

CATHOLICS AND THE COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS¹

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IN this paper we want to describe something which is generally used as a weapon against Christianity. We want to suggest how we may take this weapon into our own hands, and use it in our own defence, and even for aggression.

In our effort to be short and very clear, the omissions of this paper must be so many that it cannot but be superficial; its contents must be so elementary that it may seem to many of this audience almost impertinent. From this latter charge, at least, we hope we may stand absolved.

The comparative history of religions aims, first, at collecting evidence concerning the various religions, ancient and modern, of the world, and at so arranging the facts that a continuous account of each be formed, showing its various phases from the day of its birth, if we can discover that, to the day of its death, if that has been reached. Exactly in the same way we might trace the constitutional history of, say, Rome; watching the scattered villages near the Tiber coalesce and submit

¹ A paper read at the Catholic Conference at Manchester, Sept. 22, 1909.

themselves to monarchy ; watching the republic succeed to the monarchy and the empire absorb the republic, and the collapse of the empire in its turn, and its new birth, in a new form, beneath the Popes.

When several religions have thus historically been traced, they will be compared ; they will be grouped on grounds of likeness and of contrast ; principles of evolution will be sought, and laws of growth and of decay. They will be shown, perhaps, to have followed a necessary line, curving to an inevitable end. Thus, in the case of Greece, historians have a fairly easy task before them to show why one tiny State developed towards democracy, another towards feudalism, another into a military despotism. Or the republic of Rome may be compared with that of Athens, or of medieval Florence, or of modern France, always in quest of the political law, the vital principles at work in and responsible for events.

A philosopher will take the last step : just as he will inquire into what the political instinct is in itself ; why men form States at all ; whether one form of government is better than another, or than all others ; so will it be asked *why* men are religious at all ; whether they can, at will, do without religion, or even some particular form of it ; whether religions be connatural to man, or a gift bestowed unmerited from outside, or an inevitable disease of the soul.

Elsewhere, in philology, in anatomy, this method has borne admirable fruit. To it, in philology, we owe our knowledge of the genealogies of words, and, in consequence, of the relationships of races ; in anatomy, it imparts the consoling knowledge that a whale is not a fish, nor a bat a bird, and much that is a good deal more important. No wonder it has been eagerly applied by students to that phenomenon, religion, which from the beginning has so uniquely troubled or consoled mankind

and agitated life. From it are asked answers to the questions: What is religion? Has it always existed? and everywhere? and inevitably? How did it arise? Does it change? Can it die? What is the use of it? Has any form of it a special value? a unique, eternal, universal value?

For some time it was the fashion to avoid drawing comparisons between the Hebrew and the Christian religions on the one hand and the various pagan worships on the other; though we confess that students—far more often than they owned to it—had one or the other of those religions in their minds as a tacit term to which facts might be compared, or an assumed standard by which they might be judged. However, while many non-Catholic Christians have refrained, through a rather timid reverence, from bringing the principles and results of their research into connection with Christian traditions, we believe that Catholics have been particularly candid in doing this very thing. We shall have more to say upon this later; meanwhile suffice it to recall that the earliest research into the cult of the Persian god Mithra, so popular to-day among unbelievers, was due to a Catholic bishop; while in 1880 the Abbé de Broglie's lectures on the non-Christian cults at the Institut Catholique of Paris actually anticipated by one month the first official and frankly sectarian lectures on the same topic given by Albert Réville from the newly founded chair of History of Religions at the Collège de France. Cardinal Wiseman, in his *Essays on Various Subjects* (ed. 1853, vol. i. p. 262 *seq.*), welcomes the principles and aims of these investigations. While, therefore, our absolute conviction in the truth of our own faith has made us fearless in comparing it with others, the enormous change which has come over all, though especially ancient, history in the last century makes it impossible,

even if we wish it, to keep our faith apart. To start with, research in Babylonia and in Palestine, the translation of Egypt's hieroglyphs and Assyrian cuneiform, the critical study of the Old Testament, have all combined to set the religion of the Hebrews in perspective, to leave it no longer hanging luminous in the darkness—a unique vision of worship and morality with an isolated literature: for good or evil, the religion of the Hebrews must perforce be compared with the contemporary and neighbouring Semite cults. So, too, archeology has been transformed and made scientific, papyri have been excavated, manuscripts discovered and criticized, inscriptions catalogued, whole new chapters of religious history round about the first few Christian centuries rewritten, or for the first time written; and all this has placed the history of Christianity itself in a new light, has given new angles of vision, new criteria, which peremptorily refuse to that faith a privileged demesne which comparative history may not approach.

We have already hinted that Catholics, in spite of the overwhelming difficulties which have all over Europe, and especially in this country, hampered their higher education, never shirked the task these facts created for them. We shall have to refer to this below, and in particular to the most encouraging activity of the last twenty years. This must not be forgotten when we insist, as we cannot but insist, on the need of ever greater activity if we are to make ourselves heard above the Babel of non-Catholic voices which sound in the ears of modern Europe, so eager to be educated. They assure it, that though all else may be uncertain, this at least is clear—that in view of the astonishing similarities existing between the religions called revealed and those not so described, there can be no essential difference between Judaism or Christianity and their

predecessors or contemporaries ; that if those two cults did not actually borrow idea and formula, symbol and ceremony, date and purpose of feast-day and of fast, plagiarize the pagan, imitate their enemies, at least Christianity and Judaism, Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, Asiatic cults, in fine, all religions everywhere and always are natural and homogeneous, are created by the same human needs, witness to an identical craving of man's heart, are but the more or less successful expression of a certain phase of feeling or level of society, vary directly with these, and die with their death. To quote a catalogue of names would be easy, tedious, and useless. Nearly forty years ago M. Havet preached this in *Le Christianisme et ses Origines* (Paris, 1871. Ed. 2, 1873-1884), and could say, "The thesis which is contained in the present volume is so thoroughly in keeping with the spirit of our time that I should find it hard work to mention all the authorities who support it. . . . All modern works touching on the history of religions are driven to reach the same conclusion." In the *Nineteenth Century and After* of October, 1905, Mr. Mallock preached the same doctrine in his graceful and vivid way, giving to the Persian god Mithra the exaggerated influence on the formation of Christianity which M. Havet gave to Platonism, but witnessing always to the same tendency to read out of Christianity all that is supernatural, and to explain the remainder as the product of purely natural forces. And we may add that even those authors—Robertson Smith, Max Müller himself, and many another—who are whole worlds away from the violent hatred of our religion which animates, say, M. Salomon Reinach, or even from the active antipathies of men like Dr. Frazer and Professor Rendel Harris, and are willing indeed to see in Christianity and Judaism something indefinitely better

than everything else, yet eliminate from them all those peculiar elements of super-nature, grace, and special revelation which, for us, cleave the essential gulf between ourselves and the whole of the world's religious history.

And I am anxious to insist that this is not a danger for the expert only, the property of the pedant, a poison brewed in secret and doled out to individuals. The commonplaces of Comparative Religion have already reached the man in the street; France and Germany have long had their popular series of disastrous publications; Constable's series of *Religions* is new but welcomed amongst ourselves; it was in the *Clarion* that I saw advertised, last December, popular Lectures on the "True History of Christmas Day." It was a letter in the *Hibbert Journal*, signed by a self-taught "City Clerk," who owing to his studies had abandoned his faith, which first threw for me a new and alarming light on a subject that had already fascinated me. The Rationalist Press Association is rich in destructive publications of this sort. There are the heavier volumes of Mr. J. M. Robertson, M.P.—*Christianity and Mythology*, *A Short History of Christianity*, *Pagan Christs*—heavier, yet well-thumbed where we have met them in Free Libraries—there are the *Concise History of Religion* and *Religion of the First Christians* by Gould, and the cheap reprints of Grant Allen's *Evolution of the Idea of God*, and Laing's *Human Origins* which Mr. Clodd has revised. Idle is it to urge that this detestable literature has been again and again refuted; who knows where to find, who is willing to weigh, the magazine articles or learned monographs which discuss details, or reaffirm lost principles? True science, sober, careful, and restrictive, is always at a discount when compared with the breezy and reckless iconoclasm of these writers; and alas! it is through spectacles supplied by them that their more

serious readers will study the original texts they refer to, of which translations are now so easily available. Not alone, however, do the workers, for whom we think so much nowadays, find their attention called to these topics. Europe, and England far from least, is to-day tormented by religion. Our railway bookstalls prove it. The almost feverish interest in religious subjects at our Universities proves it too. The themes we have heard discussed at Oxford debating clubs, in daily conversations, the two or three questions on religions set now in all Ancient History or Philosophy papers, argue a religious awareness that may, or may not, be consoling. "There is hardly a man in this college," a friend once assured us—and he was an unbeliever, and a member of a college which had a reputation, well, not primarily for being religious—"there's hardly a man here who wouldn't be ready to talk religion if you cared to." America, too, seems likely to pass that way; and from Japan we have heard quite recently of the crying need for lectures on the history of religions to counteract, if it be not already too late, the chaotic influences of Spencer, Tylor, Frazer, and many another, who are for explaining the origin and appraising the value of religion as such, and agree in little save in unsupernaturalizing Christianity.

The apostles of the new science take their vocation seriously. In the preface to his *Orpheus*,[†] the dainty pocket and popular *résumé* of his famous *Cultes, Mythes et Religions*, M. S. Reinach, who was a President in the Third International Congress for the Comparative Study of Religions, held at Oxford last year, declares: "I recognize most profoundly the moral responsibility I am assuming in presenting for the first time a synoptic view

[†] Published in 1909, already in its fifth edition, a manual in French lycées, enthusiastically reviewed in this country, and about to be translated into English.

of religions, considered purely and simply as natural phenomena. I do so because I believe that the time for this has come round, and that in this field, as in all others, lay-reason must claim its rights." Hence he explains that he has made certain omissions, for, "I hope, nay, flatter myself, that I shall find as many readers among the ladies as among men. . . . I promise mammas (*les mamans*) that they can give this book to their daughters, provided always the light of history does not scare them. . . . Some day I shall produce a more complete edition for mammas (*pour les mamans*)." Yet what sanction has this writer for his apostolate of dechristianization? He owns that the *totem*-theory on which his big volumes and *Orpheus* both are based "is but an edifice constructed out of materials not substantial, not solid, tested, verifiable, but out of possible or probable hypotheses which reciprocally support and buttress one another; a style of architecture familiar enough, for in it card-castles are built" (*C.M.R.*, iii. 88, 1908); while at the Oxford Congress he confessed that totemism was "a hobby, and an overridden hobby too." The weapon may then be worthless, its use most clearly illegitimate; it matters little, if, in an evil crusade, it may work havoc against Christ. "I address myself," he cries (*C.M.R.*, 1906, ii. p. xviii), "to Jews as to Christians, to ignorant atheists, as to learned believers, to announce to them the Good News of religions unveiled [*Veniet Felicior Aetas—A Happier Age is Coming* is the motto of *Orpheus*]. That is why I publish these volumes; that is why I preach them in lectures before popular audiences; that is why I flatter myself with the hope that many years of my life will have been devoted not in vain to this work."

I should like to have been able to indicate the sort of evidence which is exploited by those who wish to argue

the purely natural evolution of Christianity and Judaism, or at least their organic connection with cults once thought alien. From Babylonia and Assyria came, we are assured, the Genesis-tales of Creation, Fall, and Flood; the style of Israel's prophecies and psalms; the germ of its monotheism; the very name of Yahweh; from Egypt were copied its ark, many of its ceremonies and vestments; immemorial Semitic—nay, world-tradition gave it its blood-ritual, its scape-goat; from Hammurabi, says Reinach, "God plagiarized" the Decalogue and the Mosaic law; from Persia are said to have come its doctrines of angels and of personal resurrection; from a slow elaboration of Greek philosophies, of later Persian worship, and of Syrian cults, came Christianity, in itself a mainly social ebullition into which elements of religion were from all sides tossed. To Egypt we are to look for the origin of our Trinity; almost anywhere for the Incarnation and miraculous birth; to Asia for the yearly Passion-plays of death and resurrection of youthful gods; to Mithraism (lately grown fashionable far beyond its merits) for our sacraments and hierarchy; to Isis-worship for our ideal of Virgin-Motherhood; to the medley of cults run riot in the early Roman Empire for the ideas of sin, forgiveness, penance, ecstasy, union with God, heaven, hell, and purgatory which we believed peculiarly our own. Even humility, even chastity, even charity and renunciation are jewels peculiar no more, we learn, to the crown of Christianity.

Since it would be quite impossible, within our limits, even to indicate the principles whereby we should sift true from false, or draw legitimate comparisons or emphasize contrasts, we had better not elaborate this point. Yet we may very briefly indicate the encouraging side of all this movement. First, it really is not so modern as

it claims to be. In the very earliest centuries of the Church it was insisted on. Celsus, Faustus, and many another anti-Christian controversialist were quite aware of the similarities and pushed them quite as far as our modern theorists. Justin, Tatian, Clement, Minutius Felix, Gregory of Nazianzos and Gregory the Great, and other Christian Fathers were equally aware of them and by no means frightened by them; indeed, they built up whole new chapters of apologetic on them—very entertaining chapters, too, at times. Chrysostom and Jerome are astonishingly severe on the Jews for the amount of paganism God was forced to allow them to retain. Very gradual, indeed, Gregory of Nazianzos owns, was the world's conversion to Christianity; the preparation for the Gospel was begun far back in history; the substance of the Christian religion, Augustine dared to say, was never lacking from the very beginning of the world. Clement of Alexandria taught that heathen systems got what good they had from a plundering of the Mosaic books. Bishop Huet, in the seventeenth century, thought that all pagan gods were really Moses in disguise. But most of all, the earlier Fathers liked to see, when pagan seemed too like Christian, the mischief-making of devils, who, by anticipating or imitating Christian dogma or ritual in pagan spheres, bewildered the faithful and prevented conversions.

Still, in our own century historical and archeological appliances are, as we said at the beginning, so much more perfect than they were, that we have a far better chance than the Christian Fathers themselves of getting facts in perspective; and we may confidently expect that honest research, even under rationalist auspices, will shape the Comparative History of Religions into a very valuable weapon in defence of Revelation. For it is

now obvious that, to the study of Comparative Religion as such, we have not, nor could have, any reasonable objection. Those who imagine that we resent the inclusion of the religions of Israel and of Christ among those to which the comparative method is to be applied, are entirely mistaken. It is true that we believe those two religions—or rather, that one religion of which they are the stages—to be unique because divine. Yet this is no reason for deprecating comparison, but rather for inviting it; and invite it we do, convinced that once the facts are known, they will be found, as Aristotle promised, to make one music with the truth. Not with the premisses, not with the principles of this science, as we have described them, may we quarrel, but only with the hurried conclusions, or the hypotheses treated as verified certainties which mar too often the work of non-Catholic students.

That the result will be all in our favour is not only assured by faith, but is warranted by even these few years of experience. Thus, the new science, in its early days, detected such seeming similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, that Cardinal Newman himself was scared. The self-same science, progressing a little further, ascertained not only that these similarities were enormously exaggerated, but that they were often the result of borrowings not by Christianity from Buddhism, but by Buddhism from Christianity. Where Persia was said to have influenced Judaism, it is becoming at least probable that Judaism may have influenced Persian literature. And speaking more generally, just as M. Reinach confesses that his totemist theory was but a card-castle, and is himself abandoning it more and more, so we have seen all sorts of theories put forward in the name of Comparative History of Religion as naturalistic, but adequate explanations of the religious phenomenon

collapse beneath the weight of new facts, added by the very science which had accumulated the data out of which those theories at first were built. Such is the fate of Animism, Totemism, Magic, Social Instinct, Ancestor Worship, Solar Myth, Astral Myth, which one after the other professed to explain religion and rob Christianity and Judaism of their claim to divine origin.

On all this we must renounce to dwell; we have but space, here, to ask for four definite things. They are: that Catholics should write more simple yet scientific literature on this subject; that they should produce works recognized as standard on it; that in the training of professors or of men destined to be spiritual guides, the thing should not be overlooked; and finally, that there should be an apostolate of more than mere literature.

First, the crying need of a popular literature has been so often emphasized in Conferences like this, that we need do no more than indicate Comparative Religion as a topic that needs not least to be so treated. Germany started its simple series at Münster nearly twenty years ago. Bloud, in Paris, publishes excellent simple lectures in his *Science et Religion* series; Beauchesne, also of Paris, has brought out three numbers of a series considerably more ambitious, on *Buddhism*, by Professor de la Vallée Poussin; *Islam*, by Baron Carra de Vaux; on the *Religion of non-Civilized Folks*, by Mgr. Leroy. The Catholic Truth Society of England has, for a year now, been publishing a modest series, which, composed of thirty-two lectures, will form four volumes of a shilling each; the first contains an introductory lecture, by the distinguished editor of the *Études*, and others on the greater religions of antiquity, that on the uniquely important religion of *Assyria and Babylon* being by the Rev. A. Condamin, an Orientalist of the very first rank

in scholarship; that on *Buddhism*, an almost equally important religion in view of the constant attack made, on its occasion, upon Catholicism, is by Professor de la Vallée Poussin, a scholar of European reputation; that on *China*, by a missionary of twenty-two years' experience in that country; that on *Hinduism* will be the editor of the *Bombay Examiner*. The second volume, which deals with the great ancient religions which bordered especially closely on nascent Christianity or its more immediate ancestry, will have the exceptional good fortune to contain two lectures from the pen of His Lordship the Bishop of Salford, whose unimpeachable authority is recognized far beyond this country. The third volume deals with great phases or crises in the history of our own religion; the fourth with the sects that have broken from it, and their fate, and the two great systems of Mohammedanism and Modern Judaism. The paper on *Eastern Churches*, as well as that on *Gregory VII*, is from the erudite and entertaining pen of Dr. Adrian Fortescue. *Aquinas* has the advantage of being written by the Very Reverend Father McNabb, of St. Thomas's own Order. *Anglicanism* and *Wesleyanism* are treated by ex-ministers of those bodies; *Presbyterianism* is by Fr. Power of Edinburgh. But this is not the place to insist in any detail on the qualifications of the various authors; we will only add that if this series succeeds well, the Catholic Truth Society hopes to be able to accede to the numerous wishes expressed that a fifth volume be published dealing with those low forms—Magic, Fetichism, and the like—held, by some, to have preceded all religion, and with those "after-faiths," Spiritualism, Christian Science, &c., superstitions which invade the human soul, once it has deserted genuine religion, but remains restless after God.

Unitarianism, the nadir to which, in this country,

organized religion has descended, is by the Rev. G. S. Hitchcock, long a minister of that body, to whose initiative this series owes much.¹

As for the big works, surely it stands to reason that writers of short pamphlets should scarcely dare to claim a hearing if they cannot back what they say by work recognized as original and unimpeachable, by garnered erudition which guarantees the unproved generalizations of their popular productions. It is M. Reinach's *Cultes, Mythes et Religions* which gives such startling notoriety to his *Orpheus*; it is Harnack's famous *Lehrbuch* which guarantees, in popular estimation, his *What is Christianity?* We will not labour this, but merely indicate how disastrous it must be if, when we are asked advice upon these subjects, we cannot—I will not say, speak authoritatively ourselves (no one need be scandalized if we disclaim the right to do *that*)—but if we cannot point to Catholic works as reliable sources of information; if we must send inquirers to works of well-meaning non-Catholics at best. How consoling is it, therefore, to see that in the Encyclopedias—Dr. Hastings's new *Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*, for instance—Catholics are beginning to find a place as of right; the admirable work of Fr. Lagrange and the whole Dominican School at Jerusalem, and of Fr. Delehaye of the Bollandists, is winning an international recognition; to the articles in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* none need fear to refer the inquirer.

Third—and we speak here with extremest diffidence—a short experience has already made it clear to us how suddenly the boys who leave our schools are

¹ We would plead that the inevitable limitation of choice and treatment of subject-matter implied by this arrangement, did not seem to the Editor to justify the postponement of an effort, inadequate indeed, yet, it is trusted, of immediate utility.

brought face to face with problems such as we have dwelt upon, and how they are for the most part thrown back upon sheer loyalty to a faith that cannot lie. They cannot even remember that So-and-so at their school had foreseen for them those problems, forgotten though the solution then might be. We believe that here—and in how many fields—the era of protection should yield to that of preparation, and that this topic which is so obviously most important can without difficulty be made most interesting; and we would dare to hint that at least some of its leading principles might find a place in those higher courses of religious instruction which we long to see.

Finally—and would we could dwell on this!—should not a loyal exposition of this *History of Religions* be equivalent to a splendid Apologetic? Max Müller himself declared that in proportion as the treasures hidden in the despised religions of the world were appreciated, true Christianity stood out only the more unique and supreme. To know ourselves, we should know them; when we see their best, our best appears better than we had dreamed. The presence and work of the Holy Spirit, the mystery of sin, of grace, the relation of the Natural and the Supernatural, the transcendency of the Person of Jesus Christ, the divinity and immortality of His Church, stand out the better when we watch well the process of man's pilgrimage in universal history. May I refer with gratitude and admiration to the lectures given in the University of Manchester by the Right Reverend the Bishop of Salford? Such a work—the active supplementing of the written by the spoken word, by an expert, before a mixed audience—answers all our prayers. And is it not noticeable, in view of the close connection which the *History of Religions* has

with Sociology, and the patronage accorded to its worst extravagances by the Socialist organs of this country, that these University Lectures should be given in the same city which has established that Catholic School of Social Science, from which we can scarcely hope too much, so noble are the fruits it has already borne? We would conclude by recalling that the Holy Father's munificent gift of one hundred thousand francs to Mgr. Baudrillart—a gift offered in the hour of his poverty to the French Church in her great need—was, with his full consent and approbation, given to the foundation of a new chair of Comparative History of Religions in the Institut Catholique of Paris, while the foundation of a chair of Assyriology at the Apollinare in Rome, and the place given to analogous studies in the Pope's Syllabus for the Italian seminaries, proves the personal interest the Holy Father finds in the cause we have been pleading.