



Comparative religion¹

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What is then, in the last analysis, the value of comparative religion? Certainly not to convince us that one mode of belief is the preparation for another, or to lead to a decision as to which is “best”. One might as well regard ancient or exotic styles of art as preparations for and aspirations towards one’s own. Nor can the value of this discipline be thought of as one conducing to the development of a single universally acceptable syncretic faith embodying all that is “best” in every faith; such a “faith” as this would be a mechanical and lifeless monstrosity, by no means a stream of living water, but a sort of religious Esperanto. Comparative religion can demonstrate that all religions spring from a common source; are, as Jeremias says, the “dialects of a single spiritual speech”. We cannot therefore, take the formulae of one religion and insert them in another without incongruity. One can recognize that many formulae are identical in different religions; confront, for example, St. Thomas, “Creation, which is the emanation of all being from the not-being, which is no thing” (*Sum. Theol.* I.45.1C) with the Vedic “Being is engendered from nonbeing” (*asatah sad ajâyata*, RV X.72.3), and such comparisons can be validly employed (even by the most orthodox) as what St. Thomas calls “extrinsic and probable proofs” of the validity of a given dogma.

But the greater value than this is the clarification that results when the formulae of one tradition are collated with those of another. For, as we have already seen, every tradition is necessarily a partial representation of the truth intended by tradition universally considered; in each tradition something is suppressed, or reserved, or obscure, which in another may be found more extensively, more logically, or more brilliantly developed. What then is clear and full in one tradition can be used to develop the meaning of what may be hardly more than alluded into another. Or even if in one tradition a given doctrine has been definitely named, a realization of the significance of this definition may lead to the recognition and correlation of a whole series of affirmations in another tradition, in all of which the same doctrine is implicit, but which had previously been overlooked in their relation to one another. It is thus a great advantage to be able to make use of the expression *Vedic exemplarism*; or conversely, to speak of Christian *yoga* immediately brings out the analogy between St. Bernard’s *consideratio*, *contemplatio*, and *raptus* with Sanskrit *dharana*, *dhyâna*, and *samâdhi*.

¹ Our title. From *Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance* in Coomaraswamy, 2: **Selected Papers, Metaphysics**, Edited by Roger Lipsey, Princeton Univ. Press, 1977, pp. 39-40.