FOUR CHALLENGES TO RELIGION

III. FRAZER[1]

PERHAPS Frazer's own theories about the origin and development of religion hardly constitute a present-day challenge of any sort. There is ample evidence that he grew increasingly dissatisfied with them himself, and few students of the subject today would care to subscribe to them as adequate to account for all the facts—even for all the facts which he himself collected, let alone the enormous quantity which have been gathered since his time. It is not, however, of Frazer's own theories in particular, or even of his own findings, that I propose to speak; I take his name rather as a symbol, for it is that of the leading representative of the widespread dissemination of the comparative study of religion. Comparative religion was studied before Frazer, and it has been studied since. Yet it was Frazer's great work, more than any other, which aroused the interest of non-specialists. Jane Harrison recalls how, 'Among my own contemporaries J. G. Frazer was soon to light the dark world of savage superstition with a gleam from *The Golden Bough*. The happy title of that great book . . . made it arrest the attention of scholars. . . . Tylor had written and spoken; Robertson Smith had seen the Star in the East; in vain; we classical deaf-adders stopped our ears and closed our eyes; but at the mere sound of the magical words "Golden Bough" the scales fell—we heard and understood.' But it was not only to classical scholars that Frazer's work opened new worlds; and soon it was to become common knowledge that the beliefs and practices of Christian Europe were by no means so peculiar and unique as had been commonly assumed. A nodding acquaintance, at least, with other people's religions became part of the equipment of any educated man. Even if books like *The Golden Bough* had not enthralled him, he could hardly avoid hearing about them. And the study of religions can be a very potent solvent of religion, and perhaps no other field of inquiry has been quite so effective in spreading religious scepticism and bewilderment amongst us.

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The *museum* is perhaps the perfect expression and symbol of the predicament in which modern Western Man finds himself. His power and wealth have made him the heir of the earth, of the spoils of countless temples; but the inheritance seems only to undermine his own certainties, the very certainties which are the foundation of his own culture. The museum of a hundred years ago was less disturbing, more digestible; for (as André Malraux has reminded us) its exhibits were strictly limited by the canons of contemporary academic taste. But now those canons have themselves become a joke, and we despise the squeamishness of our parents' stomachs. Belvedere Apollos alongside tortured Gothic crucifixes, animal heads on human torsos from Egypt, bearded human heads on animal bodies from Assyria, crude herms and exquisite Renascence madonnas, placid Buddhas, furiously dancing Shivas, voluptuous Shaktis, fearsome 'wrathful deities' from Tibet, plumed serpents from Mexico, many-headed totem-poles from Alaska, elongated enigmas from darkest Africa: Western Man has collected them all, labelled them, displayed them—and they set him wondering. All these, he knows, have aroused in fellow-human beings awe and devotion; a faith perhaps far more fervent than his own in the Christianity he has inherited. Fantastic and even revolting though many of these images may sometimes appear, it seems an intolerable arrogance to claim that one 'faith' is true, the others false. The average man has no time to study and compare them all, and, should he do so, what are to be his standards of assessment? If he is able to leave the museum's showcases, to browse in the library, he will perhaps be more confused and bewildered than ever. He will find that the material collected by scholars from archaeology, anthropology and history, about the religious beliefs and customs of mankind, are even more vast, more baffling in their strange variety, and no less strange similarities, than he had supposed. And he will find that the theories of the learned who have tried to co-ordinate this material are still more conflicting and confusing.

He probably does not reflect that the museum, by the very fact of being a musem, has falsified the whole situation. In tearing its exhibits from their contexts in church or temple or mosque, it has removed them from any religious function they could fulfil. They have been deprived of the principal quality with which, consciously or unconsciously, their makers endowed them, and which

the worshipper met in them: they have become precisely *exhibits* —no longer subjects which we encounter, but objects which we consider. To use Martin Buber's language, they have been transposed from the world of Thou into the world of It; and become things which we can perhaps express in the third person, but no longer address in the second. Thereby they have become non-religious, abstractions from the total religious situation. The confusion is enhanced by the fact that, not only has each been removed from its shrine, but by being set alongside other 'specimens', each has lost that absolute claim to unconditional allegiance which is inseparable from religion. The position of the visitor to the museum is correspondingly distorted: his relationship is not that of the worshipper, but of the spectator, the detached onlooker, the uncommitted impartial judge. And what is true of the casual stroller through a museum, is at least no less so of the serious student of religious history; indeed, the more he aims at detached scientific observation and exact correlation of data, the further must he be removed from the attitude of the religious man. And the more we learn to share his point of view, without realising the distortion, the more must religion itself tend to wither away.

All this is not to say that the religious phenomena of mankind are an illegitimate field for scientific inquiry. It is an inquiry which has advanced immeasurably since Frazer's day, not only in the accumulation of data, but also in strictness of method and appreciation of its own limitations. The fever to stress similarities at the expense of differences, to reduce all religions to one common origin or denominator, to 'explain' its epiphenomena in terms of something else; all these are outmoded. The late G. van der Leeuw's 'Phenomenological' approach, the work of Mircea Eliade and Karl Kerényi, W. K. C. Guthrie's *The Greeks and their Gods*— each in its very different way testifies to the growth of a more self-critical treatment, all the more scientifically objective for its stress on the subjective response of the worshipper, and indeed of the student also. It is even becoming questionable, no longer whether the religious believer is too prejudiced to attain the requisite scientific detachment for the study of religions, but whether anyone else can attain the requisite involvement.

But the fact remains that the overall effect has been detrimental to religious faith and practice in our society, and a very serious factor in its moral disintegration, and in the individual's sense of

bewilderment and insecurity. It is all the more acute because it is accompanied by an unprecedented realisation of the need for one world-religion that will bind mankind in a common brotherhood, in the acknowledgment of one Divine Lord and Father.

What is the remedy? The way of syncretism, such as we read of under the Roman Empire, in which protean local divinities merge into one another, is no longer open to us for whom polytheism is inadmissible. The facile wishful-thinking that declares all religions one and the same may contain some elusive element of truth, but it is belied by the most indisputable findings of comparative religion itself, for these increasingly testify to their differences and contradictions. The aspiration for some agreed syllabus, an artificial formula for extracting the quintessence of all religions, to be negotiated by some world-conference of all faiths, can only be entertained by those who are ignorant of history, of human nature, of religion itself. A generalised religion, with no roots in the particular, is an intellectual abstraction, and no religion at all, for it is incapable of being put into practice.

But the challenge to the professing Christian should be evident. It is idle for him to lament what is happening, futile to ignore it. The situation I have tried to describe is the ineluctable destiny of Western man, the providential chaos in which the Christian should see the working of the Spirit to form a new cosmos. He must believe and proclaim his Christ, not just as the hope of Israel, or as the white man's god, or as the tutelary of a self-contained Christendom which no longer exists—but proclaim him as the desire of all the nations as well. Already he professes to believe it: comparative religion may well serve him in coming to understand it and make it real. But museums and the science of religions will not deceive him into mistaking abstract universals for genuine catholicity. He will know that this cannot be had without the particular, localised historical continuity which his creed calls apostolicity. No more than any other human activity can religion be exercised except in the concrete particular, and the Christian's very 'scandal of particularity' equips him, as no other is equipped, to proclaim the unity of all mankind with all its diversity in one Son with one Father in the love and power of one Spirit.

It is no new Gospel, no streamlined 'new apologetic', that he has to preach, but the original witness to 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of *all*',—the testimony to the 'un-

known God', latent in all other gods, 'ignorantly worshipped'. The cares of building a self-contained 'Christian city' on earth, with its inevitable bulwarks and bastions, and in which even Christian missions have sometimes assumed the character of colonisations, have perhaps distracted us from our world mission and obscured our view of Christianity's own responsibility to so-called other religions—a mission not to destroy, but to fulfil. For if the acquaintance with religions is a solvent of religion, it is no less true that Christian religion dissolves the multiplicity of religions. St Augustine said that the coming of Christ, the divine word of healing in human flesh, spelt the end of religions—in the plural; for they all unknowingly sought what Christ embodies, and he fulfils them all. The Christian can meet our present predicament only by reaffirming that ancient faith which should be his own, but perhaps with the better equipment which the scientific study of religions offers him.

SCIENCE AND THE TRINITY

CECILY HASTINGS

WHEN we try to make contact, for the purpose of teaching and explaining the faith, with the pagan mind of our generation, something we might call 'scientific mindedness' at once arises as a barrier. (The inverted commas are strictly necessary.) We are not speaking of the truly scientific attitude but of a by-product, to be found both among scientists and among those several removes away from any field of scientific research. I do not mean by 'scientific mindedness' simply the attitude that demands tangible proof for every assertion made. Neither do I mean actual knowledge of recent scientific discoveries and theories, requiring particular answers to particular objections. The difficulty is really one of basic mental patterns. The more we are pre-occupied, as Christians, with the truths of revelation, the more these truths will determine the shape of our thinking and our approach to all questions, not only doctrinal ones. The unbeliever is not, of course, so shaped in his mind. But this naturally

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