

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM:
RELIGION AS A SUBJECT OF INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT:

The initial enthusiasm for the scientific study of religion and other religions (also known as comparative religion) during the 19th century almost evaporated during the 20th century for two reasons. Firstly, it became clear that scholars of comparative religion had allowed presuppositions and assumptions to influence their research. Secondly, the horrors of the world wars disproved the scientific theory regarding the gradual evolution of religions. Eventually, two groups of scholars of comparative religion emerged. One group wanted to continue their research using the scientific method. The other group felt that comparative religion should make a more significant contribution to society. This article concludes that, firstly, scholars of religion must remain wary of the presuppositions and subjective bias they bring to the study of religion. Secondly, scholars of religion could abandon the exclusivist approach to the truth of other religions so as to foster a deeper engagement among religions in the modern world.

ENTHUSIASM FOR THE METHOD OF SCIENCE

In the 19th century, many scholars were quite confident that comparative religion would flourish by adopting the scientific method. For example, in 1873, Max Muller, whom many consider to be the father of the modern discipline called comparative religion, had this to say: "A Science of Religion, based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important, religions of mankind, is now only a question of time."¹

The scientific approach to comparative religion became popular during the closing years of the 19th century. The general feeling (at least in America)

¹. Max Muller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, quoted in Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion A History*, London: Duckworth, 1975, Preface, p. xi.

was that history was the key to the scientific study of other religions and that science was neutral in any conflict between the religions.²

However, Sharpe (writing in 1970) held that scholars since the 19th century have abandoned the scientific approach to the study of religion and “no new method accepted by all has arisen to take its place.”³ At the end of his one hundred year survey (1870 to 1970) of the method of comparative religion, Sharpe concludes that methodology had become the key issue for comparative religion.

For many years now the question of method has been wide open, and despite the high seriousness which has always been found in the study of religion, the scholarly community has not always been able to agree on the terms or conditions on which that study ought to be pursued.⁴ Serious questions about the suitability of the scientific method to study religion began to surface during the 20th century and resulted in a loss of confidence in the approach of comparative religion. Philosophers, theologians and social scientists who formerly were fascinated by the comparative approach to the study of world religions have begun to question the validity of such an approach.⁵ Some of these scholars even began to doubt that comparative religion was an academic discipline at all.

Eventually, four main views about the aim and method of comparative religion emerged. First, one group of scholars were of the view that the scientific study of religion should search for the objective truth underlying all the religions (the so-called ‘commonalities’) so as to discover the essence of religion or the absolute truth transcending all the religions. According to the second group of scholars, comparative religion should dispense with all presuppositions and value judgments and study the religions based on information provided by other academic disciplines. A third group of scholars were of the view that comparative religion should allow the

². Mircea Eliade and J.M. Kitagawa (ed.), *The History of Religions; Essays in Methodology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, p. 5

³. *ibid*, p. xii

⁴. *ibid*, p. 268

⁵. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 5

followers of the different religions to speak for themselves about their own religious experience. A fourth group of scholars claimed that comparative religion should be studied from the perspective of one's own religion and that theology should clarify the topics chosen for study.⁶ This last group of scholars implied that the study of other religions 'from within' would follow certain methods of theological reflection.

The differences among scholars about the correct method for the scientific study of religion is reflected in the diversity of names by which this discipline has come to be known, namely, general science of religions (German: *Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*), comparative religion, history of religions, phenomenology of religion, religious studies etc.⁷

This paper will discuss various scholarly approaches to the study of religion and conclude that today the subject of comparative religion has become like an elephant in the room. The reason is that the scientific approach to comparative religion has not been able to dismiss the impression of subjectivity and prejudice in the study of religion and the religions. In fact, the Enlightenment use of reason has led to more confusion than clarity about a rational and objective approach to the study of religion.

THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION

Ever since the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment (17th to 18th centuries), comparative religion has placed the religions side by side in order to study them in a systematic way. According to Mircea Eliade (1907-86), "The thinkers of the Enlightenment attempted to find the meaning of religion in terms of 'reason,' rather than depending solely on revelation."⁸ Their aim was to find the essence of religion by discovering the existence of patterns among the religions of the world. Some scholars of comparative religion

6. cf. *ibid*, pp. 6-7

7. Max Muller first used the term *Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft* in 1867. "In the English-speaking world, the imposing title of 'general science of religions' has not been used widely, partly because it is too long and awkward, and partly because the English word 'science' tends to be misleading." *Ibid*, p. 15

8. *ibid*, p. 17

chose to study the history of religion and others focused on the signs and symbols of the religions. Some scholars were more interested in the rituals or the teachings of the religions while others focused on religious beliefs and practices. The general assumption was that scholars were able to classify each of these subjects according to a definite order and arrangement, thereby articulating the similarities and the differences that existed between the religions.

The subject and the focus for research were determined by the subjective judgment of scholars. Their goal was to identify features that many or all of the religions had in common. The assumption that all religions contained a common essence and followed a similar pattern or system enabled comparative scholars to identify the commonalities among them. However, by trying to fit the rituals, doctrines, beliefs and practices of all religions into a generally acceptable philosophical framework, scholars of comparative religion were accused of reductionism.

At first, comparative religion seemed to be a scientific study of religion because scholars were drawing their conclusions from empirical data and objective analysis. In the course of time, however, it became clear that the method of comparative religion was subject to the assumptions, presuppositions and bias of the researchers. For example, many of the pioneers in the field of comparative religion had definite ideas about the so-called essence of each religion, such as its concepts of deity, of the nature and destiny of man and of the world, which have been handed down to us through manuals and handbooks that are abundant in the European tradition of *Religionswissenschaft*.⁹

Another cause for concern was the precise limits of the field that could be investigated by comparative religion. Many scholars developed the view that comparative religion should refrain from evaluating the truth-value of other religions because the assessment of religious beliefs and doctrines should be done within the religious traditions to which they belonged.

⁹. *ibid*, p. 26

Moreover, whenever comparative religion became involved in a discussion of the truth-value of beliefs and doctrines, it entered the field reserved for theology. But the boundaries between comparative religion and theology were not clearly defined. For instance, some scholars of comparative religion had no hesitation in dividing the religions into two categories: those religions that were revealed and those that were not revealed. However, such a division is based on preconceptions about the nature of revelation and exposes an implicit theological judgment.

In short, the scientific study of religion that developed in the West was inspired by the rationality of Enlightenment thinkers, who urged scholars of comparative religion to discover the essence of religion. Moreover, Enlightenment sciences provided scholars of comparative religion with useful material, such as the findings history, archaeology, philology, anthropology, psychology, sociology and so on. Scholars of religion from the East, however, were not so ready to reduce religious experience to rational concepts. Many scholars of comparative religion today have become aware of the need to look beyond the rationalism of the positive sciences and to search for new perspectives for the study of the religions.

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW METHOD

The publication of Charles Darwin's book, *The Origin of Species* in 1869 caused confusion among religious people because Darwin adopted the scientific method to explain the origin of different species of life on earth. He developed a theory of evolution based on what he considered to be scientific evidence. Sharpe explains that this evidence was based on a method that was truly scientific because of its inductive pattern and its belief in universal laws of cause and effect, and because of its distrust of obvious a priori arguments; critical because of its fundamental attitude to evidence; historical because of the new sense of continuity between the past and the present to which it gave rise; comparative because it claimed comparison to be the basis of all knowledge.¹⁰

¹⁰. Sharpe, op. cit., p. 31

After Darwin had demonstrated that the scientific method could be used to discuss realities that previously had belonged exclusively to the domain of religion such as the origin of humanity, the discipline of comparative religion began to adopt an evolutionary approach to the study of religions by classifying the beliefs and practices of the religions according to the pattern of evolution. This new approach to comparative religion led scholars to search for convincing evidence for their assumption that primitive religions had developed from very simple forms of religious expression to increasingly complex patterns and structures.

After the trauma of the war years, however, theories about the unilinear evolution of religion began to lose favour because the horror of the wars had shown that human society was not developing according to linear evolutionary patterns. Scholars began to realize that the findings of comparative religion that had been taken as evidence for the theory of evolutionary development of the religions of humanity had arisen out of a value judgment about which religious expression was considered to be higher or more developed than another. Eventually, the practice of comparing primitive religions with more advanced forms of religion was rejected as baseless.

Furthermore, after the war years, scholars of comparative religion became aware that they had been reducing the study of religion to abstractions. They discovered that their discussions of abstract concepts were separating the scholar of religion from those who actually practiced these religions (*homo religiosus*). So they began to search for an approach that would be more sensitive to the religious experience of the human person. As Sharpe observes:

“When the attempt is made to study religion solely on the basis of logical and social categories, the whole enterprise so often moves in the sphere of abstractions, revealing nothing of the mind of *homo religiosus*, and failing at

any point seriously to make contact with the personality of the researcher.”¹¹

Scholars of comparative religion became aware that religions were always based on experience rather than on rational concepts and they began to wonder whether it was possible to understand another religion totally and adequately. As a result, the focus of comparative religion began to shift away from an interest in rational accounts of rites and doctrines and to focus more on accurate descriptions of religious experience. For instance, Mircea Eliade draws the following conclusion from his research into women’s initiation: “It is easy to discern a common element: the foundation for all these rites and mysteries is always a deep religious experience . . . The mystery of childbearing, that is, woman’s discovery that she is a creator on the plane of life, constitutes a religious experience that cannot be translated into masculine terms.”¹²

Scholars of comparative religion became convinced that religions have no existence apart from their existential existence within human societies, and they began to take the religious experience of human beings more seriously. As Eliade writes “A purely rational man is an abstraction; he is never found in real life. Every human being is made up at once of his conscious activity and his irrational experiences.”¹³

Instead of trying to develop theories and conclusions from written texts, scholars of comparative religion started living among the people so they could participate in the religious experience of the people. Bennett notes that the emphasis on experience caused another shift in the development of comparative religion.

“Thus, there are Muslims, Buddhists and Christians rather than Islam, Buddhism and Christianity and . . . The study of religions becomes the study of religious persons, acts and behavior . . . Again, this suggests new

¹¹. *ibid*, p. 235

¹². Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane, the Nature of Religion*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961, p. 193-94

¹³. *ibid*, p. 209

subject matter for the student of religions. Old interest in doctrines and in scriptures begins to give way to a new interest in worship, ritual, liturgy, religious art and symbolism as well as in how faith is 'acted out' (as verb) in society."¹⁴

In a similar vein, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000), who taught for eight years at Forman Christian College, Lahore, held that the term religion was no longer useful as a subject of study because it had been made to refer to an object, a thing, which is devoid of persons and transcendence. In Smith's view, faith experience should be the focus of inquiry for those interested in comparative religion.

"By faith I mean personal faith . . . an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person; the impingement upon him of the transcendent, putative or real."¹⁵ Smith criticized scholars of religion who did not enter into the religious experience of others but were content to observe them from the outside. Such scholars were like "flies crawling on the surface of a goldfish bowl, making accurate and complete observations on the fish inside . . . and indeed contributing much to our knowledge of the subject; but never asking themselves, and never finding out, how it feels to be a goldfish."

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

In the first half of the 20th century, Van der Leeuw ((1890-1950) developed a method, which became known as the phenomenology of religion. This method drew inspiration from the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who wanted to get back to 'things' as they appeared in reality, that is, the phenomena, 'in themselves'. Husserl thought that it was necessary to become free of the preconceived theories and interpretive frameworks into which scholars had tried to fit the data of their research.

¹⁴. Clinton Bennett, *In Search of the Sacred: Anthropology and the Study of Religions*, London: Cassell, 1996, p. 107

¹⁵. Smith W.C., *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: New American Library, 1964, p. 141

In his view, scholars should suspend their judgment and their involvement in the experience of research by a process he called *epoche*, the 'bracketing out' of their own emotions, theories, ideas, assumptions, values and presuppositions so as to allow the phenomena to appear as they are. He wrote: "Through reflection, instead of grasping simply the matter straight-out – the values, goals, and instrumentalities – we grasp the corresponding subjective experiences in which we become 'conscious' of them, in which (in the broadest sense) they 'appear.' For this reason, they are called 'phenomena,' and their most general essential character is to exist as the 'consciousness-of' or 'appearance-of' the specific things, thoughts (judged states of affairs, grounds, conclusions), plans, decisions, hopes, and so forth."¹⁶

Van der Leeuw applied this method to comparative religion. In his view, comparative religion does not need to analyze various 'things' or 'concepts' about religion in an abstract way but simply to study the 'phenomena' that appear in the consciousness of the observer. Phenomenology is neither metaphysics nor the effort to comprehend empirical reality. Phenomenologists of religion, therefore, do not enter into a discussion of truth claims, nor are they concerned with the origin and development of religion but they simply observe the phenomena as these appear in their consciousness.

Eliade was a phenomenologist of religion who became interested in studying other religions not from the "outside" but from the "inside." He wrote: "To come to know the mental universe of *homo religiosus*, we must above all take into account the men of these primitive societies. Now, to us in this day their culture seems eccentric if not positively aberrant; in any case it is difficult to grasp. But there is no other way of understanding a

¹⁶. Quoted in Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics, Development and Significance*, London, SCM Press, 2002, p. 58

foreign mental universe than to place oneself inside it, at its every center, in order to progress from there to all the values that it possesses.”¹⁷

The phenomenology of religion approximates the scientific method in that it urges researchers to dispense with their own values and judgments regarding the data of religion. Further, the phenomenological approach claims to be scientific by making a distinction between describing another religion and interpreting its meaning.

“The phenomenologists of religion also distinguish the collection and description of religious data, which is objective and scientific, from the interpretation of meaning, which is at least partially subjective and normative.”¹⁸

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) adopted the phenomenological approach in his study of the numinous quality of religious experience as a unique a priori category of meaning and value, which should not be reduced to its moral or rational or conceptual aspects. A religious experience of “the holy” cannot be defined or conceptualized. The experience of the “wholly other” is qualitatively unique and transcendent. The student of comparative religion must not reduce religious experience into a rationalistic discourse in the attempt to interpret or to understand it according to the concepts of history, sociology, psychology etc. Phenomenologists of religion have generally accepted this emphasis on the autonomy of religion and have simply observed and investigated the unique manifestations or phenomena of religion. According to Wayne Proudfoot (b. 1939), an American scholar of religion: “No topic is better suited for an examination of current issues in religious thought and the study of religion than religious experience. If we can understand how that experience has been variously described, and

¹⁷. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion*, New York: Harper Torchbook edition, 1961, p. 165

¹⁸. Douglas Allen, “Phenomenology of Religion” in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, vol. 3, p. 281

begin to distinguish between descriptive, analytical, explanatory, and evocative elements in the accounts of religious experience which have been most influential, we will be in a better position to assess the current state of the field.”¹⁹

Another scholar of religion who demonstrated the use of the phenomenological approach was Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), who maintained that religions “manifest themselves in signs and symbols which, as far as believers are concerned, express the way the world actually is.”²⁰ Signs and symbols are to be understood, not merely as expressions of social identity but as meaningful in and of themselves. Signs and symbols are the visible manifestations of religion in the world. They can be studied within their own social and religious context, free of the presuppositions of the scholar of religion.

Both Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) were sociologists who wrote about the structures and patterns underpinning all religions. Similarly, for Mircea Eliade, the author of *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, the purpose of comparative religion was to identify the patterns in the hierophanies (structures which manifest the sacred), symbols and archetypes of human societies. However, Bennett explains that phenomenology should discourage comparison, “since to talk about different phenomena as if they were the same phenomena may do an injustice to the actuality, or essence of each different phenomena.”²¹ For instance, it is misleading to compare the Qur’an and the Bible because Muslims and Christians regard these scriptures differently. Since each religion is unique, the religions cannot be reduced to a theory or essence that they share in common. This means that there is no such thing as a typology or structure that would apply to all the religions.

¹⁹. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, Introduction, xv

²⁰. Bennett, op. cit., p. 103

²¹. Bennett, op. cit., p. 104

In short, phenomenologists of religion regarded religious traditions as autonomous and independent entities and did not feel the need to draw general conclusions or to develop explanatory theories or frameworks that would include all of these traditions. Phenomenology was the method they adopted to avoid imposing alien concepts and words on the phenomena, the signs and symbols of religion.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

One of the issues raised by the critics of phenomenology was that the phenomenological approach discussed religious phenomena as if they could be separated from their historical context. For instance, scholars criticized Eliade for taking myths and symbols out of their historical context.

“Eliade’s main ‘historical documents’ are non-written religious expressions such as myths and symbols, which stretch back in appearance far beyond the time when they are first discovered or documented; his concern is with typologies rather than historical contexts and narratives; his interest is in the structure of hierophanies and archetypal symbols rather than in the way individuals or groups interpret them.”²²

Eliade’s conclusions were also found wanting because they were based on his presuppositions and his research was carried out in order to find answers to specific questions. For example, Eliade’s research was limited by his focus to renew the desacralized West by enabling it to encounter primal and Eastern religious worldviews, his stress upon primal man as the model of religious man, his emphasis upon the ‘sacred’ and the hierophanies, symbols, myths, and rituals whereby it is manifested and apprehended, his penchant for structuring data into phenomenological typologies, his notion of an archaic ontology that lies behind all religions, his assumption that

²² Frank Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion; Volume 1: The Humanities*, Berlin: Mouton, 1984, p. 219

religious phenomena have a sui generis character and that they strike a chord in the 'trans-consciousness' of man.²³

Other scholars were also opposed to the practice of making general comparisons among religions. For example, the Islamic scholar, Hamilton Gibb (1895-1971) was of the view that every religion was "an autonomous expression of religious thought and experience, which must be viewed in and through itself and its own principles and standards."²⁴ Similarly, Hendrik Kraemer (1888-1965) wrote that comparative religion means "contrasting and elaborating the particular character and structure of different religions."²⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith also stressed the individual character of every religion and was "reluctant to assume parallels and similarities, lest 'differences' be overlooked."²⁶

Just as the earlier methodologies adopted by comparative religion were based on subjective judgment, the approach of the phenomenology of religion did not make it possible for researchers to abandon their preferences and perceptions and could not provide an objective method for the collection and description of religious data. Phenomenology of religion failed to provide a way to verify interpretations or to choose between alternative accounts of the data. These limitations rendered the phenomenology of religion inadequate as a reliable method for comparative religion. Douglas Allen concludes by asking: "Does this leave the phenomenology of religion with a large number of very personal, extremely subjective, hopelessly fragmented interpretations of universal structures and meanings, each relativistic interpretation determined by the particular situation and orientation of the individual phenomenologist?"²⁷

²³. Whaling, op. cit., p. 217

²⁴. Hamilton A.R. Gibb, *Muhammedanism ,An Historical Survey*, 3rd edition, Oxford: OUP. 1978, preface, p. vi

²⁵. Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, London: Lutterworth, 1956, p. 76

²⁶. Bennett, op. cit., p. 105

²⁷. Douglas Allen, "Phenomenology of Religion," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, op. cit., p. 284

Joachim Wach (1898-1955) criticized the phenomenological method precisely because of its insistence that one should bracket out one's values and beliefs. On the contrary, in Wach's view, the scholar should not reject the possibility that comparative religion could contribute certain values and useful attitudes to society. Wach invited his students "to abandon certain less defensible positions, notably the position of the dweller in an ivory tower totally isolated from value-judgments and presuppositions."²⁸

THE SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

At the end of his one hundred year survey of comparative religion (1870 to 1970), Sharpe concludes that scholars of comparative religion could be separated into two main groups. The first group of scholars was primarily concerned with the objective or academic study of religion. The second group was searching for ways in which comparative religion would create greater understanding and harmony among the religions of the world. Kitagawa identifies a similar division among the scholars of comparative religion just after the first World Parliament of Religions (1893) and describes the type of scholar of comparative religion who had become dissatisfied with the dispassionate approach of science. He wrote that "What interested many ardent supporters of the parliament was the religious and philosophical inquiry into the possibility of the unity of all religions, and not the scholarly, religio-scientific study of the religions."²⁹

Kitagawa goes on to say that, during these years, "many liberals were naively optimistic about social progress as well as the 'stuff of human brotherhood' crossing religious lines."³⁰ In short, a division was forming between scholars for whom comparative religion should remain a scientific, objective method and other scholars for whom comparative religion should make a contribution to society at the global level. According to the latter group of scholars, comparative religion could no longer remain detached from the struggles of humanity. As Sharpe observes, "The historian of

²⁸. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 275

²⁹. Mircea Eliade and J.M. Kitagawa (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 4

³⁰. *ibid.*, p. 5

religion might find himself playing an active role in the world's cultural dialogue, rather than merely sitting on the sidelines as a disinterested observer."³¹

We noted above that Wach belonged to the group of scholars who thought that comparative religion should make a contribution to society. In his view, comparative religion should provide not only 'a clear vision of what religious experience can mean' and 'what forms its expression may take', but also, and more importantly, 'what it might do for man'.³² Some scholars were suggesting that comparative religion was becoming more akin to art or literary criticism than to natural or even social science.³³

A NEW APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

As we saw at the beginning of this survey, some scholars of comparative religion had asserted in the 19th century that it was only a matter of time before science would explain the meaning and functions of religion. In this paper, I have traced the history of the relationship between science and the study of religion. It has become clear that scholars of comparative religion were trying to explain religion using the rational categories of the Enlightenment. Eventually, this approach was considered unsatisfactory because it reified the religions by viewing them as "things" or objects that could be classified according to abstract categories. Scholars of religion began to realize that positive science could not discover the underlying essence of religion because abstract rationalism could not explain the unique quality of religious phenomena.³⁴

³¹. Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 280

³². *ibid.*, p. 275

³³. cf. the views of William Oxtoby in Sharpe, *op. cit.*, p. 249

³⁴. In line with this view, Anwar Alam says that one of the factors responsible for the slow recognition of the Gulen Movement in contemporary society is "the modern knowledge system," which cannot understand religious phenomena. Alam explains: "The dominance of instrumental rationality in modernity and its fragmented and utilitarian approach hinders a fuller understanding of religious phenomena." Anwar Alam, *For The Sake of Allah, The Origin, Development, and Discourse of the Gulen Movement*, New Jersey: Blue Dome Press, 2019, p. 2

The method known as the phenomenology of religion tried to circumvent this process of reification by “bracketing out” all presuppositions about the object “out there” and focusing on the consciousness of the subject. According to phenomenology, consciousness and not the rational subject is the foundation of all knowledge. Hence, phenomenology of religion began to examine what actually happened within consciousness as a consequence of the religious response to God or to the divine. But this method was also found wanting because it could not move beyond subjective perceptions and conclusions.

Since the 19th century, scholars have become increasingly aware that there is much more to knowledge than whatever can be discovered through scientific experiment and empirical verification. They also became convinced that there was more to religion than could be explained by the study of history. The methods of positive science were incapable of disclosing the full meaning of religious experience. For these reasons, scholars of religion became dissatisfied with the Enlightenment paradigm of history as a tool to understand the complex reality of religious traditions.³⁵ In short, ‘science,’ ‘history,’ and even ‘religion’ itself are terms that have emerged out of Enlightenment rationalism and reflect a limited approach to knowledge. It seems that we need a new approach to the study of religion.

A PLURALIST VIEW OF TRUTH

Our survey of the scientific study of religion has exposed the limitations of the scientific method for the study of religion. It follows that scholars of religion can no longer claim scientific neutrality and objectivity. In the light of these epistemological issues, one wonders what prospects remain for the study of religion and for interreligious understanding. Can the study of

³⁵ According to Moltmann: “In the seventeenth century, the concept of ‘history’ began to develop as an all-embracing paradigm for interpreting human beings and nature, God and the world . . . The paradigm ‘history’ does not take in the whole of reality; it splits up its wholeness. So we must go beyond this modern paradigm and develop a new one which will grasp nature *and* spirit, history *and* nature, as a unity, and will integrate what has been divided.” Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today’s World*, London: SCM Press, 1994, p. 76 & pp. 82-83

religion be in any way objective and constructive? What are the prospects for mutual religious understanding and dialogue?

One response to these questions is to assert that it will always remain essential for scholars of religion to examine their presuppositions and assumptions. This will remain an important task for any further study of religion and other religions. As Catherine Cornille reminds us, all interreligious understanding is always colored by one's own religious framework.³⁶ Hence, scholars of religion will need to remain vigilant with regard to possible presuppositions, assumptions and evaluations that can undermine their research.

Following on from my first observation, I would suggest that future scholars of religion could be more willing to declare their own position with regard to the three traditional attitudes or approaches to the truth of other religions, namely: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.³⁷ Clearly, an exclusivist approach, which does not acknowledge the truth of another religion, will lead to very different conclusions about that religion as compared to a pluralist approach. According to Catherine Cornille, exclusivism is viewed "as the source of anti-semitism, colonialism, racism, and Western imperialism. Awareness of these dynamics may thus lead to reticence about imposing one's own judgment on the teachings of other religions. Pluralism here thus represents an attempt to compensate for the distortions in understanding and judgment that have colored the history of interreligious engagement."³⁸

One important characteristic of the postmodern study of religion could be that scholars of religion will show more readiness to acknowledge their own theological disposition regarding the truth of other religions by rejecting the exclusivist orientation, which has led to declarations of

³⁶. Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, West Sussex, Wiley Blackwell, 2020, p. 50

³⁷. Cornille provides a helpful analysis of these different approaches in *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, op. cit., chapter 2, pp. 45 - 65

³⁸. Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, op. cit., p. 61

superiority by one religion over another hereby causing much suspicion and animosity.

Hence forward it is to be hoped that scholars of religion will adopt a more inclusive or even a pluralist approach to the truth of other religions. According to Cornille, "In order to avoid the danger of relativism on the one hand, and sectarianism on the other, religions claiming universal truth thus cannot but engage the reality of religious plurality, both in general and in its particular expressions in the teachings and practices of other religions."³⁹

Further research needs to be done regarding the meaning and implications of a pluralist orientation to the truth of other religions.⁴⁰ Recognizing and respecting the truth of other religions is the most objective and most appropriate approach to understanding religion and other religions in the circumstances of today's world.⁴¹ This means that scholars with a pluralist approach to the study of other religions are more likely to engage in a constructive encounter with the religions of the world.

³⁹. Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*, op. cit., p 173

⁴⁰. The articles published in the book by David Ray Griffin (ed.), *Deep Religious Pluralism*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, are expressions of an effort in this direction. Another reflection on the relation of Islam to other religions is *The Other in the Light of the One*, by Reza Shah-Kasemi, Islamic Texts Society, 2010

⁴¹. As Ruzgar explains: "One of the most important reasons why pluralism has been so important, especially during recent times, is the fact that, given the present world situation, we can no longer isolate ourselves from exposure to other religious, cultural, and ethnic diversities. This exposure helps us understand and appreciate the true nature and value of the other." Mustafa Ruzgar, "Islam and Deep Religious Pluralism," in David Ray Griffin (ed.), *Deep Religious Pluralism*, op. cit., p. 165