



Paradigm and Paradoxes in the Study of Religion

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ABSTRACT

The study of religion opens the door of mutual understanding. It gathers, bring together and explains religious phenomena. It also discovers the beginning, various phases, and principles of different religions with their distinguish features. The study of living faiths helps us to understand the nature of men and religion itself.

KEYWORDS

The study of religion not only opens the door of mutual understanding but it is also important to understand history, philosophy, human nature and psyche. Because it gathers, collates and explains religious phenomena. It also discovers the genesis, various stages, and principles of different religions with their distinguish features. The study of living faiths helps us to understand the nature of men and religion itself. As the study of Durkheim shows that religion is a social affair of men. In contrast of this idea Whitehead opined that religion is what a man does in his solitariness. But both the studies discover two different aspects of faiths. Similarly study of different faiths with different angles will bring forth the common acceptable points found in them. The works of Alfred W. Martin, Rudolf Otto and Bhagwan Das are best examples of that kind of studies. These kinds of studies will be obviously helpful to inspire tolerance and respect to the faith of each others. Not only that but also deepen and enrich the insight into one's own tradition and may cross-fertilize religions to shape new form of social conduct based on common similar moral values acceptable to all. Thus, a comparative and correlative study of religion is quit helpful to brings out the kernel of faith from old age myths, to cultivate the virtue of appreciation and appropriation of the different insights of different religions.

In the study of comparative religion there are certain dangers if some methodological norms have not been taken in care by the scholars. Even if methodology is correct but approach is not in coherence with it the results may be hazardous. To the writer the most appropriate approach to the study of comparative religion is pluralistic. If the scholar of comparative religion is apologetic, exclusive or inclusive the findings of studies will not be of any use as per the aims and objectives of comparative study of religion.

It is not appropriate to speak of the superiority or inferiority of any religion in comparison with others. In fact, religion is a matter of faith which has its own historical and cultural background. Comparative religion as a philosophical discipline is concerned with spiritual values which are shareable and universal. Thus, the discipline of comparative religion is concerned more with values than with the origin of religions. It instills faith in the universality of divine. It inculcates in men not only tolerance but genuine respect and appreciations for all faiths. It tries to discover the spirit of each religion.

The basic purpose of religion is bind human beings to one another, and finally with divine. The study of scriptures shows that perfection and divinity are realized when one identifies oneself with divine and humanity as a whole. Therefore, most important task of comparative study of religion is to find out a principle of unity which will harmonize and balance the claims

and counter claims of diversant faiths into a sense of unity in their basics. Unity does not mean uniformity of religious conduct and belief, but it is a kind of symphony of spiritual striving.

In this context if we look in to the Prophetic traditions. Prophets had been instructed to be very much careful to invite the people to the Devine message. As mentioned in the Qur'an addressed to *Ahl-e-Kitab* by Prophet Mohammed(s), 'O people of the book (let us) rally to a common formula to be binding on both of us that we shall worship none but Allah'. (3:64) The Qur'an post pond the differences of divergent religions and their followers to a final decision by God, 'Those who believe (this Qur'an) and those who are Jews, and the Sabceans and the Christians and the Magians and the Polytheists – Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. No doubt Allah is witness over all things'. (22:17)

In the above verses there is indication also that the religious differences hardly can be resolved perfectly and finally by human being but mutual Understanding on common points and basic aims of religions can be reconciliated.

If a scholar pondered upon the Qur'an he will find many verses and illustrations on the basis of them a thesis. 'How to study religions comparatively' can be built.

Theologies and philosophies of other religions also reflect that supreme reality is not tangible to be proved by scientific arguments but to experience. Take the example of Upanishadic Advaitism in which Brahman is the sole reality which is to be meditated upon and realized. It is not an object to itself but pure consciousness. As per evolutionary scheme of things also the supreme reality is a creative current which has given rise to matter, life and self consciousness. Ludwig Wittgenstein known as philosopher of the 20th century said that God is the meaning of the Universe.

The question of religion in a priori also leads to the same conclusion. By that religion is naturally inbuilt in our personality. It means that there is a constant urge in human nature to realize the Supreme Being. Therefore, inner self of man can't find rest till he finds a religion that will give him peace in his own circumstances. The question had been tried to be answered under 'organismic theory of man and his psyche' by Spinoza. The theory developed from the Aristotelian concept of 'horme' means eagerness in organism to be complete. The Qur'an also indicates to that point, '*Allah asked the question to the progeny of Adam in eternity. Am I not your Lord? They said: Of course. We testify lest you might say on the Day of Resurrection: this we were unaware*' (7:172). It seems the reason The Qur'an appeals the

consciousness of men to come to basics and lead a life in coherence with nature. But among religions in general conflict appear in their rituals called Samsk ras which have been developed as per socio-historical backgrounds. There psychological make up also built around their ideal deity or ideal man in which they try to find out their ideal self. Therefore, Y. Meshih said that metaphysics is more of an intellectual construction and religious theologies are practical guides towards making men 'fit for heaven'.

The discipline of Comparative Religion discovers the layers of human history and their religions. The historical encounter of faiths gave birth to another form of faith. Such as encounter of Vedic tradition with ancient traditions of Indus Valley civilization in India changed it in new form. Likewise, encounter of Jainism and Buddhism in 6th BC with Brahmanism leads to the rise of Shankeracharia and Upanishadic Advaitism. Similarly encounter of Judaism with Zoroastrianism had influenced the Jew concept of the tribal God with its monotheistic one. Its imprint remains apparent on Christianity and Islam. The whole tradition from Judaism to Islam is known as Semitic tradition in academic circles. In difference with Judaism and Christianity Islam accepts the chain of Prophethood from Adam to Muhammad(s). Particularly, when the Qur'an emphasises the concept of Monotheism '*Towheed*' it repeatedly mentions the name of Abraham as a founder of Monotheism '*Deen-e-Hanif*' in the region.

The Scholar of the Comparative Religion feels in trouble to find the relativity in paradoxical entangled philosophical concepts and principals of religions. Similarly to interpret their epistemological terms and analyzing the particular religious languages accepted as revealed in the particular historical context. The acceptance of transcendence reality as immanence also makes it from infinite to finite and mortal, which seems paradoxical. The languages bearing the God message or God-talk as revealed have their own limitations as containers of the messages. As a matter of fact, intelligibility and Justifiability of God-talk depends on the certain kind of language prevail in the certain religious community or genealogical group of its origin. To ascertain that point one could have a look on interpretations and exegesis of concepts and scriptures. The interpretations and exegesis keeps on changing as per demand and challenges of mundane life. The certain image of God is primarily used to moral-booster in certain religious community which in general keeps on changing in interpretations as per development of intellect.

The encounter of faiths gave birth to another currents and counter currents in religious spheres. When Islam entered in Indian sub-continent contradiction and assimilation took place between Semitic and Indian traditions. Development of Bhakti movement and various religious sects in India is out come of that. Later on Sufiized Islam got more acceptances in India and became the major factor of religious and cultural assimilation. To such extent that Brahman-talk of Brahmanism was modified in to monotheistic mysticism of the Sufism.

One of the aims of the study of comparative religion is interfaith as well as interfaith understanding. There are many layers of faiths and sects under the faith of a single religion and religious community. Interfaith or interfaith differences are comparatively more apparent in the religions of Indian origin. Upanishadic Advaitism of Shankara tried to make them reconcile with the idea of the absolute principal of unity in religions. The idea explained, "The gods refer to God, and God, finally leads to that which is 'God beyond God.' It is a stage beyond description and verbalization." At this stage no name, no image, temple ceremonies and theologies are required. It is closely related with the idea of *Nirvana* in Buddhism. The idea gain least appeal in Semitic traditions. In later period Brahmanism came to be known as Hinduism due to Muslim Impact. Now the term is practically used to cover all traditions of the Indian origin Vedic and non-Vedic but strongly refuted by some sections particularly by Sikhs. The term gets currency as a protection cover from the impact of Christianity and

Islam. It becomes politically even more important in Modern India. Therefore, the idea of unity in religions had been traced and elaborated again and again by Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan. The question of the unity in religions or of religions still persists to be addressed. What sort of co-existence and interfaith Understanding can be created is a question to be answered by the scholars of comparative religions.

The purely religious idea of the unity in religions had crept into Indian politics also. King Akbar in Medieval period had tried the idea to create harmony for the shake of Kingdom. In modern democratic India Jawaharlal Nehru again present the idea of unity in diversity for the shake of national integration and advised to keep religion away from politics. The secularism in India was not adopted as it did in the West. Where, secularism means to cultivate a scientific attitude in life. But Indian secularism means to respect all religions. Indian secularism is religious one not a purely political concept. Because of this definition of Indian secularism religions had entered into the political life of the country. Rather, religions had become the tool of mass mobilization to win elections. As a result, fundamentalism, communalism, fanaticism and corruption developed as an infectious disease in Indian society. Now practically religion just remain exists in the form of castism and communalism.

The issue of conversion and proselytization is also out come of the nexus of religion and politics. The social discordance due to conversion and proselytization can be avoided if the followers of concerning religions would be able to develop mutual understanding on spiritual bases. Often, theories and practices seem contradictory. These kinds of studies may be inspiring to the followers of the respective religions and they will be able to come together on common basic points to get focused the faith driven energy to inculcate moral values, to establish peace and to activate society towards comprehensive development.

As religion affects all human activities so the discipline of Comparative Religion is of multidisciplinary nature. It covers in its ambit sociology, psychology, history, anthropology etc. Need less to mention the history of comparative religion, the subject is as old as religion itself but it established as an academic discipline in universities in the nineteenth century. The intellectual foundation and background was prepared for it by the works of William James, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Their famous books 'The varieties of religious experience', 'The protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism' and 'Elementary forms of the religious life' respectively are still pioneering in their respective fields of Psychology, Economics and Sociology. These were early attempts to understand religion by various perspectives. It was also the time when the European scholars start scholarly and historical analysis of the Bible. Later on Hindu and Buddhist text were first being translated into European languages. Friedrich Max Muller in England and Cornelius P. Teile, in the Netherlands were among famous scholars. Now the subject is gaining worldwide popularity. In its early years, it was popular by the name of Comparative Religion or the Science of Religion. In that period a chair by the name of Comparative Religion was established at Oxford University and Max Muller was appointed as the first professor of the Comparative Religion. In USA, particularly in university of Chicago the subject is known as the History of Religion. Mircea Eliade did pioneering works in this direction from the late 1950s to the late 1980s. The subject is known as *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany and *Science dela Religion* in France. The discipline is now grown as an academic subject. but as requirements of human life are always changeable there is always a scope to more growth and further refinement as per the changing situations and circumstances. It all depends on the scholars of the field, if they are innovative, open minded, considerate to communal sensibilities and delicacies of faith and philosophies then discipline defiantly will reach up to its zenith. In that way it will be able to put its stamp in all aspects of human society as a spiritual and divine guidance to enrich human wisdom and too make life on this planet easier and happier.

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