



036-The Scientific Study on Religion in Western Scholarship: A Study on Christianity with the Christian Others

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ABSTRACT

A considerable number of scholars claim that the scientific study of religion did not emerge before the end of the 19th century due to Muller's significance. His approach of studying religion provided the essential basis for the scientific study of religions in the modern period. The emphasis on "objective" and "scientific" methods are dominant in Friedrich Max Muller (1794-1827), which has led modern scholars to apply certain characteristics of interpreting religion. Paden (1992) also agrees that Christian relations with other religions have significantly influenced religious study in the West, especially its affiliation with Asian religions. Scholars have thoroughly discussed the experience of Christianity with non-Christians, which leads to different views on the meaning of religion and religious experience, especially of those outside Christianity. The method used in this article is a descriptive and analytical study. The article will examine some groups of scholars who sought to liberate theology from traditional Christianity, which later prompted the advancement of religious pluralism. Therefore, in doing so, the article will examine the development of scientific study on religion by Western scholars. It will also consult Muslim's arguments to on how Western study of religion has become a subject of transition and change in the modern understanding of religious diversity.

Keywords: Western Scientific Study of Religion, Christianity, the Christian Others, Religious Pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

The term religious pluralism is related to at least three important components: religion, pluralism, and plurality. It is worth exploring the very meaning of 'religion' and its historical underpinnings that have triggered the recent scholarly debate on religious pluralism. Academic treatises paved the way for various interpretations of the term 'religion' and profoundly influenced the way religion is studied today. We also examine in this article how the study of



religion in the West has become a subject of transition and change pertaining to the modern understanding of religious diversity. This aspect is important as it has shaped the development of religious pluralism in the West. Although this chapter focuses on the discourse of religious pluralism in the West, the narrative also includes the evaluation of religious pluralism in the West from the viewpoint of Muslim scholars.

WESTERN UNDERSTANDING ON RELIGION

“Modern academic study of religion began with the European’s separation of the scientific study of religion from Christian theology” (Imtiyaz Yusof. 2014. pp.99-100). The introduction of *Religionswissenschaft*, or the scientific study of religion, by the German-British philologist Friedrich Max Muller (1794-1827), marked the beginning of a new era in the West. It formulates the European Enlightenment’s separation of Christian theology. Religion, in particular Christianity and the Church were once challenged by the secular and modern outlook. There were attempts made by scholars to eliminate religion from every day’s life of humans and that it has less importance than the worldly matters. Scholars demonstrate religion “as reminiscent of primitive life and beliefs” and must be liberated from the domination of religious texts and traditions. It can be observed in William Smith’s definition of religion that the term ‘religion’ has to be abolished permanently from the writings of Western scholarship. This pertains mainly to the tendency influenced by positivist scientism who renders traditional religious belief as “primitive and superstitious” (Adnan Aslan, 1998, p.31). Religious supremacy and revelation can never be part of the modern rationalistic approach, be it in positivism, materialism, or Darwinian evolutionism. Religious doctrines, metaphysical attachment and religious traditions are to be alienated in the focal study of religion which prompted John Hick (1989) to describe religion as mere “human interpretations and responses to the Real.” Thus, Adnan Aslan (1998) examines the underpinning of religion in the West and asserts that “religion has left a legacy of speculation which has imposed its secular content on generations to come” (p.31).

There outcome of this outlook is of two importance pertaining to the study of religion in the modern academia. One is forwarded by social sciences established by Social Darwinist reductionist and functionalist approach who view religion as a mere cultural product. The second one is established by the phenomenology and history of religion which offers interdisciplinary approach to the study of religion (Imtiyaz Yusuf 2014).

Adnan Aslan (1998) is concerned with a number of important scholars who paved the way for the study of the origin of religion in history and proves that there was a tremendous shift of interest among scholars in the West on the study of religion in the third quarter of 19th century. Therefore, their contributions to the study of the origin of religion such as those of Charles Darwin, Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud were not left out. Yet, the ‘secular’ understanding of religion has failed to acknowledge the existence of a supernatural order and the significance of religious traditions in providing a basis for moral standards and the meaning of life (Adnan Aslan 1998; Yousif 2000).



The contributions made by Muller in the modern study of religion are huge. A considerable number of scholars claim that the scientific study of religion did not emerge before the end of the 19th century due to Muller's significance. His approach of studying religion provided the essential basis for the scientific study of religions in the modern period. The emphasis on "objective" and "scientific" methods are dominant in Muller's approach, which has led modern scholars to apply certain characteristics of interpreting religion. This is true especially when viewed from the naturalistic interpretations of religion which resulted in the development of other disciplinary branches such as anthropology, history, phenomenology, psychology, and sociology. Besides, it is evident from the emergence of the 'science of religion' and later recognized as 'comparative religion' where scholars recognized that "religion is a worldwide form of culture that needs to be understood before it is explained. To understand religion is to know its cross-cultural patterns and varieties in balanced perspective (Paden, 1992). Therefore, Muller's famous saying reads that "he who knows one, knows none" (Muller, 1872).

Even so, the setback of this particular approach is limited to the study of religion from the Ancient Greeks and Romans to the Western Europeans. This is because a great part of Muslim scholarship on religion remained excluded from this field of study as it was deemed as "unscientific" (Anis Malik Thoha, 2009; Imtiyaz Yusuf, 2014). According to Cain (1987), the study is based exclusively on the Western traditions and their modern approaches including historical, phenomenological, anthropological, sociological, and other studies. The contributions in the form of classical works produced in the Christian and Islamic era were judged as immaterial which leading scholars such as Cain rejected as 'unscientific' and thus omitted them from their research (Cain 1987; Waardenburg 1979).

It is not surprising that a scholar like Hick is very keen to interpret religion, even a century after Max Muller's interpretation of religion. The meaning of religion has surpassed radical modifications throughout the centuries. The impact of secularization, which is one of the impacts of modernization has led certain scholars to abandon religion and the religious doctrines of Christianity. It is evident from the Nietzschean philosophical dictum 'God is dead', which led some Protestant scholars to accept the fate that Christianity is dead.

... and – particularly the Protestants, who seem to accept the fate of traditional Christianity as such, and are more readily inclined toward changing with the times – have even started to initiate preparations for the laying out of a new theological ground above the wreckage in which lay the dissolute body of traditional Christianity, out of which a new secularized Christianity might be resurrected. (Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, 2014. P.3).

CHRISTIANITY AND THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Clarke and Byrne (1993) is of the opinion that the understanding of the term 'religion' in the West is not only determined by the modern theories on religion, but also the transformation the religion of Christianity "that is Western in origin". The scope of religious study in modern times was considerably widened to accept other's system of beliefs, rituals or religious



practices that are similar to the West, to the extent that it has marginalized and reduced its applicability to “non-Western institutions.”

The religious experience of Christianity in relation to religious diversity can be also seen in its affiliation with Asian religions. Paden (1992) demonstrates that non-Christians have been an essential part of the religious studies of the Christian experience. In fact, in modern Christian scholarship, it is paradoxically unique to see how Christianity applied its superiority and dominance over other religions particularly of those established in Asia. The relationship of Christianity with non-Christians has subsequently prompted some scholars to develop different understandings of religions and religious experience, particularly of those outside of Christianity as to maintain a meaningful co-existence with them (Paden 1992; Knitter 1988). A considerable number of these movements sought to liberate theology from traditional Christianity which later allowed the advancement of the philosophy of religious pluralism.

The rise of comparative religion in Western Scholarship has also enunciated a new paradigm because it provides a space for a non-Western’s understanding of religion. It somehow challenged the traditional outlook of Western thought that failed to recognize the very aspect of religion other than Christianity. Paden (1992) wrote on the impact of this new approach that:

The rise of comparative religion therefore coincided with the deprovincializing of Western Thought, for most of what had gone under the name of “the philosophy of religion” had equated religion with Western religion. The presence of non-Western spiritual universe and the genres of religion different than the Biblical types, and the scholars’ attitudes of respect for them, put a whole new light on the question of the nature of religion and challenged traditional Western stereotype about it (p.68).

Prior to this, religions were studied according to the four accepted classifications by grouping all religions into Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Paganism (the rest) meaning all other religions which were perceived to fall outside the framework of Judeo-Christian tradition. The presence of non-Western religions other than the Biblical types which was confronted with the ideal of scholarly objectivity and respect to all religions seriously challenged the century-old traditional Western stereotypes (Paden 1992).

This contemporary outlook of the study of religion has been promulgated by many scholars including Ernst Troeltsch, William E. Hocking, Arnold Toynbee, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and John Hick. Troeltsch (1980). Troeltsch (1980) affirm the claim that the absolute Truth is not in the possession of Christianity or any religion. All religions share the element of truth. In fact, the concept of God, according to him, is many and not singular. He summarized his idea of religious pluralism in his last lecture at Oxford before his death in 1923. Similarly, Hocking has followed the steps of Troeltsch and forwarded the idea of universal religion that suited the idea of global government in his *Rethinking Mission* (1932) and *Living Religion and A World Faith* (1940). Toynbee’s prominent work closest to the thought of Troeltsch and Hocking is his *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* (1956) and *Christianity and World Religion* in the following year.



Meanwhile, Wilfred Cantwell Smith came up with the idea of a universal or global theology that provided a common ground for all religions to co-exist peacefully in such a society that was imbued with many traditions and belief systems. John Hick propounded this idea in his writings including *God Has Many Names* (1980), *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985), *Trinity, Incarnation and Religious Pluralism* (1989). John Hick (1989) in his *An Interpretation of Religion* defines religion “as an awareness of and response to a reality that transcends ourselves and our world, whether the direction of transcendence be beyond or within or both” (p.3). By this definition, Hick attempts to include as many as traditions and world religions in his spectrum of interpretation as possible, together with their experience with the Real (God). Hick is trying to “value each tradition according to its fruits in human life” (Adnan Aslan. 1998. p.31). Due to Hick’s inclination towards enlightened rationality, his interpretation of religion was a such, however, nevertheless, utterly secular.

Many contemporary scholars suppose that the notion and scope of studying religion in the West has shifted from a ‘traditional’ or ‘primitive’ to a more pragmatic approach. Aslan (1998) characterized this development as “a tremendous shift of interest” of looking at religion as primitive to the “recognition of it as the ‘data’ of religious experience” (p.28). The German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto (1966) and later the American Psychologist turned philosopher William James (1961) were among the first to value religious experiences rather than theological doctrines within individuals and society. Aslan (1998) states that:

One can find a clue from where Hick derives his theory of “religious experience” which attributed clearly to William James. James attempt to divide religion into institutional and personal, and that the focus of religious thought from theology and the relevance of religion to human life can be obtained. James was in an attempt to value religious experiences rather than theological doctrines (pp.5-6).

This sort of outlook which was touted by James as ‘realistic’ became the main concern of other scholars particularly during the mid-19th century, for example Joachim Wach (1965), Sydney Hook (1961), Ninian Smart (1969), John Hick (1989) and Wayne Proudfoot (1985). Even though James attempted to give a diverse meaning to the definition of religion, it can be very contradicting. This is because as Marty (1982) asserted in his introduction to James book that James “was not so much interested in ‘true’ or ‘false’ religion or even good or bad experience as in the act of respecting experience itself. James was a self-declared pluralist who perceived that what is called ‘the secret of universe’ was plural, not singular. He did regard the need for religion to be more or less universal as it was already based on universal needs: “We are all potentially ... sick men,” and need saving or rescue” (Marty, 1982, p.xxiv).

James’s approach was to widen the meaning of religious life to all adherents of all religions in the world. In his view, all types of religious experiences, particularly those which were positive and morally transformative, should not be undervalued (James, 1982). His *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1909) has put forth the idea that “direct communion with the divine” was more prominent than to the theology and ecclesiastical organization. Thus, religion according to James (1982) is that:

...the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow (p.31).

Despite the attention not to reveal any controversy in his definition of religion, James perceived it to appear over the word 'divine'. Marty observes James's attempts to relate it with philosophy and to draw the necessary conclusion in what was known as the science of religion (Marty, 1982). Divinity according to James constituted "not a deity *in concreto*, not a superhuman person, but the immanent divinity in things, the essentially spiritual structure of the universe, is the object of the transcendentalist cult" (James, 1982. pp.31-32). In fact, to comprehend religion is to consider one's experience of what he or she believes as 'divine' i.e., "denoting any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not" (James. 1982. p.34). This is in the case of Buddhism, whereby James argues there exist within us systems of thought where they do not assume a God, but still religious in our sense. Consequently, it does not necessarily based on the solid interpretations from revelation and other established sources. This attempt sounds quite promising as to suggest a 'wider' look at the various interpretations and approaches of religion, yet it seems too feeble if one has to include "the godless or quasi-godless creeds" as religion notably in the experiential approach (Anis Malik Thoha, 2010; Yousif. 2000).

Sharpe (1983) observed that "religious studies attempt to study religion not on the basis of one tradition (or a part of a tradition) only but "in the round" - an approach that could be applied to other areas separately. Yet according to Yousif (2013), the underlying principles for this new term 'religious studies seem to contradict the Muslim point of view. From a Muslim point of view, the question was as whether the external aspects of the doctrinal, legal and social manifestations of religion were to be the focus of the study of world religions or the more internal aspects such as individual religious experience. Yousif (2013) posed the question to what extent it was necessary for someone to embark on this so called "objective" study of other religions whereby he or she is left with at least three ambiguities as "we are left with three possibilities that: All religions are equally true; 2. All religions contain bits of truth; and 3. None of the religions contain any truth at all (pp.12-13). This relativistic framework of understanding religion was further elaborated by Byrne (1995) in his *Prolegomena of Religious Pluralism* that shows these three relativistic premises of religious pluralism.

The same goes with Proudfoot's interpretation of religion that the divine being or the metaphysical origin should never be viewed as intervening in human life. Religion had to be set free from this connotation. Proudfoot (1985) stated in his *Religious Experience* that "the turn to religious experience was motivated in large by an interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions and grounding it in human experience" (p.xiii). This, however, demands essentially convincing reasons to defy the significance of such an intervention that has somehow established and defined 'religion', particularly in relation to certain religious doctrines. Al-Faruqi (1965) has been critical in this issue and claims that "religion 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 everything is invested” (p.57). This perspective illustrates how a man could pertain his role to God.

Eliade’s (1963) supposition entails that there is no purely religious phenomenon “because religion is human it must for that reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic...” (pxiii). The concept of religion discussed by the scholars has clearly indicated that religion can never escape that human element and that presupposes a relativistic theory.

Nevertheless, in James’s interpretation of religious experience, some elements could make religion irrelevant in the eyes of its adherents. James has made identical all related items to the divine with inappropriate bases such as myths, superstitions or anything set by religious believers which have nothing to do with the element of truth.

Religious experience, in other words, spontaneously and inevitably engenders myths, superstitions, dogmas, creeds, and metaphysical theologies, and criticisms of one set of these by the adherents of another. Of late, impartial classifications and comparisons have become possible, alongside of the denunciations and anathemas by which the commerce between creeds used exclusively to be carried on. We have the beginnings of a ‘Science of Religions,’ so-called; and if these lectures could ever be accounted a crumb-like contribution to such a science, I should be made very happy (James. 1997. p.321).

Taking creeds and faith-state together, as forming ‘religions’, and treating these as purely subjective phenomena, without regard to the question of their ‘truth’, we are obliged, on account of their extraordinary influence upon action and endurance, to class them amongst the most important biological functions of mankind (James. 1997. p.506).

CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

As far as the religion of Christianity is concerned, religious studies in the West have been challenged by many circumstances. The preference of studying religions in the West explicitly indicates how Christianity prescribes its experience in relation to the anonymous Christians²¹⁷ or the Christian others. This is to say that Christian relations with other religions have impacted the religious study in the West. Hocking (1940) also observes that the notion that all religions are the same has greatly impacted the authorities and the Christian churches along with the theologians.

Understanding the Christians’ others also has become the central focus of Western

²¹⁷A term used by Paul F. Knitter to describe the inclusive approach in the salvific truth.



scholars in dealing with religious studies. Christian theologians and other scholars had to learn to include other religions as part of their salvific journey to recognize the truth system applied by these religions. It has become an essential part of the modern Christian experience, a view that can be obtained only through the lens of its diverse interpretations through history. Early Christian scholars and theologians perceived the others as ‘pagans’ (idol worshippers, heathens) being trapped in their tribal and primitive beliefs while later scholars had learned to ascribe ‘them’ a similar stance with Christianity (Hocking. 1940). Paden, while commenting on this modern Christian approach, foresees the attempts made to “demonstrate the superiority of Christian ideas to those of other religions”, particularly of the non-monotheistic Asian religions. He argues that:

Biblical ideas that creation is “good” are made to look more attractive than oriental ideas that the world is an “illusion;” the idea of incarnate love is made to look more religiously profound by contrasting it with the idea of an “empty nirvana;” the idea that God is known through history and social justice can be made to look more adequate than the idea of “timeless” transcendental truths; and the idea that humans need to overcome their broken relationship to God can be made to look more realistic than the need for “simply realizing your inner potential.” *Such contrasts effectively set up the comparison not in the interests of objective comparative typologies, but in order to establish the supremacy of the interpreter’s own faith by presenting others in terms of a belittling polarity.* (Paden. 1992. P.74)

Christianity has become the *de facto* basis that enables the ideology of religious pluralism to expand. As Glauz-Todrank (1996) espouses in his *Transforming Christianity*, Christianity “is beginning to undergo a metamorphosis from traditional Roman Catholic and Protestant worldviews into something altogether new”. Religious pluralism was initially established to encounter intolerance among religions, particularly directed against the “exclusive truth-claim” of Christian religion. If we glance into the history of this religious phenomenon, the doctrine of *extra Christos nulla salus* (there is no salvation outside of Christ) stands out very clearly in the Protestant faith till the end of the 19th century. The Catholic Church also affirms the same approach towards salvation in its doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* which means “no salvation outside the Church”. Both maintained the same claim that the salvation could only be obtained through Christianity based on the Gospel of John, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Gospel of John, 14:6).

The way of understanding religion and perceiving others has caused a tremendous shift in modern Christian thought. This is true since the early inception of this idea into Western culture and life, the religion of Christianity with its different sects and denominations has reacted multifariously and, in fact, contradictory. Christianity could no longer claim sole supremacy in terms of salvation. Such a change in direction contradicted the exclusive Catholic claim and dogma *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*. It also challenged the evangelical Protestant mission that one had to believe in Christ to attain salvation. The doctrine reads that “all non-Christians (and so all faithful religious people who are not Christians) are damned to eternal separation from God” (Griffiths .2001; Shehu. 2008).



Thus, many initiatives were then set up by the Catholic Church to affirm the importance of the Christian missionaries and the significance of Christ as the universal mediation in Christianity <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20120308_ladaria_en.html (retrieved on January 23rd, 2014) > It has undoubtedly required strenuous years of explanations and theological discussions among Christian scholars and theologians, even after the pronouncement of the constitutions by the Christian authorities. Some scholars have directed the meaning of this declaration into another direction, theorizing religious pluralism as an option vis-à-vis religious diversity, whose motive is deemed ambivalent. In fact, several scholars were then accused to have been influenced by Hick's relativistic view of religions. According to Ratzinger, any theologians who share the same interest in religious pluralism "must take up." Ratzinger affirmed that "the relativist theories all flow into a state of not being obligatory and thus become superfluous, or else they presume to have an absolute standard which is not found in the praxis, by elevating it to an absolutism that has really no place" (Allen. 2000. p.240).

CONCLUSION

This article attempts to evaluate the development of religious studies in the West and its relation to the emergence of religious pluralism. The aim is to identify how scholars perceive religion from this outlook and examine the essential characteristics that shape the understanding of religion from the modern perspective. The article demonstrates methods used by scholars which have emanated from a particular background that has sparked criticism among academics. Besides, the preference for studying religion has also influenced the religion of Christianity. Some scholars made great efforts to harmonize the relationship of religious adherents yet have to sacrifice some of the fundamentals of Christianity. Besides, the article affirms that Christian scholars and theologians made strenuous initiatives to revive the importance of missionaries' duty along with the fundamentals of Christianity.

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