
WHY COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS IS IMPORTANT?

Dr. Tahira Basharat *

In this global age work in the field of comparative religions has become the most urgent. As religion is the ground from which the identity of persons, cultures and civilizations emerges, it is impossible to relate across peoples and civilizations unless the religious grounds upon which others build their lives is deeply and positively appreciated. . Because of the role of the religion in human culture, the study of religion can become the study of humanity itself. The study of comparative religion helps you to learn how to think critically, listen empathetically, speak thoughtfully, and write clearly—all skills that will be of great use no matter what you do. This paper highlights the significance of study comparative religion and its necessity in contemporary world. The current world and especially our country is in dire need of understanding the differences in people belonging to other sects and religion and creating a tolerant attitude and find a commonality to enhance the relationships and outlook towards life.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a powerful and dynamic force in shaping cultures and complex civilization. Religion can be defined as the human notions regarding the sacred, numinous, spiritual and divine. It is said to be a phenomenon essentially related to providing the answers to a number of basic questions about life, the destiny of man and the universe. It also caters to some deep-rooted needs of human nature. These needs, which become cravings for sensitive souls, comprise discovering the ultimate meaning of life and finding security and relief in the face of the transience, suffering and death.

* Associate Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore-Pakistan.

Throughout history and around the world, from prehistoric cave paintings to the worldwide web, religion has played a central role in human civilization. Never has this fact been more evident than in our contemporary world, where public discourse and global politics are daily buffeted by religious pressures and concerns.

Thinkers all over the world are first concerned with the self understanding of man. Man wants to know about his own history. In the light of this history he determines his own destiny. Arnold Toynbee has done a monumental work in ten volumes regarding the world history of man through the ages. His findings are that religion stands in the centre.

“I have come back to a belief that religion holds the key to the mystery of existence” (1)

We study religion in order to learn more about how different aspects of human life—politics, science, literature, art, law, economics—have been and continue to be shaped by changing religious notions of, for example, good and evil, images of the deity and the divine, salvation and punishment, etc. By studying different religious doctrines, rituals, stories, and scriptures, we can also come to understand how different communities of believers—past and present, East and West—have used their religious traditions to shape, sustain, transform themselves.

More than ever before, the world we live in is both multicultural and global. We no longer need to travel across the ocean to visit a Hindu temple or an Islamic mosque or to meet a Sikh or a Jain. The chances are that you can find a temple or mosque within a few miles of where you live, and it is almost certain that you will meet someone from any and all of these religious traditions on campus or on the street. This makes it even more essential that we cultivate our ability to understand and interpret other people's religious traditions.

WHAT IS COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS?

Comparative religion is a field of religious study that analyzes the similarities and differences of themes, myths, rituals and concepts among the world's religions.

The Arabic English Dictionary describes 'comparative' as, encountering, standing face to face, draw up in opposite compos.(2)

Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic cites the word 'comparative' in this way, it literally means estimation by comparison, expressing a higher or lower degree of quality; encountering, standing face to face, mutual opposition. While in terminology it is used in broad sense. The phrase comparative study of religion implies to the indifference study of various religion of the world and the differentiation between right and wrong. (3)

E.. A. Livingstone observes Comparative Religion in the The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Christian Church in this way, The branch of study which investigates by scientific and historical methods the religions of the world and their mutual relations. Its successful pursuit as a science rests on the universality of religion and the frequent recurrence of certain patterns of religious experience in widely separated ethnological and social groups. It studies the conditions under which these various forms of religious behavior manifest themselves, the processes of their growth, and the part they play in the cultures and traditions to which they belong. It is not concerned with questions of ultimate validity. (4)

The very famous internet dictionary defines comparative religion as, It is a field of study seeking to derive general principles from a comparison and classification of the growth and influence of various religions. (5)

The Encyclopedia of Religion determines comparative religion in such a way, The term comparative religion is a shortened form, the comparative religion became current in the late nineteenth century as a synonym for, 'the science of religion'. As originally conceived it centered, on the application of the comparative or scientific method to the data provided by the religions of the world, past and present. (6)

Louis H Jordan states, Study of the religions side by side, in order that deliberately comparing and contrasting them may frame a reliable estimate of their respective claims and values. (7)

According to Peter Johannes Antes, The phrase 'comparative religion' typically signifies the study of all forms and traditions of religious life as distinguished from the study or exposition of just one. (8)

Kedar Nath Tiwari descriptively writes, the subject of Comparative Religion as a scientific study of the various features of the different religions of the world in a comparative perspective is relatively a late development. It is hardly for a hundred years or so that the name Comparative Religion has gained currency and studies in this direction has been taken up in right earnest. One important reason of this late beginning of the study of the subject may be attributed to the fact that most of the scientific studies of modern times have originated from the west and the western people until recently entertained such a sense of supremacy in their head and heart regarding their own religion that they hardly thought it worthwhile to compare it with the religions of the east. Consequently, they did not see the necessity of undertaking any study of religions other than their own. Even they sometimes did so, they did it only with a view to exposing the weak points of those religions so as to belittle their importance and, in contrast, to exalt their own. But this is not the right spirit in which a comparative study of the different religions can be made. Such a study requires an impartial, neutral

and tolerant outlook and if at all there is any learning or sympathy for any religion, it must be for religions other than one's own. (9)

In the book, *Theology of Religion* it is stated, comparative study of religion is the development of more personalized, realistic approach, and the exploration of the essential human quality of the subject. (10)

A. C. Bouquet, while making his aim of writing a book on *Comparative Religions* asserts that "Comparative study of Religions' rather than 'Comparative Religion.', surveys and compares the great religions of the world.' Comparative Religion, therefore, precisely speaking, is a comparative study of the important features of the different religions of the world in a perfectly scientific spirit. (11)

Cantwell Smith says, "It is the business of comparative religion to construct statements about religion that are intelligible within at least two traditions simultaneously." The two traditions meant here are: (1) tradition to which the appraiser belongs and (2) The tradition of the religion he is appraising. (12)

Hence collectively it could be said that Comparative Study of Religion is actually a science that deals with comparing, analyzing and harmonizing all the living religions of the world. It is a study that not only finds differences that come up in various religions

but also commonalities in them thus fostering a sense of oneness in some aspect of lives all humankind.

SIGNIFICANCE AND AIMS OF COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

The significance, aims, purpose and necessity of comparative study of religion has been noted by a number of intellectuals and thus been quoted in various books.

Y Masih in his book 'Comparative study of Religions expounds, First only a believer in religion should undertake the task of studying religions belonging to different ages and peoples. Even a historical development of one's own religion will be a rewarding pursuit. For example, Rudolf Bultmann studied Christianity from its inception and has established for himself and for other fellow Christians the task of demythologizing Christianity. By Demythologizing Christianity one would know the real message of Christianity for its modern adherents.

Again, a comparative and historical study of prophetic religions will bring them much closer and would promote a comparative study of all living religions with regard to some common salient features would show that after all the disagreement between them is much less than agreement. For example, the doctrine of eternal hell and the doctrine of innumerable rebirths are not as remote as people seem to think. And the same is true with regard to other key-concepts of religions.

A study of various religions may serve to enrich and deepen one's insight into one's own religion. For example, a study of Hinduism created a new insight in Otto, and thereby he wrote '*The Idea of*

the Holy'. In like manner, a study of advaitism led Paul Tillich to establish his fruitful theory of symbolism in religion. Hence, Radharkrishnan writes,

Our aim should be not to make converts, Christians into Buddhists or Buddhists into Christians, but enable both Buddhists and Christians to rediscover the basic principles of their own religions and live up to them. Thus, a comparative study of religions teaches us to cultivate the virtue of appreciation and appropriation of the different insights of different religions. (13)

In view of Philip H Phenix, Comparative study is one of the oldest, best established and most thoroughly explored studies of religions in the modern study of religion.

Every scholarly endeavor serves some purpose. What are the motives of comparing the world religions to mankind? What interest stimulates the study of comparative religion?

The first is that of a missionary- to propagate a faith. The missionary in confronting people of other faiths must come to terms with religions other than his own. Many studies in comparative religions have had an apologetic motive. For example a widely used book, *The World's Living Religions*, by Robert E. Hume, after comparing each religion compares it with Christianity, to the obvious advantage of the latter. The clear objective of the study is to convince the reader of the superiority of the religion to which the author is committed.

A second motive as apologetic as the first, is to undermine the claims of all religions by showing their mutual contradictions at

every point and practice by analyzing the natural and human conditions which have determined the content of the several faiths. The third purpose in studying comparative religion is simply to get understanding. The purpose is not to promote one religion nor to discredit all of them but to gain a broad and wide horizon for people to see for themselves what is better for them and to create a tolerant attitude towards what they disagree with. (14)

A notable book of this field named 'Comparative Religion' presents, Moreover, Comparative Religion, if it is to be a real academic study (and not only a study of general interest), must not only be a comparative description of the various points in a scientific spirit, but also be to some extent evaluative and critical. Really this aspect of comparative religion is the most delicate and it is here that tolerance and sympathy towards other religions are most required. If comparative Religion is to become a useful study, one such hint is that, when evaluative statements are made about other religions, it must be kept in kind that they are recognized as fair in the context of the particular religion regarding which they are made. This clearly means that external criticisms of religions must be avoided as far as possible. Criticisms of a religion must be made within the framework of its own beliefs, ideas and practices. There is not limit to external criticisms. They all depend upon the personal convictions, likes and dislikes of the appraiser. But such criticisms based on personal likes and dislikes, or based on criteria

drawn out of one's own faith and religion is hardly justified and desirable. (15)

In a similar way Prof. Bahm discerns, "My own view is that 'Comparative religions' does not exist in its fullest and fairest of them and until each religion that proposes by other religions is also measured by standards proposed by other religions. 'Comparative religions' as a study cannot approach being an 'objective science' until those who study it become willing to commit themselves to comparisons based on objective standards. It is clear that the general spirit lying behind all those hints is that, in making critical appraisals of other religions, one must give up preference for the beliefs and ideas of one's own religion or of any particular religion. Evaluations must be made with an open mind such that standards derived from one's own religion are not imposed upon others. (16)

Masih explicates on the importance of comparative religion in these words, A study of living religions would bring us nearer to the nature of religion. For example, Durkheim held that religion is a social affair of men. As against this A. N. Whitehead stated that religion is what a man does in his solitariness. It is true that for primitive races and for early form of Judaism and for Vedic Hinduism, religion is a matter of social affair. But against this for Christianity, later Judaism and Islam and Hinayana Buddhism salvation is for the individual with their moral and religious

obligations to society. If Marxism be regarded as a religion, then for its social changes, leading to the withering of the state would lead to social millennium where everybody will get what he needs and would produce according to his abilities. (17)

Even Isaiah hopes for a millennium, “Wolves and lambs will eat together; lions will eat straw, as cattle do” (18)

J G Walker comments and unfolds the importance; The Comparative Study of Religion is of recent growth. It enables us to survey the working of religion and conscience over a far wider field than was possible before. Moreover we can see the process of development at many different stages; for some races of the present day are at an earlier stage than others. (19)

A S. Geden highlights the progress and aims of comparative religion, within a comparatively short period of time, the science of comparative religion, or as some prefer to term it, ‘Comparative study of religions’, has gained a high place among the sciences. To the pursuit and elucidation of this new science many scholars in many countries have devoted their energies. It is right that it should be so, for in a real sense religion with all that it implies and prescribes is the highest interest of mankind. The science of Comparative Religion has its part to play in the general advance, to vindicate and sustain intellectual freedom, and to aid men to realize that there are social and moral issues above the

material and the visible, of which these last can at their best give but a faint premonition. (20)

The book, Religion and truth: towards an alternative paradigm for the study of religion depicts, to study religions, one would have himself to be, in some at least, for there is uniqueness in the religious experience that is impossible to capture in rational, scientific concepts. Thus Smith insists that 'one of the things needed in a comparative study of religion is ability to see the divine which I call faith.' (21)

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the most important task of comparative study of religions is to find out a principle of unity which will harmonize and balance the claims and counter claims of warring religions into one unity. Unity does not mean uniformity of religious conduct and belief, but a harmonious blending of religious variety into a symphony of spiritual striving and quest.

All over the world, there is vast advancement going on in the field of comparative study of religions. The world renowned universities like Harvard (America) and Hampshire (England) have set up centers for this area of study specially to cater the needs, similarly countries like France, Malaysia and India have a lot of research work undergoing in this aspect. But unfortunately in our country no considerable efforts have been made to establish a centre where

studies and research in the field of comparative religion could undergo. Pakistan is in constant threat of terrorism which is springing up from intolerance towards people of different sects and religions, in this scenario comparative study of religions can help in neutralizing the views of a lot of people and thus cultivate a feeling of unison in at least some aspect of each other's faith or just respecting the other's beliefs.

Importance of Comparative Studies of Religions as a separate discipline of study in colleges and universities in Pakistan cannot be over emphasized. In the present situation of 21st century, where Islam is portrayed as a religion which gives lesson of terrorism, the need to introduce and study the subject of Comparative study of Religions becomes tenfold. In general when this subject is introduced at college and university level, one should know in depth the meaning and scope of one's own religion to compare and contrast it with other religions.

In Pakistan, people are divided in sects and they are fighting to safeguard their school of thoughts. The foreign media is presenting Pakistan as a country where terrorists are prepared, while the inner story is quite opposite to it. Those who are involved in such activities, they are working on the agenda of those who are presenting them as terrorists. All the divine religions give the lesson of peace and tolerance while the word Islam itself stands for peace, let alone its message of brotherhood, love and harmony.

It is high time in Pakistan to introduce the subject of Comparative Studies Of Religions in colleges and universities. So it is recommended that Federal Ministry of Education should direct the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and Ministry of Curriculum wing to take a start in their direction. The field will open the horizons of minds of the students and the scholars. Moreover, the art of comparing and contrasting develops critical thinking.

Practically speaking, comparative religious studies can enable to better practice the task of selfhood by both building self-esteem and making possible the acquisition of competencies crucial for one's well-being in increasingly diverse world cultures.

Serious study of the world's religions inculcates unique cultural sensitivities among. Since it straddles the boundary between objective evidence and subjective experience, religious studies is methodologically diverse, globally aware, and academically transgressive. Comparative study of religions is rigorously and playfully open to a multicultural and international way of being that bursts the boundaries of the conventional and the everyday.

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