

# COMMENTARY

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1. It is a pleasure to be associated with Professor Parrinder in this fascinating enterprise, but it will be most fruitful for our endeavors if I stress our differences. His paper does not deal incisively, or indeed mainly, with the similarities and differences between the major religions. Much of it might be characterized as ecumenical apologetics, and in the final sentence we are told outright that the paper is intended to generate "discussion of the contribution of religion to the understanding of life and the welfare of mankind." That is a far cry from our assigned topic. To facilitate discussion of differences and similarities, I shall number my remarks, and I shall not pull my punches.

2. The general title for Group A is: "Are There Values Common to All Religions." I am not sure whether anyone here would claim to know *all* religions. Yet an affirmative answer would require no less. For a negative answer, on the other hand, it might be sufficient to deal with "Great World Religions," which is what Parrinder and I are supposed to do. In any case, we should begin by naming the religions that we shall take into account. Parrinder says rather more about Marxism and Mao than he does about Zoroastrianism or Judaism, without ever making clear whether he considers Marxism or Maoism world religions. I do not, and I suggest that we focus on *nine* religions: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which belong to one historical family; Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, which belong to another; and Confucianism and Taoism, which constitute a third family. Let us call the first family Near Eastern, the second Indian, and the last Chinese.

3. The palpable similarities between the members of each family are due to the fact that the religions belonging to the same family have not developed independently of each other. Zoroastrianism influenced post-

exilic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Judaism also influenced Christianity and Islam; and Islam was further influenced by Christianity. Moreover, there was continued interaction between these religions. Similarly, there has been a great deal of interaction between the three Indian religions and also between the two of China. Beyond that, of course, Zoroastrianism has also had some influence on Mahayana Buddhism; Buddhism may have had some influence on the New Testament; and—what is far more important—all religions that have spread to distant regions (notably, Christianity, Islam, and Mahayana Buddhism) have absorbed a great deal of the indigenous religions. The transformation of Buddhism in China furnishes an obvious example, and Kenneth Ch'en and Arthur F. Wright have dealt with it brilliantly.<sup>1</sup> Any discussion of similarities and differences should take into account this rich history. But the question remains whether there are important features shared by all nine religions.

4. Parrinder quotes—approvingly, it seems—a highly misleading and rather Manichaeic contrast between “The non-believer” and “the believer [who] seeks rather to understand the manner in which a people conceives of a reality and their relations to it.” Logically, of course, being a believer does not entail such an attitude. Historically, moreover, the opposite contrast would be less misleading. Zarathushtra and the Hebrew prophets, Jesus and Muhammad, St. Augustine and St. Thomas, Luther and Calvin were far from seeking any sympathetic understanding of rival religions. Nor did the Buddha aim to show how much wisdom there was to be found in the Vedas or Upanishads; and the *Tao Teh Ching* is also a profoundly polemical work. The major religious figures down to the mid-nineteenth century have always stressed differences and challenged people to make choices. Nor did they reject or ridicule only religions that were palpably opposed to their intentions. Thomas tried to justify the Inquisition by proving that heretics must be burnt, and church councils consigned to hell fellow Christians who differed on abstruse points of dogma. Calvin still burnt Servetus. Christian attitudes toward Islam and persecution of Jews hardly need to be detailed here.<sup>2</sup> Again, we should not ignore the historical record. Until the nineteenth century most believers considered religions—or even denominations—other than their own simply wrong, and they rarely took an interest in similarities.

5. The very concept of “religion” is not a religious but a secular concept. In antiquity, in the middle ages, and even in the early modern period, people did not see their own religion as one religion among others. The enlightenment gave currency to the notion that Christianity was not all

that different from other religions. When religions came under attack, the surviving believers came to feel like people who share a life raft; it was better to forget past differences and to realize that “we are all in the same boat.” It is arguable that Ramakrishna’s insistence in the mid-nineteenth century that different religions are merely different paths to the one God had deep roots in Indian thought; yet this was assuredly not what most Hindus and Muslims in India had felt before he came, nor do most of them feel that way today. The now fashionable tendency to play down the differences between the major religions is itself a historical phenomenon and should be recognized as, in large measure, a defensive maneuver.

6. Parrinder is not content to stress similarities and play down differences; he claims that the major religions agree on many crucial claims. At the end of his first section he affirms that “the major religions, at least, believe in a superhuman spirit, a conscious intelligence, that created and sustains the world but is transcendent to it, and who is revealed through mediatorial figures.” As has often been pointed out—for example, by Frederick Mote<sup>3</sup>—this is false regarding the two indigenous Chinese religions. It is also false regarding the religion of the Upanishads, early Jainism, and early Buddhism. The later changes in these religions will be considered in a moment.

7. In his second section Parrinder claims that “The priceless value of the individual is one of the central themes of religion.” This is surely false. What about the hell of Christianity in which, according to the New Testament and the traditional creeds, the majority of mankind is tormented in all eternity? What about the attitudes of Christianity and Islam toward slavery? What about the burning of Jews and of witches? What about the Law of Manu and the traditional Hindu treatment of women, widows, Shudras, and outcastes? According to Parrinder, “religion is at odds with all forms of dictatorship, of right or left.” What, then, about the attitudes of the churches in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Slovakia toward Hitler? According to Parrinder, religion “always has teachings about life after death.” This might have come as a surprise to Moses and the pre-exilic prophets, if not to most Jews in Old Testament times.

8. It is widely assumed that claims on which many religions agree are therefore probably true. (Hence some people, try to shore up their beliefs by claiming, against the evidence, that these beliefs were shared by the great religious teachers of mankind or are shared by the major religions). Actually, the great figures we find at or near the beginnings of the major religions did

not at all agree with each other on what they themselves considered essential. But Parrinder points out that one scholar "concluded that 'Buddhists differ very little from people in general,' and their beliefs on human nature and the supernatural compare well with those of other religions." It is hard to tell what "compare well" might mean; but in any case one common feature of the major religions might be that they all share a tendency to degenerate. "As religions spread, they often descend lower and lower, like rivers. Born in some lonely place in an exalted state of mind, they become polluted as they enter cities where large numbers of people make use of them for their own ends."<sup>4</sup>

9. No matter how they began, religions have been subject to the same diseases, and those which conquered large parts of the world absorbed manifold superstitions. All of the religions considered here have developed beliefs and rituals that are quite remote from their scriptures or the spirit of their founders. One of the most interesting points of agreement may well be that the clergy of all the major religions has developed ingenious forms of exegesis to read some sanctions for these later accretions into old texts.

10. The current fashion of downplaying differences between the major religions depends on ignoring the existential dimension of religions as well as the historical. There is therefore a sense in which this fashion is deeply irreligious, and irreverent, for it turns a deaf ear to the central challenges of the great religions. When we ask, as we should, what the great scriptures would have us do with our lives, we find how far they are from agreeing. In the Hebrew prophets we find an overriding concern for the oppressed and helpless, for orphan, widow, and stranger, a denunciation of war, and an interest in what is now usually called social justice. The insistence in the Gospels on the terrifying choice between salvation and damnation strikes an altogether different note: "Whoever does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3.36). "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be damned" (end of Mark). This is very different from the ethos of the Book of Jonah. The *Dhammapada* offers a third way; the detachment the Buddha taught is remarkably different from the thrust of the New Testament as well as the Old. The *Tao Teh Ching* presents a fourth alternative. As long as we ignore these differences we shut our eyes to what is most important in religion: the challenge to change our life by making a choice.

11. Most discussions of similarities and differences between the major religions overlook how hazardous it is to make generalizations about any one

of them. Again, we need history to make us aware of the vast differences between Christianity, for example, in contemporary Boston, Christianity in seventeenth century New England, Christianity destroying pre-Columbian cultures in say, Mexico, and Christianity in other parts of the world during various periods, including the Albigensian Crusade, the Eastern churches, and so forth. In the final sentence of his abstract, Parrinder says that religions provide ideals for the establishment of justice and peace. Surely, not all the major religions are pacifist; some of them have often exhorted people to go to war; and they cannot take credit for the fact that today many people are very frightened of nuclear war. The indiscriminate slaughters in India and Pakistan after partition and in Ireland today are inspired in large part by religious differences. As for justice, it should be noted how very different Manu's conception of it was from that of Amos, and how different that of the New Testament with its eternal torments is from many modern notions of justice.

12. In his abstract, Parrinder also says once more that the cornerstone of religion is "individual spiritual experience." Although "cornerstone" is a vague metaphor, this claim, too, is misleading if not false. Many people who are pillars of their churches have never had any spiritual experiences of much significance, while many people who are not religious have. Such experiences do not necessarily make for or support any religion. People who belong to a religion interpret such experiences religiously when they have them.

13. If we really wish to clarify some of the major differences and similarities we should forget about apologetics and homiletics and attend to the historical and existential dimensions of religion. Having just published a book, *Religions in Four Dimensions*,<sup>5</sup> I am doubly aware of the inadequacy of these brief comments which unfortunately did not only have to be highly selective but also polemical. I hope nevertheless that they may help to focus our discussion on the topic that we have come here to consider: "Similarities and Differences between Great World Religions."

## NOTES

1. Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1964, and *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*, *ibid*, 1973. Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1959.
2. See, e.g., Malcolm Hay, *The Foot of Pride: The Pressure of Christendom on the People of Israel for 1900 Years*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1950.
3. Frederick Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.
4. Walter Kaufmann, *Religions in Four Dimensions: Existential and Aesthetic, Historical and Comparative*. New York, Reader's Digest Press, 1976.
5. See note 4.