for such antagonism may have shifted from religion and faith to racism and economics.<sup>7</sup>

### C. *STAGE 3. MODERNITY SINCE THE ENLIGHTENMENT*

The Enlightenment removed religion as principle and base of identity and set up reason in its place. Ethics and utility, rather than creed and piety, became the criteria of human worth. If religious dicta or divine commandments did not agree with the dictates of reason, all the worse for religion. This defiance was generated and enhanced by the discoveries of astronomy and other natural sciences which, stimulated by the achievements of Islam, took a sharp turn upward toward great breakthroughs of their own. The magisterium which the Church held for a thousand years finally began to crumble. It received a tremendous blow in the Reformation; and the successful challenges of the scientists, despite the burning at the stake of Hugo Brache and the terror of Galileo, pushed it further away from human affairs.

While most of the great mouthpieces of the Enlightenment were Christians, they derided religion and its men, permitting it a role only if it fell "within the boundaries of reason alone," as the famous book of Kant indicated in its title. Whereas Descartes, a century earlier, used reason to prove the existence of God, the princes of the Enlightenment reduced its importance and regarded it, as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd had done, as necessary for the poor in spirit, to prevent them from doing evil and orient them toward some virtue; they stood above such plebeian need. Behind this demotion of religion stood the epistemology of rationalism under whose criteria the claims of religion were found wanting. Only a psychological – rather, pastoral – role may therefore be played by religion.

This tyranny of reason did not last long. Soon the forces of skepticism, having been victorious over the Church and all that it stood for, rampaged

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive survey of Christian thinking and attitude to Islam and its people, see the works of Norman Daniels and Jacques Waardenburg.

again, this time under the pressure of rising European particularism. Reason is by nature opposed to particularism; it loves the universal. When it became a movement during the Enlightenment, it resulted in the Napoleonic unification of Europe (or the attempt to unify it) and the emancipation of the Jews from their ghettos and separate identities. Europe, however, was in no mood for universalism. The development of navigation, industry, and trade had whetted its appetite for world dominion. But this can only be justified by nationalism, a brand of particularism that can be justified by feeling alone. Romanticism was the result. It dethroned reason and set feeling in its place as the criterion of truth and value. The genius of Schleiermacher, the greatest theologian of the nineteenth century, was to ransom Christianity from the abyss in which the enlightenment had thrown it. He gave it a new foundation, namely, feeling, or experience; and he thus enabled it to be honored as the highest expression of the people's common feeling. He subtitled his major work "Address to the Despisers of Religion" and invited them to adhere to Christianity because to be Christian is to share in the treasury of common feelings and experiences, in short, to be "folkish."

Skepticism did not stop at "shared feeling" or "common experience." The shared commonality or uniformity of the group was elevated in status to an arbitrary entity, formed by an arbitrary organism, the state. Though centered on some natural characteristics such as language, territory, physical traits, and social customs, these are never necessary. They are the accidents of history. So, while group sharing remains the fact and mainstay of romanticism, and hence of nationalism as well, epistemologically it cannot rest but on the ineffable experience of the individual. This is epistemological individualism; in plain English, relativism, Protagorean in foundation and cultural in manifestation. Of necessity, it implies denial of religious knowledge, denial of transcendent reality, denial of the Absolute, in short, denial of God as traditional Christianity and Judaism have known him.

Little wonder therefore that those Western thinkers who were not, properly speaking, theologians, sought explanation of the phenomenon of religion in the stresses and distresses of individuals and groups. The genesis of Christianity in the messianism of Isaiah, the worldly despair of the Jews in and after their Exile in Babylon, and its rise among the slaves of the Roman Empire, and the struggle to upturn the *virtu* of the Roman soldiers and replace their masterly values with those of the humble slaves — these were turned into the living contexts explaining the pressures to be Christian. Many a thinker, such as Feuerbach, Freud, William James, John Dewey, Fromm, and Jung saw religion as an effective prop and savior from a predicament which, if not called original sin, is assumed to be man's existential plight.

#### D. STAGE 4. CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

It was with this attitude towards Christianity — their own religion — as background that Western thought was thrust by developments in industry, maritime trade, and the resultant colonial expansion upon the religions of Asia and Africa. Darwinism had provided Western thinkers with a methodology which, assuming differences from Europe to be signs of primitiveness, led them to seek in the phenomena of other peoples the “original sources,” the “primordial forms” of a religious development whose apex was their Christianity.

A number of approaches to the study of religion developed, and they continue to have their advocates today in every department of comparative studies: the anthropological, the sociological, the psychological, the philosophical, the theological, and the phenomenological. The anthropological method focused on the religions of the primitives as reported by direct observation of present practices, and/or the confessions and descriptions of the living adherents. It sought to understand them as functions of human conditions affected by the natural environment and the life of the ethnic entity in question. Anthropology is bound by evolutionist axioms as well as by an epistemology that recognizes only the behavioral data as valid, whether verbal or actional. Its emphasis on the ethnic entity is so exaggerated that it regards any analysis not based on it as abstractionist. Ethnicity, it holds, makes the man. The sociological approach places the emphasis on the social group and understands religion as a factor, constructive or destructive, uniting or separating, integrating or disrupting, classifying or distinguishing humans in their group membership. Like anthropology, it recognizes as data only the behavioral and the empirical. The psychological method places its emphasis on the internal state of the subject and the determinants that affect it in its purely subjective moment. It understands religion as states of consciousness as such, depressive in case of insecurity or need, projective in case of desire and hope, ecstatic in case of fulfillment, and so forth. Its empiricism and behaviorism guard it when, in social psychology, the discipline seeks to describe group consciousness as an entity *sui generis*, causing it to fall back upon the hard data of the given individual.

The historical method depends upon all these to provide it with its data, in which it seeks to uncover patterns of change which it can then establish as applicable in other or similar situations. Its axiom is evolutionist, holding that every reality comes to be what it is because it was what it was. History being a self-determining process, its explanation is the uncovering of its earlier stages with as many of its determining factors as possible.

Finally, the theologians of Christianity, advocates of the theological method, avowedly declared Christianity to be the only true religion, the only criterion and norm of religious truth, and hence the judge of all other religions. The missionaries and Orientalists went out to study the other religions as if they were enemy territory, to reconnoiter enemy defenses, to probe for weakness in anticipation of the onslaught. The philosophers, for their part, were not as blunt as the theologians to declare off hand that their brand or "ism" is the only right one. Standing either behind the wall of skepticism as to the very knowability of truth, or behind that of an absolutism no less Western and dated than the stance of the theologians, they criticized the claims of religions concerning the world, divine providence, freedom, resurrection, judgment, and paradise and hell.

In an attempt to avoid all these shortcomings at once, a number of students of comparative religion sought a different method and approach to their materials. Taking their clue from Edmund Husserl in his attempt to avoid the pitfalls of idealism and realism, they thought that it is possible to reach an eidetic vision of a religion (that is, an understanding of its essence, its structuring or ordering principles) by suspending one's own categories and prejudgments, beholding the phenomena of religion as they are and, as it were, allowing them to speak for themselves. This will to objectivity was genuine; for it was born out of disgust with all previous studies of religion, especially the philosophical and the theological. Its candidness pushed its advocates to call the approach *Religionswissenschaft*, or science of religion, and to pour their energies on the sheer collection, classification, and establishment of the data. They prescribed *epoche* to the student of religion, that is, the suspension of all principles and norms not derived from the data, and the constant reexamination of one's understanding of the essence of a religion in light of the data of that religion. Without doubt, the phenomenology of religion is the highest point the academic study of religion has reached in the West.

## E. STAGE 5. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

The phenomenological study of religion, however, is not without limitations. It consists of two branches: reportage, or the collection of data; and construction of meaning, wholes, or the systematization of data.

### 1. Reportage, or the Collection of Data

The history of religions has known two influences that sought to reduce its jurisdiction by limiting the data that constitute its subject matter: one was the attempt to redefine the religious datum in a restricted and narrow

manner; and the other was an isolationist policy observed vis-a-vis Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The attempt to limit the jurisdiction of phenomena of religions by giving the religious datum a narrow definition led to theories that have tried to isolate the religious element and to identify it in terms of "the religious," "the holy," "the sacred." The problem these theories faced was primarily the reductionist's analysis of the religious phenomenon into something else that would lend itself more readily to his kind of investigation. This well-intended movement had the effect of limiting the scope of the investigation. If the religious is a unique, irreducible, and identifiable element in human life, the religious discipline should aim at it first and last. The other elements of which human life is supposedly composed may be the objects of other disciplines and they may be studied by the history of religions only as *relata* affecting or affected by the uniquely religious element.

Among Western phenomenologists, where the act of faith has been held to consist in the confrontation of the person with God in his most personal moment when everything or almost everything that is non-self has been detached from consciousness, the discovery of "the religious" as a unique element fell on fertile ground and was taken as a matter of course. Today, fortunately, the relevance of God to every aspect and element of space-time is being rediscovered by Western Christendom, and the repudiation of an isolated, unique, religious holy or sacred is being prepared for. In its place, the religiousness of everything is being discovered, a religiousness that does not consist in the thing's being a mere *relatum*. Islam has for centuries been teaching the religiousness of all space-time, of all life.

Not the personal act of faith, nor the social act, nor the whole of space-time and life as *relata*, but the whole of life and space-time as such should constitute the data of phenomenologists of religions. Every human act is an integral part of the religious complexus. Religion itself, however, is not an act (the act of faith, or encounter with God, or of participation), but a dimension of every act. It is not a thing but a perspective with which every thing is invested. It is the highest and most important dimension; for it alone takes cognizance of the act as personal, as standing within the religio-cultural context in which it has taken place, as well as within the total context of space-time. For religion, the act includes all the inner determinations of the person as well as all its effects in space-time. And it is this relation of the whole act to the whole space-time that constitutes the religious dimension. Everything then is subject matter for the study of religion. The cultic and dogmatic have too long monopolized without challenge the definition of the religious; and the addition of the scriptural, of the theory of origin and destiny of man and cosmos, of the moral and of the aesthetic, and finally, of "the sacred" or "the holy" is certainly not enough. Every human act is religious in that it involves

the inner person, the member of society, and the whole cosmos all at once, and all being, whether so-called sacred or so-called profane, is the "religious." It was an impoverishment of the realm of the religious to limit it, as it were, to a unique act of man, to a unique aspect of his life, or to the sacred as opposed to the profane. The first two views are not compatible with our modern field theory of meaning, of value or of causation, where the particular is not a unique element but a point in space-time at which converge and from which diverge an infinite number of elements in all directions.<sup>8</sup> The third denies half and more of the realities of the religious experience of mankind.

This restoration to the religious of its universal scope and relevance widens the horizon of the *phenomenology of religion*. Henceforth, it should include every branch of human knowledge and pursuit. For its purposes, mankind may still be divided into Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and other, but the whole history, culture, and civilization of the Christians, the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Muslims, and so on, should be its object.

The *phenomenology of religion* had its jurisdiction further curtailed in another direction. While, theoretically, it was supposed to be a history of all religions, it turned out to be in reality a history of "Asiatic" and "primitive" religions, on the one hand, and of the the extinct religions of antiquity, on the other. By far the overwhelming majority of the literature of the library of comparative religion has been devoted to them. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam always managed somehow to escape. This is not to plead that one group of materials is better, richer, or more important than another. Primitive and ancient religions may very well hold for us many great lessons. But they are far more impenetrable than the other group because of obstacles of language, of remoteness of time, of wide difference between their categories and ours. The truth that cannot be gainsaid here is that the comparativist has so far found the remoteness of primitive and ancient religions far more reassuring than the explosive character of the living world religions. Hence, he has been far bolder to collect the data of the former, to systematize, generalize about, and judge them than the latter. He seems to have shied away, whether in awe or in panic, from handling the data of the living religions.

## 2. *Construction of Meaning – Wholes or the Systematization of Data*

This great mass of data, once identified and collected, must be systematized, or ordered, in three different operations:

a. *First*, it should be classified in a way that fulfills the organizational needs of a modern inquiry. Under each heading the relevant data should

<sup>8</sup> Ushenko, Andrew Paul, *The Field Theory of Meaning*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1958) p. 111 ff.

be so analyzed and related to one another as to reveal the nexus of ideas of which they are the embodiment. The organization of the material must enable the modern researcher to put under the lucid light of consciousness, quickly and certainly, the whole field of ideas and all the particular items therein that in any religion or aspect of a religion, constitute a single network or system of meanings. It should be topical as well as historical, and should endeavor to put at the disposal of the understanding a comprehensive picture of all the facts pertinent to all topics, periods, or groups within the religious culture under examination. In turn, these groups of data should be analyzed and related among themselves so as to disclose the essence of the religious culture as a whole.

*b. Second*, the relations of each datum with the whole complexus of history to which it belongs should be shown and established for thought. Its origin must be discovered, and its growth and development, its crystallization, and, where necessary, its decay, misunderstanding, and final repudiation must be accurately traced. Developments of ideas, of institutions, of evaluations and discoveries, of human attitudes and deeds, have to be projected against the background of historical facts. For they did not develop in the abstract but in a given milieu, and a need for precisely that development must have been felt. The datum in question must have been meant either to serve or to combat that development. Equally, every one of these developments must have had a whole range of effects which must be brought within the field of vision to be systematized if the understanding of the given data, the given movement, or the given system of ideas is to be complete.<sup>9</sup>

*c. Third*, the religious data thus classified and systematized ought to be distilled for their meanings, and these meanings should be elucidated and systematized in turn. That is to say, they should be related as meanings, and not as facts as in the first two steps of systematization, to the historical complexus so that the civilization as such becomes both a structured whole of meanings and a whole with a meaning. Every religious datum, whether it is an expression of an idea, an attitude or feeling-state, refers to something that is the content expressed, the meaning intuited or felt, the purpose realiz-

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<sup>9</sup> This has been well pointed out by Joseph M. Kitagawa in the opening essay on "The History of Religions in America" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, edited by himself and M. Eliade (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) p. 26 where he says: ". . . One must study the historical development of a religion, in itself and in interaction with the culture and society. One must try to understand the emotional makeup of the religious community and its reaction or relation to the outside world. . . There must be added a religio-sociological analysis, in our sense of the term, the aim of which is to analyze the social background, to describe the structure and to ascertain the sociologically relevant implications of the religious movement."

ed or violated, or the object of inaction if no action whatever has taken place other than inaction. This something is a value. It is the meaning to which the religious datum is the human response, noetic, attitudinal, or actional. As the human response could not become intelligible without its relation to the complexi of history, it cannot be meaningful without its relation to value. The former is a planar relation; the latter is a relation in depth. Unless the plane of historical relations is seen against the background of and is related to values in a depth relation, the religious datum may never be grasped for what it really is.<sup>10</sup>

In the discernment, analysis, and establishment of this depth relation – the relation of “categorical existence” to “axiological being” or value – the history of religions meets serious perils and grave pitfalls. And it is true that a great number of comparative accounts of religions have failed in this requirement of constructing meaning – wholes out of the given religious data. But this failure is the failure of the investigator’s own effort. It is not an argument against the history of religions or its methodology, but against the investigator and his research. The pitfalls of *exegesis*, are reading into a religious datum something that is not there, or perceiving therein no value, or a value other than that which the adherent himself perceives. This constitutes, in most cases, the rejection of the religious wisdom of the adherents themselves. If a reconstruction meets the requisities of scholarship while at the same time the adherents of the religion in question find it meaningful and accept it as saying something to them about their own faith, surely it has passed all that can be reasonably required of the comparativist. This was essentially the insight of W. C. Smith.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, the application of the principle presents a number of serious practical difficulties: The consent of which adherents of the faith may be taken as proof, and how may such consent be expressed? Moreover, it

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<sup>10</sup> To take an example from this author’s study of Christianity, (*Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic Analysis of Its Dominant Idea*. (Montreal, McGill University Press, 1967): “The Fall” or “Original Sin” is a datum of the Christian religion. We must first understand what it means discursively, by reading the definition and analyses of Hebraic and Jewish thinkers for the Old Testament precursors, and of Christian thinkers from the New Testament to Paul. Tillich. Having grasped the doctrinal development of the idea, we then relate it to the historical development of Christendom, showing how, in every stage, the Fall developed in answer to certain sociological and doctrinal developments. Thus systematized into a developing stream or complexi of ideas, each member of which is a network of a number of closely-related facts, this complex religious datum is then related in depth to the values which, at each stage of the development, the datum was meant to and actually did, serve. This last relation is usually more evident in the general literature of the civilization than in the strictly doctrinal statements.

<sup>11</sup> “No statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers” (Smith, W. C., “Comparative Religion: Whither – And Why?”, *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, *cit. supra*, p. 42).

must be at least theoretically possible that the adherents of a religion may have gone so far in interpreting their religion that they have missed its primeval essence, that they do not find it any longer meaningful. This is of course tantamount to their acquiring a new religion, despite the fact that the new may still be called by the name of the old; and Smith's criterion cannot therefore be taken as a test of validity in the strict sense. Nonetheless, if we take it as a pedagogic principle, and ask the historian of religions to check his work, as it progresses, against the perspective of the adherents of the religion under investigation, we would have a check-and-balance technique to safeguard the work against aberration.

The principle governing the work of systematization is therefore that the categories under which the systematizing work should proceed must be innate to the pertinent religious culture investigated, not imposed thereon from the outside. The divisions constituting the various religious cultures must not be interchanged; the data of each must be classified, analyzed, and systematized not under categories alien to that religious culture, but under categories derived from it. Those Christian investigators of non-Christian religions who regard ritual law as self-sacrifice, as atonement or salvation; and who speak of purity as morality, of destiny in contrast to history, of redemption as the end and purpose of religion, betray an obvious governance by Christian principles which vitiates against them. The suspicion that the investigation in question was carried out in order to show the deficiency of the non-Christian religion in the same areas where Christianity is claimed to be superior can never be removed.

The history of religions shows its purely scientific character particularly here. Within any one religion, the task of organizing the data into a systematic whole, of relating doctrinal, cultic, institutional, moral, and artistic facts to the history of the civilization concerned as a whole, is a purely scientific affair, despite the fact that the materials with which the historian of religions works are unlike those of the natural or social scientist. The scientific character of an inquiry is not a function of the materials but of what is done with them. The materials may be chemical facts or religious meanings. An inquiry into either is scientific if it starts from what is historically given and seeks to uncover the relations that govern the existence and actuality of these facts. It is immaterial that in one case the facts are laboratory materials in test tubes and in the other, ideas and facts recorded in books in a library or lived by a living community of men.<sup>12</sup> Certainly the "whats"

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<sup>12</sup> It was this consideration that misled Professor Kitagawa to assign to the history of religions a position intermediate between descriptive and normative. (Op. cit., p. 19). He clearly saw the descriptive nature of the discipline when it studies the history of a religion, or when it appropriates the analyses of psychology, anthropology, sociology, philology, etc., applied to

in the two cases are different; but the presuppositions of methodology are the same. Just as the economist, the sociologist, the psychologist, the anthropologist apply the term "social science" to their scientific treatment of data, we shall invent the term "humanitic science" to describe the phenomenologists' scientific treatment of materials other than those of the natural and social sciences. It is granted that religious as well as moral and aesthetic meanings are always instantiated in some overt social or personal behavior and that, except through abstraction, they are really inseparable from their instances.

## II. SHORTCOMINGS OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL SCHOOL

### A. THE NECESSITY OF JUDGMENT

However scientific and reliable the above-mentioned operations may be, a phenomenology of religion that has accumulated as many scientific and reliable articulations and systematizations as there are religions is a mere boodle bag in which religio-cultural wholes have just been put one beside the other in cold juxtaposition. The first two steps of phenomenology of religion, (namely, reportage and the construction of meaning – wholes) therefore justify the specialized disciplines of Islamic, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist studies, and so forth, but not the comparative study of religions as an autonomous discipline. For this, a *third* step or branch of study is necessary, namely, judgment or evaluation. Out of the meaning-wholes constructed by the first two branches, one meaning-whole should be arrived at, which would belong to man as such. Like the second, this third operation is also a systematization, not so much of particular data as of meaning-wholes. Its task is that of relating the given meaning-wholes to the universal, the human, and the divine as such. For this, *meta-religion* is necessary or principles belonging to such order of generality as would serve as bases of comparison and evaluation of the meaning-wholes.

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scriptures, doctrines, cults and social groupings. But when he came to differentiate the history of religions from the normative disciplines, he wrote: "While *Religionswissenschaft* has to be faithful to descriptive principles, its inquiry must nevertheless be directed to the meaning (*sic*) of religious phenomena" (*Ibid.*, p. 21). This concern with meanings is, in his view, sufficient to remove the history of religions from the ranks of descriptive science. Evidently, he precludes the possibility of a descriptive treatment of normative content such as value-realist philosophy has been suggesting for a generation. (cf. the tradition of Max Scheler, Nikolai Hartmann, etc.).

Such relating does involve a judgment of the individual meaning-wholes, an evaluation of their large claims. That this is itself a very large claim is not denied. Indeed, it sounds quite presumptuous to want to judge the religio-cultures of mankind. But the point is that the significance of the whole discipline of phenomenology of religion will stand or fall with the establishment or repudiation of this third branch.

1. First, we have seen that the first two branches can succeed in putting in front of us a series of internally coherent wholes of meanings, the constituents of which are related to one another as well as to their respective categorial existents manifest in the history, life and culture of that religion as well as to their respective axiological grounds. If the first two operations have been successful, every meaning-whole will contain within it the claim not only that it is true, but that it is the truth. The claim is essential to religion. For the religious assertion is not merely one among a multitude of propositions, but necessarily unique and exclusive. It is of its nature to be imperative in addition to being propositive, and no command can issue therefrom if it did not mean to assert that its content is better or truer than the alternative content of another assertion if not the only true and good content *uberhaupt*.

Imperativeness is always a preference of something to something else; and this always implies that what is commanded in any instance is the best thing commandable in that instance. Where alternative commandments are of identical value, none may be said to be, by itself, commandable. Religious exclusiveness, when it is asserted not on the level of accidentals but on that of the essentials of a religion, can be dispensed with only at the cost of axiological relativism. But this sacralization of relativism may not contend with our assertion of exclusiveness without contradicting itself. What we then have is not a series of meaning-wholes, *simpliciter*, but a juxtaposition of several meaning-wholes each of which claims to be the only autonomous expression of the truth. These wholes do not vary only in detail, nor merely in the important issues. They diametrically contradict one another in most of the principles which constitute the framework and structure of their house of ideas. How then can the phenomenologist of religion, who is above all an academician, stop after the presentation of these wholes? As academician, the historian of religions is above all concerned with the truth. But to present the meaning-wholes of the religions and acquiesce to their pluralism is nothing short of cynicism. There is no alternative to this cynicism except in judging and evaluating the claimant meaning-wholes. The phenomenologists of religion must therefore do much more than steps 1 and 2.

2. Second, "knowledge" in the study of religions does not consist merely of the apprehension of data. In science, a datum is gnoseologically valuable in itself, inasmuch as the natural fact held in consciousness is itself the end of the

scientific investigation. In comparative religion a datum has little significance unless it is related to the feeling, propensity, aspiration or value-apprehension of which it is the expression, the affirmation or negation, the satisfaction or denial, the approbation or condemnation, the exaltation or denigration, and so forth. But feelings, propensities, aspirations are human, not only Christian or Muslim, and value-apprehension is apprehension of a real value in experience. It is not therefore enough to know that for a certain religion, such and such are held to be facts. Movement from the Christianness or Muslimness of a factum to its human-ness or universal reality is indispensable. Likewise, no meaning-whole is complete unless its insights, claims, desiderata, and damnata are related to their human and therefore real roots, and thence to the real values and disvalues they seek to make real or to eliminate. Knowledge itself demands this relating to man as such, to existential and axiological reality. But to relate the data and meaning-wholes in this manner is certainly to judge them.

Mutually-contradictory as they are, to relate the data of religions or their meaning-wholes to the same reality, whether human or valuational, is really to present an incomplete picture with which the human understanding can do nothing. Indeed, such relating of them cannot be maintained in consciousness without coercion. But data that cannot be treated except coercively, that is cannot be related to the universal and the real without dislodging or being dislodged by other data, cannot be simply true. Either the dislodging or the dislodged data are wrong, or their place in the meaning-whole has been wrongly assigned. The consequence therefore is that either the construction of the meaning-whole has been faulty or the meaning-whole as a whole has laid a false claim to the truth.

## B. THE DESIRABILITY OF JUDGMENT

Since the data which the phenomenologists of religion collect are universally related to meanings or values, they are, in contradistinction to the dead facts of natural science, life-facts. In order to perceive them as life-facts, an *epoche* is necessary in which, as the phenomenologists have argued, the investigator would put his own presuppositions, religion, and perspective in brackets while he beholds the given religious datum. This is necessary but insufficient. That the life-fact is endowed with energizing and stirring power implies for epistemology that to apprehend it is to apprehend its moving power in experience. Hence, life-fact cognition is life-fact determination, and to perceive a religious meaning is to suffer determination by that meaning. The phenomenologists of religion must therefore be capable of moving freely from one context to another while enabling his ethos to be determined by the data beheld alone. Only thus can he construct the historically given data into self-coherent meaning-wholes, which

is his objective as a comparativist. But what does this peregrination mean for him as a human being, as a searcher for wisdom? And consequently, what does it mean for him to present to his fellow men these mutually repulsive, severally appealing and determining meaning-wholes?

It may be argued that the comparativist should do no more than present these meaning-wholes from the highest level of detachment possible. Ivory-tower detachment is not only impressive but necessary when the subject matter investigated and presented to man belongs to the realm of nature which we called "dead facts." To apply it in the realm of life-facts, where cognition is to be determined in discursive thought as well as in feeling and action, is to expose men to their energizing power and moving appeal. Now, if the comparativist of religions takes no more than steps 1 and 2, he is exposing man to galaxies of meaning-wholes that pull him apart in different directions. There can be no doubt that every human being must reach his own personal decision regarding what is finally meaningful, and that the phenomenologist of religion is an academician who must remain absolutely aloof from all attempts to influence man's decision-making. But has he, by presenting to man merely the meaning-wholes in cold juxtaposition, that is, without relating them to the necessarily universal, the necessarily real, the human, presented him with the whole truth?

In this age, when the world community has become conscious of a universal human identity and is repeatedly calling for a discipline that will think out its spiritual problems as a human world community, has the ivory-tower phenomenologist of religions, whose training has equipped him best for the job, the right to shy away? Does his shying away cast no doubt on his whole enterprise? By wanting to preserve the religions of man frozen as they are, this ivory-tower scholarship detaches itself from the world of man and life that is constantly being made and remade and degenerates into superficiality.

These three considerations discussed from the perspective of necessity and desirability of judgment — the first two being theoretical, affecting knowledge of religions, and the third practical, questioning the wisdom of avoiding judgment — lead us to think that judgment is both necessary and desirable. There is hence no escape for the phenomenologist of religion from developing a system of principles of meta-religion under which the judgment and evaluation of meaning-wholes may take place. Although there have been many Christian theologies of the comparative study of religions, there is, as yet, unfortunately no critical meta-religion. This shortcoming points further to the unpreparedness of modern Christendom to meet the world community that is rapidly coming into being.

It is not within the purview of this essay to elaborate on a system of meta-religion. But it would indeed be incomplete if, having striven to establish its necessity and desirability, we omit discussing its possibility.

### C. THE POSSIBILITY OF JUDGMENT

Perhaps the most common genre of meta-religion is that which looks upon the differences among religions as belonging to the surface, and upon their common agreements as belonging to the essence. This view does not always have to assume the superficial form it usually takes in interreligious conventions where the "lowest common denominator" agreements are emphasized at the cost of all the differences. It can be sophisticated, as when it claims that underlying all differences there is a real substratum common to all which is easily discoverable upon closer analysis. But it is nonetheless false because it seeks that substratum on the level of the figurizations and conceptualizations of the different religions where no such unity can be found except through selection of the materials investigated or a coercive interpretation of them. The profound differences that separate the religions on the level of teachings here all disappear in order to clear the road for generalization. When hindrances are found to be obstinate, they are subjected to an interpretation capable of bearing the required meaning. Such is the case of the analysis of Friedrich Heiler, who goes to great lengths to prove that all religions teach the same God and the same ethic, and whose conclusions are not even true to the theory of empirical generalization, not to speak of meta-religion whose principles must be apodeictically certain. For him, Yahweh, Ahura Mazdah, Allah, Buddha, Kali, and — presumably, though this enumeration carefully omits him! — Jesus, all are "imagery" in which the one and same "reality is constantly personified."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, "this reality of the Divine" is identified as "ultimate love which reveals itself to men and in men"<sup>14</sup>; and "the way of man to God is universally the way of sacrifice."<sup>15</sup> Obviously this is to see the non-Christian religions with hopelessly Christian eyes, to bend the historically given so as to accord with a predetermined Christian order.

Despite the fact that this sort of "scholarship" may serve to instill among the rank and file a little sympathy for "the others" who, hitherto, have been regarded as "infidels," it remains at bottom a gratuitous condescension. As a methodology of the comparative study of religions, it is utterly worthless.<sup>16</sup>

A far more profound and philosophical theory of history of religions

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Heiler, "The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, cit. supra, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143-44.

<sup>16</sup> Other examples betraying the same shortcomings are Albert Schweitzer's *Christianity and the Religions of the World* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1923); Hendrik Kraemer, *Why Christianity of all Religions?* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1962); Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions* (Oxford University Press, 1961); A. C. Bouquet, *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions* (James Nisbet and Co., London, 1958); Jacques-Albert Cuttat, *La Rencontre des Religions* (Aubier, Editions Mon-

has been briefly laid out in an article by B. E. Meland.<sup>17</sup> It too regards the religions as fundamentally one, not on the level of doctrine or figurization, but on that of a deeper lying substratum — which is true — and seeks to reach, reconcile, or judge the pronouncements of the different religions on the figurization level by reference to that deeper reality which is common to all. It is in the latter aspect that the theory runs aground. Whereas the unphilosophical theories fail because they do not seek humanity on the deeper level where it really is but on the figurizational level where it certainly is not, Meland's philosophical theory runs short because he identifies that reality in such a way as to make any knowledge — and hence any methodological use — of it impossible. Let us see how this is so.

Meland analyzes the nature of man as consisting of three elements: first, "the primordial ground of the individual person as actualized event," that is, the primordial substratum of reality in which he has his being, his createdness. This deep-lying substrate is ontological and hence it transcends all particularisms; but "in its actuality . . . (it) is concrete." It is "man's life in God." It is "universal"; hence, "all concretion is ultimately due" to it. All perspectives, judgments, and formulations of or within a religion "partake of this concreteness" and are, hence, "relative to it" in the "decisive" sense "that in this time and place reality has spoken." It "defines the base of our humanity" and gives man the capacity to understand the humanity of another.<sup>18</sup> Second is "the individuated selfhood of each person," and third, "the cultural history in which the drama of corporate existence is enacted."<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the first element, which is universal, the second and third are specific and particular, and belong to the level of history and culture. It is true that neither the universal nor the particular is found one without the other; but whereas the particular is readily and directly available for knowledge, the universal is never reached except through the particular. Thus the particular, which is a concretization of the universal, is relative thereto in the ontic sense; for it owes to the universal its very being. This may be granted. As to the availability of the universal for knowledge, Meland rules out all hope for the historian of religions ever to attain it outside his own culture and concretization on the grounds that "the structure of faith [i.e., the particular] is so deeply organic to the individuation of the person in any culture. . . [or so] much of this is below the level of conscious awareness. . . [that man's] processes of thought cannot

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taigne, Paris, 1957); R. C. Zaehner, *The Convergent Spirit: Towards a Dialectics of Religion* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963); etc.

<sup>17</sup> "Theology and the Historian of Religion", *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. XLI, No. 4, October, 1961, pp. 262-276.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265-66.

escape or transcend its conditioning, however disciplined they may be."<sup>20</sup>

This reduction of all human knowledge to relativity, to the particular cultural structure of the subject (which Meland calls the "fiduciary framework," borrowing the expression of Michael Polanyi), stems from a mistaking of relativity. The afore-mentioned ontic relation between primordial reality and its concrete actualization in space-time, which is the one-directional dependence of the particular on the universal, is here interpreted as epistemological and is turned around so as to become the absolute dependence of the universal on the particular. For this twist, however, no reason is given; and its net purport is the resolution to recognize only the particular as given, thus closing the gate of any reliable knowledge of the universal. But knowledge of the universal, of primordial reality, must be possible if the particular culture or religion, the "fiduciary framework," is not to be final.

Passage from the particular to the universal, that is to say, the search for universal, that is to say, the search for a meta-religion with which the particular may be properly understood as well as evaluated, is possible because, to parody the words of Kant, although all history of religions begins with the historically given data of the religions, the concrete religious experience of men in history, the given of the particular religions, it is not necessary that it all arises therefrom. Meland too is keen to save this possibility, though he is opposed to any facile *dogmatique* of the universal. With this in mind, he suggests the method of negotiation of meaning in personal interreligious encounter, asserting that the impenetrable opaqueness of meaning which the alien religion presents to the investigator could be dissipated by the encounter between him and the adherent of the religion, provided that both are aware of their fiduciary frameworks, as well as of the fact that they are, as living concretizations of primordial reality, anchored in that one and the same reality. In such an encounter, Meland holds, it would not be their particularistic *dogmatique* that carries the religious meaning sought, but the persons saying such words as they do.<sup>21</sup>

One may ask, however, what the adherent means besides what is affirmed and denied, which belongs to the level of the fiduciary framework. For an encounter to serve the purpose Meland has assigned to it, it should have a meaning and a relevance to the study of religions, that is to say, to the interest transcending the particular religions of the adherents, under which the latter could be illuminated, understood, evaluated, and judged. But what is that meaning and relevance which must be other than what the psychologist, the economist,

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272; 261; 275. Here Professor Meland finds himself in agreement with Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 266), who identifies the particular for knowledge as "fiduciary framework" outside of which "no intelligence, however critical or original, can operate" (Meland, B. E., *Op. cit.*, p. 271).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 274-75.

the historian, and other social scientists are interested in? Meland gives us no indication of it. How then can the desired "negotiation of meaning" be possible? How may that of which the fiduciary framework is the figurization be critically established for knowledge? Indeed, Meland has already laid down that the primordial reality is utterly unknowable. In this case, what reliance should be placed on any person's claim that in affirming and denying what he does, he is expressing "primordial reality"? How can one differentiate between a person communicating a particularized "primordial reality" and one communicating a particularized hallucination? Does any fiduciary framework express, take account of, and constitute a concretization of "primordial reality" as well as any other? Are men absolutely free to develop any fiduciary framework they wish? Has all human wisdom not attained anything final at all concerning that primordial reality besides its *Dasein*?

If these questions yield only negative results, then negotiated meaning is impossible and encounter is futile. If, on the other hand, the yield is positive, then certainly meta-religion is possible, and the comparativist should apply himself to the task of elaborating it. In doing so, he may not take the stand of skepticism. For to assert God and not to allow Him to be differentiated from a hallucination is idle, as it is for a Muslim to assert the unity of God and not that of truth, or for any rational being to assert reality and then to declare it utterly unknowable. To assert with Polyanyi and Meland that all we can ever have is a Muslimized or Christianized, Germanized or Russified version of the truth is skepticism — the denial of truth itself, including that of the skeptic's thesis, à la Epimenides.

The rock-bottom axiom of this relativism in religious knowledge is the principle that "the roots of man are in the region; or, more precisely, in that matrix of concrete experience, however much he may succeed in venturing beyond these psychic barriers through various efforts at shared experience."<sup>22</sup> First, this is not self-evident. The opposite, namely, that the root of man is in the human universal rationality in which he partakes by nature, is quite conceivable. Nor can it be made to accord, second, with the wisdom of those religions that expressed men's universal brotherhood in their common descentance from Adam, and attributed their cultural peculiarities to environment."<sup>23</sup> Third, it stems from an unfortunate fixation in the Western mind that whatever is, is first of all either French or German or English or Christian or Jewish, and is human, but is universal or real only in second place. This fixation is so chronic that the Western mind not only cannot see reality except as geographically, nationally, culturally, or sectarianly determined, but also assumes that God created it so. "Each [concrete occasion of reality] in its own circumstances, bodies forth its distinctive

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>23</sup> Genesis II: 1-9; Qur'an 49:13; 45:16.

disclosure as an event of actuality, prehending the creative act of God with its own degree of relevance."<sup>24</sup> That is the end of the road. It is relativism claiming for itself divine sanction.

#### D. THE BENEFITS OF JUDGMENT

Certainly, what unites men of different fiduciary frameworks is, as Meland says, their standing as actualizations of primordial reality, their createdness by one and the same Creator. Religiously speaking, the Creator has not only granted man something of the Creator's spirit, that is, a capacity to transcend his creatureliness and recognize the Creator who is his source, but has also taken several measures to bring to man a knowledge of Himself. Man therefore knows God, the primordial reality, *if not naturally*, then by means of revelation. On the other hand, metaphysically speaking, the level of being at which man stands is differentiated from the lower levels of things, plants, and animals not only by that instrument of the will to live called the understanding, but by spirit, which enables man to cognize and evaluate his standing in Being's multileveled structure. This is none other than Being's attainment of consciousness of itself. In man, Being judges itself. That it has often misjudged itself is the proof that it can judge itself, and consequently that it must, can, and in fact does know itself. For it is as inconceivable that Being would enable the emergence of a creature that is a judge of Being without endowing it with the faculty to know the object of judgment, which is itself, as it is to find a being on any level that is not accompanied by the development of such cognitive faculties as enable the higher concretization of Being to fulfill that which distinguishes it from the lower levels and hence constitutes its *raison d'être*.

Pursued in its three branches, the study of religions is the sovereign queen of the humanities. In a sense, all the humanities, including the comparative ones, are here front-line soldiers whose duties are the collection of data, and their analysis, systematization, and reconstruction into meaning-wholes. The subject matter of these disciplines is men's ideas and actions in all fields of human endeavor; and all these are, as we have seen, constituents in the religio-cultural wholes which the science of religions proper studies as wholes, and compares and relates to man and God in the attempt to reach the truth of both. The queen's concern is for every battlefield and hence for every individual soldier. But her real work is at headquarters to observe where the ship of humanity is going. Comparative religion, then, is not a course of study; it is not a department in a divinity school. It is, rather, by itself a college of liberal arts, each department of which is organically related to the center, whose job is to make sense out of the infinite diversity of the religio-cultural experience, and thus contribute

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<sup>24</sup> Meland, B.E., *Op. cit.*, p. 265.

to the reconstruction of man's knowledge of himself, to his rehabilitation in an apparently alien cosmos, to his realization of value. Inasmuch therefore as comparative religion is a collection and systematization of facts about human acts, life, and relations, it is a college. Inasmuch as comparative religion is an evaluation or judgment of meaning-wholes with the aid of a body of critical meta-religious principles, it is the queen of the humanities.

At any university or college, however, these disciplines operate in an autonomous manner without recognizing their organic relation to religion. This is not undesirable. First, a measure of evaluation and judgment relative to the data under immediate examination is necessary for collection and systematization. Second, and in a deeper sense, their attempts at evaluation are desirable inasmuch as intellectual curiosity, or the will to know, is dependent upon the recognition of the unity of truth, that is, upon the realization that the discovery of truth is a discovery of a reality that is not divisible into unrelated segments but constitutes a unique and integral whole. This is quite consistent with the second principle of Islamic methodology, namely the unity of truth and knowledge (*Islamization of Knowledge*, p. 26). Such a realization is always a requisite for venturing into the unknown fields of reality.

Third, their evaluations and judgments are of inestimable value to the student of religions, even though they may be biased or erroneous. They serve as a check and balance to the comparativist whenever he is inclined to set the facts aside in favor of abstract constructionism. Such evaluation and judgment as the specialist data-reporter and systematizer are likely to make at least will be truer to the facts in question; and this is a need which the study of religions can never overemphasize and no historian of religion can oversatisfy.

Fourth, the study of religions should keep aware of these developments and be ready to evaluate the discoveries attained by these disciplines. The real issue is the need for and desirability of evaluation on the level of religion, that is to say, on the highest, the most comprehensive, and most critical level of all.

### III. SHORTCOMINGS OF THE OTHER SCHOOLS

#### A. *THE SENTIMENTAL ECUMENISTS*

All of us have heard superficial scholars, moved more by sentiment than reason, claim that the religions of mankind are all one. With no little demagoguery, they flash out their claims at public conventions that all the religions command the golden rule of Christianity, namely, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "Love thy neighbor as thyself," or, venturing new mottos, such claims as "Every religion has some notion of ultimate reality, or

commands the having of a good heart, observance of good conduct, altruism, or a spirituality or something beyond the material life of this world." Little do these sentimentalists realize that the road to hell is paved with good intentions; that a good will, reciprocity, spirituality, and ultimate reality as such do not specify what we are to do with our lives on earth; that humans hold these values and at the same time perpetrate atrocious crimes against humanity. The lowest common denominator may be common; but it is the lowest not only in the sense that it is the least important constituent in the religion in question but also in that the demand it makes on the adherent hardly distinguishes him from other religions. Facing such a lowest common denominator as an index of commonality, the conscientious adherent is bound to shout: "*Vive la difference!*"

Such latter-day ecumenists who have laid aside their religious identity and call upon others to do the same need not deter us from our quest. Their call appeals to the shallow-minded; and its effect is always brief. There are others though, far more sophisticated, whose call is oft based upon more solid grounds. They can be classified into three groups: those who find their base in man; those who find their base in the world; and those who find it in some vague though transcendent reality. Naturally, there are always some — perhaps they are the majority — who hold their own religion to be the religion of the world and to find world theology in the tenets of their own religious tradition.

This last class comprises today the overwhelming majority of the theologians of Christianity. Their claim may be read in Hendrik Kraemer's *Christianity and the Religions of the World*, and in Emil Brunner's study on *Christianity and Human Civilization*. And it can be deduced from the writings of Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and the comparativists of religion in the West. While the theologians of the ethnocentric religions — like Judaism and Hinduism — are deliberately unecumenical, those of the other religions are for the most part altogether unaware of the problem.

Those who base their world theology on man happen to be today's skeptics as far as religious truth is concerned. That was the conclusion of our analysis of the claim of Bernard Eugene Meland, as we have already seen. As we shall see below, the claim of Wilfred Cantwell Smith derives from the same skepticism regarding religious truth.

Finally, there are those who base their world theology on transcendent reality. These are the mystics. Fritjhof Schuon is the leading figure. His call for "the transcendent unity of the religions" (also the title of his book) has won him a number of followers, including such Muslim neo-Sufis as Hossein Nasr.

## B. *THE RELIGIOUS SKEPTICS*

Trained as a historian, and often claiming to be one, Smith learned the historical method and assumed doubt to be the first principle of human

knowledge. Applied to religion, this doubt is claimed to prove that there is no such thing as religion, that no such reality exists. What we call "religion," he claims, is a reified abstraction of the mind, created by our propensity to abstract from observed reality and to reify — or make into a thing or substance — the observation the mind has perceived.

Religion, he claims, is only a succession of states of consciousness which had better be named faith, or faithfulness. "Faith" is a personal quality, always an attribute of a person, an attribute that qualifies the person's fears, attitudes, and hopes and is hence changing at every moment. Like the river of Heraclitus, one never steps in the same river again. Faith is not religion; faith is dynamic, internal, personal, and ineffable, directly determining all attitudes and actions. Religion, on the other hand, is static, external, impersonal, a cumulation of states of faith, discursive epi-descriptions of something that once was and hence is subject to a thousand mistakes. These accumulated descriptions are then hypostatized as "religion," whereas they are nothing but cumulative abstractions of states of faith.

While this description of religion may be true of biblical Judaism and church Christianity, it can hardly apply to Islam, which the Qur'an declared to be "*Al Islam*," "*Al Din*," "Fitrah Allah," revealed *in toto* and completely during the last two decades of the Prophet's Life (SAAS), and recorded in an absolutely integral, historically established document — *Al Qur'an Al Karim*. Nobody, whether Muslim or otherwise, has confused his own personal faith with *Al Islam*, as if they were one reality; personal *islam* as a *masdar* (participle) distinct from *Al Islam*, the religion of God recorded in the Qur'an. The Muslim seeks always to improve his personal faith to accord with the Qur'anic *Al Islam*. The latter is normative, absolute, unchanging; the former, as Smith rightly indicates, is changing, relative to its subject. It is the reality to be judged by *Al Islam*, *Al Furqan*, or the criterion, of all judgment.

Further critical analysis of Smith's allegations may be read elsewhere (cf. this author's essay, "The Essence of Religious Experience in Islam," *Numen*, 1972). Suffice it to say that Smith's notion of religion does not even permit him to call himself a Christian. For how does he distinguish himself from the adherents of other religions without a constant unchanging substance (a *res*, as he called it) as norm and standard of Christian-ness? If Christianity were the river of Heraclitus, how could any issue of orthodoxy-heresy, of tradition-reform, or saintliness-sinfulness ever be recognized, let alone established?

And yet it is precisely on this really flimsy foundation that Smith builds his theory of world theology. His argument is contained in his most recent publication, *Toward a World-Theology: Faith and The Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981) His claim is that, while the reified religious traditions of the world may differ from one another in the images they have built of themselves in the minds of adherents prone to reification, their

condition of faithfulness, of believing in a transcendent reality, of having attitudes to life engendered by such notion, is one and the same. It is this condition that makes them human and distinguishes them from plants and animals. Faith, in a sense resembling piety, is common to all religious adherents and gives significance to life. Indeed, faith is the source and criterion of all significance.

Thus the notion of faith which does not distinguish between Christian and Christian — let alone between Christian and Muslim — is for Smith the basis of a world theology precisely because it does not distinguish at all. But however universal the state of having faith may be, it does not define religion. We understand religion not as a characteristic of the human person, like hunger, sex, fear, hope, pleasure, hatred, anger, or jealousy. Indeed, religion is that which determines what we do with any or all of these human propensities, including the propensity of faith. Is faithfulness as such any different from hunger? What kind of world theology can be built over a human propensity? or predicament?

Smith's answer that religious content does not matter derives from epistemological despair of ever being able to establish any religious claim. Questions of religious truth are for him, as for Meland, ever personal and subjective, ever relative, ever devoid of objective validity, a prerogative that belongs to empirical propositions alone. May religious content be treated with such epistemological unconcern, nay, contempt? Is it of such little importance for Smith whether a person has a faith that commits him to the saintly, self-sacrificial life of Jesus or to that of a vicious, debauched tyrant? Of what good is the description of both as "men of faith"? Obviously, Smith's world theology is epistemologically, ethically, and religiously worthless.

### C. THE MYSTICS

Unlike the claims of the skeptics, that of the mystics is old. Muslims have known it as claimed by the Batinis as well as Ibn 'Arabi; and world scholars have known it in the claims of the Advaita School of Shankara, the Deuta School of Ramanuja Hinduism, or the modern ecumenism of Sarvapalli-Radhakrishnan. Fritjhof Schuon's claim (*The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Tr. by P. Townsend, London, 1953), and that of his follower and pupil, S. Hossein Nasr (*Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London, 1966), is not different as to substance, but only in insignificant detail.

Schuon and Nasr claim that all religions are anchored in a reality that is absolute and transcendent. This reality may be conceived of in personal, theistic terms, as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do; but to perceive it otherwise, as Taoism and Buddhism do, is equally possible. All religions conceive of transcendent reality as normative, a source of standards and/or commandments relevant for the conduct of life. And all seek to center human consciousness and life on the transcendent reality because it is ultimate and absolute in all aspects.

The life of mankind hovers around its consciousness of this reality, for which it coined the words "Sacred" and "Holy." Consciousness of the sacred and obedience to an emulation of the holy are the hallmarks of all religions. This attitude toward the holy is particularly evident by its absence from the contemporary West, as contrasted with its life of a previous age, and with Asian and African life where it still predominates, but where it is fighting what seems to be a losing battle against the threat of Western materialism, atheism, and secularism.

Schuon and Nasr affirm that in this relation of the religious to the sacred, a base may be found for a "*philosophia perennis*," a "universal human religion." Advocates of such universal religiosity, such as Pythagoras and the mystics of all religions, abound in history. But history has known them as belonging to differing traditions and cultures with differing consequences to their lives and those of their followers. It is nonetheless true that in proximity to and in consciousness of the sacred, humans curb their wills, repudiate the relativities of history, and walk humbly and lovingly together toward the source of all truth and all bliss.

This sounds more like wishful thinking than reality. Often, the fiercest religious opponents were mystics, endowed with differing insights into what transcendent or ultimate reality commanded, exhorted, or expected them to do. Granted the ontological qualities they ascribe to transcendent reality, and granted their common humble subservience to and love of that reality, nothing necessarily follows for human life, either from acknowledging its existence, its being transcendent and real, or from the attitude of humility and obedience it elicits and obtains from its advocates. It is certainly possible for diametrically opposed religious tenets and ethical commandments prescribing the most cruel savagery to issue from transcendent reality, from a sacred conceived to be sacred and holy by its followers. Indeed, isn't the history of confrontation between the religions, or between parties within one and the same religion, ample evidence that opposites may well claim to issue from a transcendental source?

As the Batinis and Ibn 'Arabi and their critics have told us in our own tradition, a reality esoterically known, however transcendent or real it may be, may be thought of as validating any view, any commandment. That is why transcendent reality must give us this content through revelation, or subject any content presented in its name to scrutiny by reason. Otherwise, there would be no telling whether the transcendent reality claim is indeed a reality or simply a great hallucination. That is why every Batini form of religion must end in corruption. It rejects *ex hypothesi* the possibility of correction, except by its own source and advocate. Unless that source is absolutely without blemish, and ever-right in the perception of truth and value — a condition no human can claim — Batini (esoteric) and mystical theories have all ended in exaggeration and abuse by their own followers.

As a world theology, mysticism's claim for a transcendent unity of all the religions is empty. It is on a par with the claim of ecumenical sentimentalism; and, though the claim is anchored in an affirmation rather than a negation, like the skeptics, it avails nothing. It does not provide criteria for settling differences among the religions of the world, nor does it provide positive indications for conduct. A critical world theology cannot be content with such affirmation, because it cannot rest with a relativist understanding of the content commanded.

#### IV. TOWARDS AN ISLAMIC THEORY OF META-RELIGION

The relation of Islam to the other religions has been established by God in His revelation, the Qur'an. No muslim therefore may deny it; since for him the Qur'an is the ultimate religious authority. Muslims regard the Qur'an as God's own word *verbatim*, the final and definitive revelation of His will for all space and time, for all mankind.

The only kind of contention possible for the Muslim is that of exegetical variation. But in this realm, the scope of variation is limited in two directions. First, continuity of Muslim practice throughout the centuries constitutes an irrefutable testament to the meanings attributed to the Qur'anic verses. Second, the methodology of Muslim orthodoxy in exegesis rests on the principle that Arabic lexicography, grammar, and syntax, which have remained frozen and in perpetual use by the millions ever since their crystallization in the Qur'an, leave no contention without solution.<sup>25</sup> These facts explain the universality with which the Qur'anic principles were understood and observed, despite the widest possible variety of ethnic cultures, languages, races, and customs characterizing the Muslim world, from Morocco to Indonesia, and from Russia and the Balkans to the heart of Africa.

As for the non-Muslims, they may contest the principles of Islam. They must know, however, that Islam does not present its principles dogmatically, for those who believe or wish to believe, exclusively. It does so rationally, critically. It comes to us armed with logical and coherent arguments; and expects our acquiescence on rational, and hence necessary, grounds. It is not legitimate for us to disagree on the relativist basis of personal taste, or that of subjective experience.

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<sup>25</sup> On this point Muslim scholarship is unanimously in agreement. To those who are not familiar with this longstanding tradition, suffice it to warn that the situation of hermeneutical despair and confusion which exists in the case of Jewish, Christian, Buddhist and other scriptures has absolutely no parallel in Islam.

We propose to analyze Islam's ideational relation in three stages: that which pertains to Judaism and Christianity, that which pertains to the other religions, and that which pertains to religion as such, and hence to all humans, whether they belong to any or no religion.

### A. JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Islam accords to these two religions special status. First, each of them is the religion of God. Their founders on earth, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, are the prophets of God. What they have conveyed – the Torah, the Psalms, the Evangel (gospels) – are revelations from God. To believe in these prophets, in the revelations they have brought, is integral to the very faith of Islam. To disbelieve in them, nay to discriminate between them, is apostasy. "Our Lord and your Lord is indeed God, the One and Only God."<sup>26</sup> God described His Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and his followers as "believing all that has been revealed from God"; as "believing in God, in His angels, in His revelations and Prophets"; as "not-distinguishing among the Prophets of God."<sup>27</sup>

Arguing with Jews and Christians who object to this self-identification and claim an exclusivist monopoly on the former prophets, the Qur'an says: "You claim that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and their tribes were Jews or Christians [and God claims otherwise]. Would you claim knowledge in these matters superior to God's?"<sup>28</sup> "Say, [Muhammad], We believe in God, in what has been revealed by Him to us, what has been revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes; in what has been conveyed to Moses, to Jesus and all the prophets from their Lord."<sup>29</sup> "We have revealed [Our revelation] to you [Muhammad] as We did to Noah and the Prophets after him, to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, and David."<sup>30</sup> "It is God indeed, the living and eternal One, that revealed to you [Muhammad] the Book [i.e., the Qur'an] confirming the previous revelations. For it is He Who revealed the Torah and the Gospels as His guidance to mankind . . . Who revealed the Psalms to David."<sup>31</sup> "Those who believe [in you, Muhammad], the Jews, the Christians or the Sabaeans – all those who believe in God and in the Day of Judgment, and have done

<sup>26</sup> Qur'an 20:88; 29:46; 42:15.

<sup>27</sup> Qur'an 2:285.

<sup>28</sup> Qur'an 2:140.

<sup>29</sup> Qur'an 3:84.

<sup>30</sup> Qur'an 4:163.

<sup>31</sup> Qur'an 3:2-4.

good works, will receive their due reward from God. They have no cause to fear, nor will they grieve.”<sup>32</sup>

The honor with which Islam regards Judaism and Christianity, their founders and scriptures, is not courtesy but acknowledgment of religious truth. Islam sees them in the world not as “other views” which it has to tolerate, but as standing *de jure*, as truly revealed religions from God. Moreover, their legitimate status is neither sociopolitical, nor cultural or civilizational, but religious. In this, Islam is unique. For no religion in the world has yet made belief in the truth of other religions a necessary condition of its own faith and witness.

Consistently, Islam pursues this acknowledgment of religious truth in Judaism and Christianity to its logical conclusion, namely, self-identification with them. Identity of God, the source of revelation in the three religions, necessarily leads to identity of the revelations and of the religions. Islam does not see itself as coming to the religious scene *ex nihilo* but as reaffirmation of the same truth presented by all the preceding prophets of Judaism and Christianity. It regards them all as Muslims, and their revelations as one and the same as its own.<sup>33</sup> Together with Hanifism, the monotheistic and ethical religion of pre-Islamic Arabia, Judaism, Christianity and Islam constitute crystallizations of one and the same religious consciousness whose essence and core is one and the same. The unity of this religious consciousness can easily be seen by the historian of civilization concerned with the ancient Near East. It is traceable in the literatures of these ancient peoples<sup>34</sup> and is supported by the unity of their physical theater or geography, in their languages (for which they are called “Semitic”), and in the unity of artistic expression.

This unity of the religious consciousness of the Near East consists of five dominant principles which characterize the known literatures of the peoples of this region. They are: (1) the ontic disparateness of God, the Creator, from His creatures, unlike the attitudes of ancient Egyptians, Indians, or Chinese, according to which God or the Absolute is immanently His own creatures; (2) the purpose of man's creation is neither God's self-contemplation nor man's enjoyment, but unconditional service to God on earth, His own “manor”; (3) the relevance of Creator to creature, or the will of God, is the content of revelation and is expressed in terms of law, of oughts and moral imperatives; (4) man, the servant, is master of the manor under God, capable of transforming it through his own efficacious action into what God desires it to be; and (5) man's obedience to and fulfillment of the divine command

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<sup>32</sup> Qur'an 5:69.

<sup>33</sup> Qur'an 3:67; 21:71-94.

<sup>34</sup> An analysis of ancient Near Eastern religious consciousness may be read in this author's *Historical Atlas of the Religions of the World*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1974), pp. 3-34.

results in happiness and felicity, its opposite in suffering and damnation, thus coalescing worldly and cosmic justice together.

The unity of "Semitic" religious and cultural consciousness was not affected by intrusion of the Egyptians in the days of their empire (1465-1165 B.C.),<sup>35</sup> nor by the Philistines from Caphtor (Crete?); nor by the Hittites, Kassites, or "People of the Mountains" (the Aryan tribes?), who were all semiticized and assimilated, despite their military conquests.<sup>36</sup> Islam has taken all this for granted. It has called the central religious tradition of the Semitic peoples "Hanifism" and identified itself with it. Unfortunately for the early Muslim scholars who benefited from this insight as they labored, the language, histories, and literatures furnished by archeology and the disciplines of the ancient Near East were not yet available. Hence they scrambled after the smallest bits of oral tradition, which they systematized for us under the title of "History of the Prophets." In reading their materials, we must remember, however, that the accurate-knowledge of Abraham, of Julius Caesar, of 'Amr ibn al 'As<sup>37</sup> and of Napoleon, about the Sphinx or the pyramids of Egypt, for instance, was equal — i.e., nil.

The Islamic concept of "Hanif" should not be compared to Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christians." "Hanif" is a Qur'anic category, not the invention of a modern theologian embarrassed by his church's exclusivist claim to divine grace. It has been operating within the Islamic ideational system for fourteen centuries. Those to whom it is attributed are the paradigms of faith and greatness, the most honored representatives of religious life, not the despised though tolerated approximators of the religious ideal. Islam's honoring of the ancient prophets and their followers is to be maintained even if the Jews and Christians stop or diminish their loyalty to them. "Worthier of Abraham are those who really follow him, this Prophet and those who believe in him."<sup>38</sup> In the Qur'an, the Christians are exalted for their self-discipline and humility, and they are declared the closest of all believers to the Muslims. "[O Muhammad], you and the believers will find closest in love and friendship those who say 'We are Christians,' for many of them are ministers and priests who are truly humble."<sup>39</sup> If, despite all this commendation of them,

<sup>35</sup> The evidence of Tall al 'Amarnah (Akhetaten) is the very opposite. The Egyptian colonial governors in Palestine communicated with the Pharaoh not in Egyptian but in Akkadian.

<sup>36</sup> Regarding the latter, Sabatino Moscati wrote: "In the course of establishing themselves, the new peoples thoroughly absorbed the great cultural tradition already existing. In this process of absorption, Mesopotamia seems to prevail . . . Like Rome in the Middle Ages, despite its political decadence, Mesopotamia . . . celebrates the triumph of its culture (over its enemies)." *The Face of the Ancient Orient*. (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962) p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> Leader of the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 19/641 and later Governor.

<sup>38</sup> Qur'an 3:68.

<sup>39</sup> Qur'an 5:82.

of their prophets, and of their scriptures, Jews and Christians would persist in opposing and rejecting the Prophet and his followers, God commanded all Muslims to call the Jews and Christians in these words: "O People of the Book, come now with us to rally around a fair and noble principle common to both of us, that all of us shall worship and serve none but God, that we shall associate naught with Him, and that we shall not take one another as lords beside God. But if they still persist in their opposition, then warn them that We shall persist in our affirmation."<sup>40</sup>

Evidently, Islam has given the maximum that can ever be given to another religion. It has acknowledged as true the other religion's prophets and founders, their scriptures and teaching. Islam has declared its God and the God of the religions of Jews and Christians as One and the same. It has declared the Muslims the assistants, friends, and supporters of the adherents of the other religions, under God. If, after all this, differences persist, Islam holds them to be of no consequence. Such differences must not be substantial. They can be surmounted and resolved through more knowledge, good will and wisdom. Islam treats them as domestic disputes within one and the same religious family. And as long as we both recognize that God alone is Lord to each and every one of us, no difference and no disagreement is beyond solution. Our religious, cultural, social, economic, and political differences may all be composed under the principle that God alone — not any one of us, not our passions, our egos, or our prejudices — is God.

## B. *THE OTHER RELIGIONS*

Islam teaches that the phenomenon of prophecy is universal; that it has taken place throughout all space and time. "Every human," the Qur'an affirms, "is responsible for his own personal deeds. On the Day of Judgment, We shall produce publicly the record of such deeds and ask everyone to examine it as it alone will be the basis of reckoning. Whoever is rightly guided is so to his own credit; whoever errs does so to his own discredit. There is no vicarious guilt; and We shall not condemn [i.e., We shall not judge] until We had sent a prophet."<sup>41</sup> It follows from God's absolute justice that He would hold nobody responsible unless His law has been conveyed, promulgated and is known. Such conveyance and/or promulgation is precisely the phenomenon of prophecy. The same principle was operative in the ancient Near East, where the states carved their laws in stone stelae which they erected everywhere for people to read. Ignorance of the divine law is indeed an argument when it is not the effect of unconcern or neglect; and it is always an attenuating fac-

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<sup>40</sup> Qur'an 3:63-64.

<sup>41</sup> Qur'an 17:13-15.

tor. Being absolutely just as well as absolutely merciful and forgiving, God, Islam holds, left no people without a prophet to teach them the divine law. "There is no people," the Qur'an asserts, "but a warner/prophet has been sent to them."<sup>42</sup> Some of these prophets are widely known; others are not. So neither the Jewish nor the Christian nor the Muslim ignorance of them implies their nonexistence. "We have indeed sent prophets before you [Muhammad]. About some of them We have informed you. About others We have not."<sup>43</sup> Thus the whole of mankind, past and present, is capable of religious merit and felicity as well as of demerit and damnation, because of the universality of prophecy.

As Islam conceives it, the divine system is one of perfect justice. Universalism and absolute egalitarianism are constitutive of it. Hence, the phenomenon of prophecy not only must needs be universally present but its content must needs be absolutely the same. If different in each case, the universalism of the phenomenon would have little effect. Therefore Islam teaches that the prophets of all times and places have taught one and the same lesson; that God has not differentiated among His messengers. "We have sent to every people a messenger," the Qur'an affirms, "to teach them that worship and service are due to God alone; that evil must be avoided [and the good pursued]."<sup>44</sup> "We have sent no messenger except to convey [the divine message] in the tongue of his own people, to make it [the content] clearly comprehensible to them."<sup>45</sup> With this reassurance, no human has any excuse for failing to acknowledge God, or to obey His law." "[We have sent to every people] prophets to preach and to warn, that no human may have an argument against God[']s judgment of that individual's deeds]."<sup>46</sup>

Islam thus lays the ground for a relation with all peoples, not only with Jews and Christians, whose prophets are confirmed in the Qur'an. Having once been the recipients of revelation, and of a revelation that is identical to that of Islam, the whole of mankind may be recognized by Muslims as equally honored, as they are, by virtue of revelation and also as equally responsible, as they are, to acknowledge God as the only God and to offer Him worship, service, and obedience to His eternal laws.

If, as Islam holds, all prophets have conveyed one and the same message, whence the tremendous variety of the historical religions of mankind? To this question, Islam furnishes a theoretical answer and a practical one.

### 1. Islam holds that the messages of all prophets had but one essence

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<sup>42</sup> Qur'an 35:24.

<sup>43</sup> Qur'an 40:78; 4:163.

<sup>44</sup> Qur'an 16:36.

<sup>45</sup> Qur'an 14:4.

<sup>46</sup> Qur'an 4:164.

and core composed of two elements. First is *tawhid*, or the acknowledgment that God alone is God and that all worship, service, and obedience are due to Him alone. Second is morality, which the Qur'an defines as service to God, doing good, and avoiding evil.

Each revelation had come figurized in a code of behavior particularly applicable to its people, and hence relevant to their historical situation and conditions. This particularization does not affect the essence or core of the revelation. If it did, God's justice would not be absolute and the claims of universalism and egalitarianism would fall to the ground. Particularization in the divine law must therefore affect the "how" of service, not its purpose or "what," the latter being always the good, righteousness, justice, and obedience to God. If it ever affects the "what," it must do so only in those areas that are nonconstitutive and hence unimportant and accidental. This principle has the special merit of rallying humanity, whether potentially or actually, around common principles of religion and morality; of removing such principles from contention, from relativism and subjectivism.<sup>47</sup>

There is therefore a legitimate ground for the religious variety in history. In His mercy, God has taken due account of the particular conditions of each people. He has revealed to them all a message that is the same in essence; but He has conveyed to each one of them His law in a prescriptive form relevant to their particular conditions, to their own grade of development on the human scale. And we may conclude that such differences are *de jure* as they do not affect the essence.

2. The second cause of religious diversity is not as benevolent as the first. The first, we have seen, is divine; the second, human. To acknowledge and do the will of God conveyed through revelation is not always welcomed by all men. There are those with vested interests that may not agree with the divine dispensations, and there are numerous circumstances favoring such disagreement.

First, divine revelation has practically always and everywhere advocated charity and altruism, ministering by the rich to the material needs of the poor. The rich do not always acquiesce in this moral imperative and may incline against it. Second, divine revelation is nearly always in favor of ordered social living. It would counsel obedience of the ruled to the law and self-discipline. But it always does so under the assumption of a rule of justice,

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<sup>47</sup> It should be added here that Islam holds its revelation to be mainly a revelation of a "what" that can become a "how" befitting any historical situation. Thus, the "how" or prescriptive form of the law may and does change in substance as well as in application, but not its spirit, purpose or "what." *Usul al Fiqh* discipline has devised and institutionalized a system to govern the process of evolution of the law.

which may not always be agreeable to rulers and kings who seek to have their own way. Their will power may incline them against the social ethic of revelation.

Third, divine revelation always reminds man to measure himself by reference to God and His law, not by reference to himself. But man is vain; and self-adoration is for him a constant temptation. Fourth, revelation demands of humans that they discipline their instincts and keep their emotions under control. Humans however, are inclined to indulgence. Orgies of instinct-satisfaction and emotional excitement have punctuated human life. Often, this inclination militates against revelation.

Fifth, where the contents of revelation are not judiciously and meticulously remembered, taught, and observed publicly and by the greatest numbers, they tend to be forgotten. When they are transmitted from generation to generation and are not embodied in public customs observed by all, the divine imperatives may suffer dilution, shift of emphasis, or change. Finally, when the divine revelation is moved across linguistic, ethnic, and cultural frontiers — indeed, even to generations within the same people but far removed from its original recipients in time — it may well change through interpretation. Any or all of these circumstances may bring about a corruption of the original revelation.

This is why God has seen fit to repeat the phenomenon of prophecy, to send forth prophets to reconvey the divine message and reestablish it in the minds and hearts of humans. This divine injection into history is an act of sheer mercy. It is continual, always ad hoc, unpredictable. To those who inquire, What was the rationale behind sending Muhammad (SAAS) at that time and place? the Qur'an answers: "God knows better where and when to send prophets to convey His message."<sup>48</sup>

### C. ISLAM'S RELATION TO ALL HUMANS

Islam has related itself, equally, to all other religions, whether recognized, historical, or otherwise. Indeed, even to the a-religionists and atheists — whatever their color — Islam has related itself in a constructive manner, its purpose being to rehabilitate them as integral members of society.

This relation constitutes Islam's humanism. At its root stands the reason for creation, man's *raison d'être*. The first mention of the divine plan to create man occurs in a conversation with the angels. "I plan to place on earth a vicegerent for Me. The angels responded: Would you place on earth a being who would also do evil and shed blood while we always praise and

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<sup>48</sup> Qur'an 6:124.

glorify and obey You? God said: I have another purpose unknown to you.”<sup>49</sup> The angels, evidently, are beings created by God to act as His messengers and /or instruments. By nature, they are incapable of acting otherwise than as God instructs them to act, and hence they are incapable of morality. Their necessary predicament, always to do God’s bidding, differentiates them from the human creature God was about to place on earth.

In another dramatic and eloquent passage, the Qur’an reports: “We [God] offered the trust to heaven and earth and mountain. They refused to carry it out of fear. But man did carry it.”<sup>50</sup> In the heavens, on earth, and in the mountains, God’s will is fulfilled with the necessity of natural law. Creation therefore, to the exclusion of man, is incapable of fulfilling the higher part of God’s will, namely, the moral law. Only man is so empowered; for morality requires that its fulfillment be free; that its opposite or alternative, that which is amoral or immoral, be possible of fulfillment by the same person at the same time and in the same respect. It is of the nature of the moral deed that it be done when the agent could do otherwise. Without that option or possibility, morality would not be morality. If done unconsciously or under coercion, the moral deed might have utilitarian but no moral value.

Viceregency of God on earth means man’s transformation of creation — including above all himself — into the patterns of God. It means obedient fulfillment of His command, which includes all values, all ethical imperatives. The highest of imperatives are the moral. Since man alone is capable of moral action, only he can carry the “divine trust” from which “heaven and earth and mountain” shied away. Man therefore has cosmic significance. He is the only creature through whom the higher part of the divine will could be realized in space and time.

To clarify the *raison d’être* of man, the Qur’an has rhetorically asked mankind: “Would you then think that We have created you in vain?”<sup>51</sup> The Qur’an further praises “men of understanding” who affirm: “O God! Certainly You have not created all this [creation] in vain!”<sup>52</sup> As to the deniers of such a purpose for creation, the Qur’an turns to an assertive, even offensive tone. “Indeed We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between in vain. That is the presumption of unbelievers. Woe and Fire to them.”<sup>53</sup> As to the content of the divine purpose, the Qur’an asserts: “And I have not created men and *jinn* except to worship/serve Me.”<sup>54</sup> The verb *‘abada* means worship as

<sup>49</sup> Qur’an 2:30.

<sup>50</sup> Qur’an 33:72.

<sup>51</sup> Qur’an 23:116.

<sup>52</sup> Qur’an 3:191.

<sup>53</sup> Qur’an 38:27.

<sup>54</sup> Qur’an 51:56.

well as serve. It has been used in this double sense in all Semitic languages. In the Qur'an, it is given further elaboration by the more specific answers given to the same questions of why creation? Why man? "It is He Who created heaven and earth . . . that you [mankind] may prove yourselves in His eye the worthier in the deed." "And it is He Who made you His vicegerents on earth . . . that you may prove yourselves worthy of all that He had bestowed upon you."<sup>55</sup>

In order to enable man to fulfill his *raison d'être*, God has created him capable, and "in the best of forms."<sup>56</sup> He has given him all the equipment necessary to achieve fulfillment of the divine imperatives. Above all, "God, Who created everything perfect . . . created man out of earth . . . perfected and breathed into him of His own spirit." He has bestowed upon him "his hearing, his sight and his heart" [the cognitive faculties].<sup>57</sup> Above all, God has given man his mind, his reason, and understanding, with which to discover and use the world in which he lives. He has made the earth and all that is in it – indeed, the whole of creation including the human self—malleable, that is, capable of change and of transformation by man's action, of engineering designed to fulfill man's purposes.

In religious language, God has made nature "subservient" to man. He has granted mankind "lordship" over nature. This is also the meaning of man's *khilafah* or vicegerency of God in the world. The Qur'an is quite emphatic in this regard: "God has made the ships [the winds which drive them] subject to you. . . . And the rivers . . . the sun and moon, day and night."<sup>58</sup> "He has made the seas subservient to you . . . camels and cattle . . . all that is on earth and in heaven."<sup>59</sup> God has planted man on earth precisely to "reconstruct and use it as a usufruct"<sup>60</sup> and to this purpose, made him "lord of the earth."<sup>61</sup> In order to make this engineering of nature and its usufruct possible, God has imbedded in it His *sunan* or patterns,<sup>62</sup> the so-called laws of nature which we know to be permanent and immutable solely through our faith that He

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<sup>55</sup> Qur'an 11:7.

"We have not created heaven and earth but for . . . We have created life and death . . . for you to prove yourselves worthier in your deeds. . . . All that is on earth and all the worldly ornaments We have made thereof are to the purpose of men proving themselves worthier in the deed" (Qur'an 11:7; 6:165; 18:7).

<sup>56</sup> Qur'an 95:4.

<sup>57</sup> Qur'an 32:7-8.

<sup>58</sup> Qur'an 14:32-33.

<sup>59</sup> Qur'an 16:14; 22:36-37; 22:65; 31:20; 45:12.

<sup>60</sup> Qur'an 11:61.

<sup>61</sup> Qur'an 67:15.

<sup>62</sup> Qur'an 30:30; 48:23.

is not a malicious but a beneficent God.<sup>63</sup> Reading God's patterns in nature or creation is equally possible in psychic or social nature<sup>64</sup> thus opening nearly all areas of creation to human observation and cognition, as well as a fair portion of the divine purpose or will.

Besides all this, God has revealed His will through the prophets directly and immediately, and commanded them to proclaim it to their peoples in their own tongues. He has sent the Prophet Muhammad with a final version which he covenanted to guard against tampering and corruption,<sup>65</sup> and which has been preserved intact, along with Arabic grammar and syntax, lexicography, etymology, and philology — all the linguistic apparatus required to understand it exactly as it was revealed. Certainly this was a gratuitous gesture, an act of pure charity and mercy, on the part of the benevolent God. Its purpose is to make man's knowledge and fulfillment of the divine will easier and more accessible.

Every human being, Islam affirms, stands to benefit from these divine dispensations. The road to felicity is a free and open highway which anyone may tread of his own accord. Everybody is innately endowed with all these rights and privileges. God has granted them to all without discrimination. "Nature," "the earth," "the heavens" — all belong to each and every human.

Indeed, God has done all this and even more! He has implanted His own religion into every human at birth. The true religion is innate, a *religio naturalis*, with which all humans are equipped.<sup>66</sup> Behind the dazzling religious diversity of mankind stands an innate religion inseparable from human nature. This is the primordial religion, the *Ur-Religion*, the one and only true religion.<sup>67</sup> Everyone possesses it unless acculturation and indoctrination, misguidance, corruption or dissuasion have taught him otherwise.<sup>68</sup> All men, therefore, possess a faculty, a "sixth sense," a *sensus communis* with which they can perceive God as God. Rudolph Otto called it "the sense of the numinous"<sup>69</sup> and phenomenologists of religion have recognized it as the faculty that perceives

<sup>63</sup> On the philosophical uncertainty of the laws of nature, see Clarence Irving Lewis, *Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (Lasalle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing co., 1946) and George Santayana, *Skepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1923). Their position, which is that of contemporary science, is epistemologically identical to that held by al Ghazali (d. 504/1111) in his controversy with the philosophers (see his *Tahafut al Falasifah* or *Refutation of the Philosophers*, tr. by Sabih Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963).

<sup>64</sup> Qur'an 51:21; 33:62; 35:43.

<sup>65</sup> Qur'an 15:9.

<sup>66</sup> Qur'an 30:30.

<sup>67</sup> Qur'an 3:19.

<sup>68</sup> This is the substance of the Hadith, "Everyman is born with natural religion — i.e. a Muslim. It is his parents that make him a Jew, a Magian or a Christian."

<sup>69</sup> Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

the religious as "religious," as "sacred,"<sup>70</sup> autonomous and *sui generis*, without reductionism.

Finally, Islam entertains no idea of "the fall of man," no concept of "original sin." It holds no man to stand in an innate, necessary predicament out of which he cannot pull himself. Man, it holds, is innocent. He is born with his innocence. Indeed, he is born with a thousand perfections, with faculties of understanding, and an innate sense with which to know God. In this all men are equal, since it follows from their very existence, from their creatureliness. This is the basis for Islamic universalism.

Concerning morality and piety, man's career on earth, Islam countenances no distinction among humans, no division of them into races or nations, castes or classes. All men, it holds, "issued from a single pair," their division into peoples and tribes being a convention designed for mutual acquaintance.<sup>71</sup> "Nobler among you," the Qur'an asserts, "is only the more righteous."<sup>72</sup> And the Prophet added, in his farewell sermon: "No Arab may have any distinction over a non-Arab, no white over non-white, except in righteousness."<sup>73</sup>

## V. ISLAMIC META-RELIGION IN HISTORY

Under these precepts, whether explicitly revealed in the *ipsissima verba* of God or implied therein, the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) worked out and proclaimed the constitution of the first Islamic state. He had barely arrived in Madinah (July, 622 C.E.) when he brought together all the inhabitants of Madinah and its environs and promulgated with them the Islamic state and its constitution. This event was of capital importance for the relation of Islam to the other religions, and of non-Muslims to Muslims of all times and places. Four years after the Prophet's demise in 10/632, 'Umar ibn al Khattab (RAA), the second caliph, ordered that the date of promulgation of this constitution was so crucial for Islam as a world movement that it should be considered the beginning of Islamic history.

The constitution was a covenant, whose guarantor was Allah (SWT), between the Prophet, the Muslims, and the Jews. It abolished the tribal system of Arabia under which the Arab defined himself and by which society was

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<sup>70</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, Ltd., undated) and *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

<sup>71</sup> Qur'an 49:13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Ishaq ibn Hisham, *Sirat Rasul Allah (The Life of Muhammad)*, tr. by Alfred Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

governed. Henceforth, the Arab was to be defined by Islam; his personal and social life was to be governed by Islamic law, the *shari'ah*. The old tribal loyalties gave way to a new social bond which tied every Muslim to all other Muslims across tribal lines, to form the *ummah*. The *ummah* is an organic body whose constituents mutually sustain and protect one another. Their personal, reciprocal, and collective responsibilities are all defined by law. The Prophet was to be its chief political and juristic authority; and, as long as he lived, he exercised this power. After his death, his *khulafa'* (pl. of *khalifah*, "successor") exercised political authority, while juristic authority devolved exclusively upon the *'ulama'* (the jurists), who had by then developed a methodology for interpretation, renewal, and expansion of the *shari'ah*.

### A. THE JEWISH UMMAH

Alongside this *ummah* of Muslims stood the *ummah* of the Jews. Their old tribalist loyalties to the Arab Aws and Khazraj tribes were to be supplanted by the bond of Judaism. Instead of their citizenship being a function of their clientship to this or that Arab tribe, it was hence to be a function of their Jewishness. Their life was to be structured around Jewish institutions and governed by the Torah, their revealed law. Political authority was vested in the chief rabbi who was also known as *Resh Galut*, while juristic authority rested with the system of rabbinic courts. Overarching both *ummahs* was a third organization, also called *al ummah*, or *al dawlah al Islamiyyah* (the Islamic polity, government, or "state") whose constituents were the two *ummahs* and whose *raison d'être* was the protection of the state, the conduct of its external affairs, and the carrying out of Islam's universal mission. The "state" could conscript the *ummah* of Muslims in its services, whether for peace or for war, but not the *ummah* of Jews. Jews, however, could volunteer their services to it if they wished. Neither the Muslim nor the Jewish *ummah* was free to conduct any relation with a foreign power, much less to declare war or peace with any other state or foreign organization. This remained the exclusive jurisdiction of the Islamic state.

The Jews, who entered freely into this covenant with the Prophet (SAAS) and whose status the new constitution raised from tribal clients on sufferance to citizens *de jure* of the state, later betrayed it. The sad consequence was, first, the fining of one group, followed by the expulsion of another group found guilty of greater offense, and finally the execution of a third group that plotted with the enemy to destroy the Islamic state and the Islamic movement. Although these judgments were made by the Prophet himself (SAAS), or by an arbiter agreed upon by the parties concerned, the Muslims did not understand them as directed against the Jews as such, but against the guilty individuals only. Islam recognizes no vicarious guilt. Hence, when the Islamic

state later expanded to include northern Arabia, Palestine, Jordan and Syria, Persia, and Egypt, where numerous Jews lived, they were automatically treated as innocent constituents of the Jewish *umma* within the Islamic state. This explains the harmony and cooperation that characterized Muslim-Jewish relations throughout the succeeding centuries.

For the first time in history since the Babylonian invasion of 586 B.C., and as citizens of the Islamic state, the Jew could model his life after the Torah and do so legitimately, supported by the public laws of the state where he resided. For the first time, a non-Jewish state put its executive power at the service of a rabbinic court. For the first time, the state-institution assumed responsibility for the maintenance of Jewishness, and declared itself ready to use its power to defend the Jewishness of Jews against the enemies of Jewishness, be they Jews or non-Jews.

After centuries of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine (Christian) oppression and persecution, the Jews of the Near East, of North Africa, of Spain, and Persia, looked upon the Islamic state as a liberator. Many of them readily helped its armies in their conquests and cooperated enthusiastically with the Islamic state administration. This cooperation was followed by acculturation into Arabic and Islamic culture, which produced a dazzling blossoming of Jewish arts, letters, sciences, and medicine. It brought affluence and prestige to the Jews, some of whom became ministers and advisers to the caliphs. Indeed, Judaism and its Hebrew language developed their "golden age" under the aegis of Islam. Hebrew acquired its first grammar, the Torah its most highly developed jurisprudence, Hebrew letters their lyrical poetry; and Hebrew philosophy found its first Aristotelian, Musa ibn Maymun (Maimonides), whose thirteen precepts, couched in Arabic first, defined the Jewish creed and identity. Judaism developed its first mystical thinker as well, Ibn Gabirol, whose "Sufi" thought brought reconciliation and inner peace to Jews throughout Europe. Under 'Abd al Rahman III in Cordoba, the Jewish prime minister, Hasdai ben Shapirut, managed to effect reconciliation between Christian monarchs whom even the Catholic Church could not bring together. All this was possible because of one Islamic principle on which it all rested, namely, the recognition of the Torah as revelation and of Judaism as God's religion, which the Qur'an attested and proclaimed.

## B. THE CHRISTIAN UMMAH

Shortly after the conquest of Makkah by Muslim forces in 8/630, the Christians of Najran in Yaman sent a delegation of chieftains to meet the Prophet (SAAS) in Madinah. Their purpose was to clarify their position vis-a-vis the Islamic state, and that of the state vis-a-vis them. The conquest of Makkah had made the Islamic state a power to reckon with in the region.

The delegates were the guests of the Prophet (SAAS), and he received them in his house and entertained them in his mosque. He explained Islam to them and called them to convert to his faith and cause. Some of them did and instantly became members of the Muslim *ummah*. Others did not. They chose to remain Christian, and to join the Islamic state as Christians. The Prophet constituted them as a Christian *ummah*, alongside the Jewish and Muslim *ummahs*, within the Islamic state. He sent with them one of his companions, Mu'adh ibn Jabal (RAA), to represent the Islamic state in their midst. They converted to Islam in the period of the second caliph (2-14/634-646), but the Christian *ummah* in the Islamic state continued to grow by the expansion of its frontiers to the north and west. Indeed, for the greater part of a century, the majority of the citizens of the Islamic state were Christians, enjoying respect, liberty, and a new dignity they had not enjoyed under either Christian Rome or Byzantium. Both these powers were imperialist and racist and they tyrannized their subjects as they colonized the territories of the Near East.

An objective account of the conversion of the Christians of the Near East to Islam<sup>74</sup> should be required reading for all, especially for those still laboring under the Crusades—old prejudice that Islam was spread among Christians by the sword. Christians lived in peace and prospered under Islam for centuries, during which time the Islamic state saw righteous as well as tyrannic sultans and caliphs. Had it been a part of Islamic sentiment to do away with the Christian presence, it could have been done without a ripple in the world or history. But it was Islam's respect for and acknowledgment of Jesus as Prophet of God and of his Evangel (Gospel) as revelation that safeguarded that presence. The same is true of Abyssinia, a neighboring Christian state, which harbored the first Muslim emigrants from the wrath of Makkah and maintained with the Islamic state at the time of the Prophet a covenant of peace and friendship. The expansive designs of the Islamic state never included Abyssinia precisely on that account.

### C. UMMAH OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Persia's incursion into Arabia had left behind it some, though very few, Arab converts to the Zoroastrian faith. A larger number of these lived in the buffer desert zone between Persia and Byzantium, and in Shatt al 'Arab, the lower region of the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, where Arabia and Persia overlapped. Notable among the Persian Zoroastrians in Arabia was Salman al Farisi (RAA), who converted to Islam before the Hijrah and became one of the illustrious companions of the Prophet (SAAS).

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (London: 1906; Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf Publications, 1961).

According to some traditions, it was the Prophet himself (SAAS) who, in the "Year of Delegations" (8-9/630-631), the year that saw the tribes and regions of Arabia sending delegations to Madinah to pledge their fealty to the Islamic state, recognized the Zoroastrians as another *ummah* within the Islamic state. Very soon afterward, the Islamic state conquered Persia and included all its millions within its citizenry. Those who converted to Islam joined the *ummah* of Muslims, and the millions of others who chose to remain Zoroastrian were accorded the same privileges and duties accorded by the constitution to the Jews. The Prophet (SAAS) had already extended their application to the Christians eight years after the constitution was enacted. They were extended to apply to the Zoroastrians in 14/636, following the conquest of Persia by the Prophet's companions (RAA), if not sooner by the Prophet himself (SAAS).

Following the conquest of India by Muhammad bin Qasim in 91/711, the Muslims faced new religions which they had never known before, Buddhism and Hinduism. Both religions co-existed in Sind and the Punjab, the regions conquered by Muslims and joined to the Islamic state. Muhammad bin Qasim sought instruction from the caliph in Damascus on how to treat Hindus and Buddhists. They appeared to worship idols, and their doctrines were at the farthest remove from Islam. Their founders were unheard of by Muslims. The caliph called a council of *'ulama* and asked them to render judgment on the basis of the governor's report. The judgment was that as long as Hindus and Buddhists did not fight the Islamic state, as long as they paid the *jizyah* or tax due, they must be free to worship their gods as they please, to maintain their temples, and to determine their lives by the precepts of their faith. Thus, the same status as that of the Jews and Christians was accorded to them.<sup>75</sup>

The principle governing Islam and the Islamic state's relations with other religions and their adherents had thus been established. It was implemented as the Islamic state entered into relations with those adherents, a process that took place either during the Prophet's life or very soon after it. When the *shari'ah* crystallized in prescriptive form, the status, rights, and obligations of Muslim and non-Muslim citizens were already included. For fourteen centuries in many places, or less because of a later arrival of Islam or the imposition of Western law by colonial administrations, the *shari'ah* successfully governed Muslim - non-Muslim relations. It created a *modus vivendi* which enabled the non-Muslims to perpetuate themselves — hence their continuing presence in the Muslim world — and to achieve felicity as defined by their own faiths.

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<sup>75</sup> Al Kufi's *Shah-Namah*, tr. by H. M. Elliott in his *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* (London: 1867-77, Vol 1, pp. 184-87).

The atmosphere of the Islamic state was one replete with respect and honor to religion, piety, and virtue, unlike the tolerance of modern times in the West born out of skepticism regarding the truth of religious claims, of cynicism and unconcern for religious values. The Islamic *shari'ah* is otherwise known as the *millah* or *millet* system (meaning "religious communities"), or the "*Dhimmah*" or *Zimmi* system (meaning the covenant of peace whose *dhimmah* or guarantor is God).

Evil rulers cannot be denied to have existed in the Muslim world any more than in any other empire. Where they existed, Muslims suffered as well as non-Muslims. Nowhere in Islamic history, however, were non-Muslims singled out for prosecution or persecution. The constitution that protected them was taken by Muslims to be God-inspired, God-protected. The Prophet (SAAS) had already warned: "Whoever oppresses any *dhimmi*, I shall be his prosecutor on the Day of Judgment." No other religion or societal system has ever regarded the religious minority in better light, integrated it into the stream of the majority with as little damage to either party, or treated it without injustice or unfairness as Islam did. Indeed, none could. Islam succeeded in a field where all other religions failed because of its unique theology, which recognized the true, one, and only religion of God to be innate in every person, the primordial base of all religions, identical with Sabaeianism, Judaism, and Christianity.

Evidently, far from being a national state, the Islamic state is a world order in which numerous religious communities, national or transnational, co-exist in peace. The universal *Pax Islamica* recognizes the legitimacy of every religious community, and grants it the right to order its life in accordance with its own religious genius. It is superior to the United Nations because, instead of national sovereignty as the principle of membership, it has taken the principle of religious identity. Its constitution is divine law, valid for all, and may be invoked in any Muslim court by anyone, be he a simple Muslim or non-Muslim individual or the chief of the largest religious community.

## VI. CONCLUSION: THE CRITICAL METHODOLOGY OF ISLAM

Let us, in conclusion, review the characteristics of meta-religion according to Islam, those characteristics that make it rational and critical.

A. Islamic meta-religion does not a priori condemn any religion. Indeed, it gives every religion the benefit of the doubt and more. Islamic meta-religion assumes that every religion is God-revealed, God-ordained, until it is historically proven beyond doubt that the constitutive elements of that religion are human made.

B. Islamic meta-religion readily links the religions of history with the divine source on the ground that there is no people or group but God had sent them a prophet to teach them the same lesson of religion, of piety and virtue.

C. Islamic meta-religion grants ready accreditation to all humans in their religious attempts to formulate and express religious truth. For it acknowledges all humans to have been born with all that is necessary to know God and His will, the moral law, to discriminate between good and evil.

D. Islamic meta-religion is painfully aware of human passions, prejudices, and deficiencies and of their sinister influence upon what was revealed or discovered to be primordial religion (*din al fitrah*) or primordial truth. Thus, it calls upon all humans, especially the '*ulama*' of each religion, to subject their religious traditions to rational, critical examination, and to discard those elements that are proven to be human additions, emendations, or falsifications. In this task of historical criticism of all the religions of history, all humans are brothers and must cooperate to establish the primordial truth underlying all the religions.

E. Islamic meta-religion honors human reason to the point of making it equivalent to revelation in the sense that neither can discard the other without imperiling itself. That is why in Islamic methodology, no contradiction, or non-correspondence with reality, can be final or ultimate. The Islamic scholar of religion is therefore ever tolerant, ever open to evidence, ever critical.

F. Islamic meta-religion is humanistic *par excellence*, in that it assumes all men to be innocent, not fallen or vitiated at birth, capable of discerning good and evil, free to choose according to their reason, conscience, or best knowledge, and personally, that is, individually, responsible for their own deeds.

G. Islamic meta-religion is world- and life-affirmative, in that it assumes creation, life, and history not to be in vain, not the work of a blind force, or of a trickster-god, but ordered to lead to value. It acknowledges the critical principle that nature is incapable by itself to produce critical self-consciousness, and a trickster-god would be in foolish self-contradiction to create man and endow him with his critical faculties.

H. Finally, Islamic meta-religion is an institution, not a mere theory, tested by fourteen centuries of continuous application, of success against tremendous odds. It alone among the religions and ideologies of the world was large enough in heart, in spirit as well as in letter, to give mankind the gift of a pluralism of laws with which to govern their lives under the aegis of its own meta-religious principles and laws. It alone acknowledged such plurality of laws as religiously and politically *de jure*, while it called their adherents with wisdom and fair argument to consider rationally, critically, and freely why they should not unite under the banner of the one religion that is the one and only meta-religion.