

# Comparative Hermeneutics: A Brief Statement

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Today it is necessary to admit that the plurality of religious traditions is part of the context to be recognized during the interpretation of any one tradition (cf. Pye 1976). It is therefore of particular interest to approach the question of possible analogies between the interpretive procedures of diverse religious traditions, and it is this that reflection under the category "comparative hermeneutics" is intended to achieve. The discernment of such analogies may eventually provide a new basis for understanding the relationships between at least some religions.

Just over eight years ago an attempt was made to introduce the concept of "comparative hermeneutics" as a matter of concern both for the general study of religion and for Christian theology. Since several relevant publications have appeared in the interim, these paragraphs are offered as a brief statement of the main points in the argument.<sup>1</sup>

*Hermeneutics.* The term "hermeneutics" is intended here to refer only to problems *about* interpretation and thus to "theory of interpretation." The expectation is that people

1. This statement is based in part on an extended paper entitled "Comparative hermeneutics in religion," first read in January 1972 at a conference at the University of Lancaster, later published in Pye and Morgan, eds., *The cardinal meaning: Essays in comparative hermeneutics . . .* (1973). An earlier version of the present paper was delivered at a comparative religion seminar in May 1973 at the University of Tokyo. The concept of a comparative science of hermeneutics as mediating between the science of religion and various constructive and interpretive theologies was advanced in the present writer's "Syncretism and ambiguity" (1971), especially pp. 87-88. The hermeneutical question relating to the origins of Buddhism and Christianity has been treated by Picken (1974).

of differing cultural and religious traditions might agree about certain theoretical aspects of the process of interpretation without necessarily agreeing about what one particular religion means. Interpretation itself is the normal activity of a representative of a religious tradition, for example, a Christian theologian, a Muslim theologian, or a Buddhist scholar-monk. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, may be used to refer to the procedures that such interpreters employ.

Sometimes the term "hermeneutics" has been used to refer to the act of understanding and interpreting itself, but the present usage is meant to focus attention on procedural questions only. Insofar as stress is laid on the comparative study of such problems, it is hoped that significant similarities may be found between the procedures used in the interpretation of religions whose contents may be quite different. For example, there may be some theoretical similarities with respect to procedures and criteria of interpretation in Buddhism and Christianity, even though the meaning of these two religions may finally be quite distinct.

*Essence.* The nature of hermeneutics thus theoretically conceived may be illustrated by reference to the important essay by Ernst Troeltsch on the nature of the problem about the "essence" of Christianity (1913). Other theologians such as Harnack and Loisy had earlier offered arguments about what the "essence" of Christianity is, but Troeltsch attempted to analyze the *procedure* involved in any attempt to reformulate the "essence" of a religion.

Troeltsch argued that any attempt to formulate or convey the essence of Christianity would have three aspects. First, it would be critical in the sense that it would distinguish between that which corresponds to the essence and that which opposes it. Second, it would be a developmental

principle with an inner, living flexibility that would take into account the variety of different forms which the religion has taken throughout its historical career. Third, it is not a mere abstraction from the past, though it depends on historical work, but is also an "ideal" or value-bearing conception corresponding to the cultural possibilities of the present and the future. He wrote: "To define the essence is to shape it afresh" (1913, p. 431: "*Wesensbestimmung ist Wesensgestaltung*" – possibly his shortest sentence). It is not necessary to agree exactly with Troeltsch's analysis to see it as a clear statement of a modern hermeneutical problem within the Christian tradition.

The relevance of Troeltsch's analysis is, however, not restricted to Christianity. He himself saw it as a problem that arises in the attempt to characterize and bring out the meaning of any cultural or religious tradition. This is because every such tradition is located in human history, and also because it is no longer possible for modern man to take a naively miraculous view of revelation or of any equivalent dogmatic term. Though he himself did not apply this analytical procedure to Buddhism in any detail, it is strikingly clear that his analysis would be relevant to the way in which European scholars from Rhys Davids to Lamotte have studied and interpreted Buddhism. Some scholars work as Harnack did, emphasizing the purity of selected aspects of "original" Buddhism. Others, like Lamotte, stress, rather, the total development of Buddhism as the key to its meaning. But the application of Troeltsch's analysis to the work of European interpreters of Buddhism does not need detailed discussion here.

*Cardinal meaning.* What is more important is that this same analysis finds parallel manifestations in the writings of oriental Buddhism itself. This can be illustrated in various ways, and special attention has been paid to the concept

of "cardinal meaning" as it occurs in the *Platform sutra* (Yampolsky 1967) and elsewhere. First, there is a critical or polemical aspect to the attainment of "the cardinal meaning" insofar as certain attitudes toward Buddhist practice and teaching, being impediments, have to be discarded. Second, there is a dependence on the conceptual and spiritual tradition of Buddhism as a whole down to the time in question. Third, Hui-neng's grasp of the meaning is seen in the *Platform sutra* as opening a new chapter in the transmission, and eventually as a new corpus of traditional materials to be added to those that need to be taken into account. Ui Hakuju's definition of the term, based on general usage in the Chinese Buddhist scriptures, is also to the point. He defines "general meaning" as "a statement that draws out and binds together the meaning of the whole, from the beginning to the end" (1965). This is a formulation that would surely have pleased Troeltsch. The idea of drawing out the meaning involves a perceptive, even critical grasp of what is and is not essential. The rest of the sentence emphasizes the importance of an overall understanding of the relevant tradition.

It must be admitted that there is a subsidiary question about the antiquity of this Buddhist conception and how it can be related to historical presuppositions of a distinctly modern kind. There is, however, a way of thinking about the procedures of interpretation within Buddhism which, on the one hand, has definite roots within the tradition itself and which, on the other, is easily linked with the kind of modern historical consciousness that has emerged in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in Japan.

Japan is a country where the historical and comparative study of religion came to flower comparatively early and is now firmly established. This is no doubt partly due to the early development of historical and scientific attitudes toward religious tradition among scholars of the Tokugawa

period (1603-1868). Such attitudes may be found among such Neo-Confucianists as Itō Jinsai (1627-1705), Itō Tōgai (1670-1736), and Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728), all of whom began to see the Confucian tradition as one built up by human effort and subject to the effects of historical and social change (Bary 1958, pp. 410-433). The best example, however, is Tominaga Nakamoto (1715-1746), who tried to take a systematically critical attitude toward three religious traditions — Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto — and yet at the same time to bring out their positive meaning.<sup>2</sup> We do not need to share Tominaga's conclusions, which are very out-of-date, in order to retain his presuppositions, which remain very modern. Thus it seems quite possible to argue that the question about the "essence" of Buddhism is not just a Western importation, but is a thoroughly Buddhist and Asian question (though of course expressed in slightly different ways and in different terminology).

*A hermeneutical tool.* So far the argument has moved from a Western analysis to an Eastern religion. There is no reason, however, for not going at it the other way round. That is to say, a hermeneutical concept in Buddhism, for example, might be found helpful in the analysis of Western religions.

Troeltsch invites us to distinguish between the essential, the inessential, and that which runs counter to the essential. Mahayana Buddhism, however, if the dialectics involved in the Japanese term *hōben* or "skilful means" (Sanskrit *upāya* etc.) may be so very briefly stated, seems to say that all items of doctrine are at once essential and dispensable, and that whether such an item conveys or impedes religious meaning is at least partly dependent on the spiritual condition of the person concerned. The concept of "skilful

2. For more details, see Bary 1958, pp. 479-488 and the present writer's "Aufklärung and religion in Europe and Japan" (1973), which argues a comparison between Tominaga and Lessing.

means” is a hermeneutical control.<sup>3</sup> It may be that recognition of the way it is used in Buddhism could lead to the discernment of important aspects of interpretive procedures found in other religions, such as Christianity, procedures that have not yet been properly clarified.<sup>4</sup>

Of course there are major problems involved in any such move, whichever the direction in which it is made. Perhaps the most important danger to avoid is that of unwittingly importing from one religion to another a metaphysics which is closely linked to a hermeneutical concept but which may be quite foreign to the other religion. In this connection two observations are in order. On the one hand, it is crucial to be clear that Troeltsch uses the term “essence” as a term in the philosophy of history. It has to do with the abstracting of coherent meaning from a mass of otherwise random data, that is to say, with a procedure that cannot now be avoided by anyone who wishes to interpret any religious tradition at all. As Troeltsch used it, the term had nothing to do with the structures of the universe and had no connection with speculative ontologies of which Buddhists would disapprove.

On the other hand, the Buddhist concept of “skilful means” is closely linked with the Mahayana doctrine of *śūnyatā* and also with the teaching of two kinds of truth, the provisional and the real. These in turn relate to the Mahayanist claim *not* to be advancing ontological propositions such as those held by their opponents within and without Buddhism. It is conceivable, therefore, that a problem could arise as to whether use of the concept of “skilful means” to elucidate interpretive procedures within other religions such as Christianity would not in fact lead

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3. See, for example, its use in the *Lotus sutra*.

4. A systematic attempt to state the meaning of this Mahayana Buddhist concept is contained in Pye (1978). The concluding chapter also contains references to the wider argument being advanced here.

to the importation of a fundamentally incongruous spirituality, an anti-metaphysics (if the *Mādhyamika* claim be given temporary credence) of a sort ultimately inconsistent with Christianity. It may be possible, however, to isolate the function of the term "skilful means" as a hermeneutical tool and then use it in a comparative context.

These problems show how important it is, if progress is to be made, to distinguish between questions about procedures of interpretation in religion (for which the term "hermeneutics" is here consistently reserved) and questions about the substantive contents or meanings of religious traditions.

*Building on analogies.* In short, the thesis still being proposed is, on the one hand, that it is desirable to study, on a comparative basis, the way in which religions are interpreted, and, on the other, that such a study has natural roots within at least two historical religions – Buddhism and Christianity. One might hope thereby to develop a more stable framework for the consideration of such questions than is possible on the basis of the study of one religious tradition alone.

This hope does not imply that all religious traditions work in exactly the same way. Nor does it imply that there is nothing to be learned about procedures of interpretation from other fields, such as literature, political ideology, or law. It is assumed, however, that there are special analogies between religions and between their procedures of interpretation, and that it would be fruitful to explore these analogies more systematically.

Other problems that would come under the heading of "comparative hermeneutics" include: problems about demythologization; problems about how traditions are shaped or how their shape changes; criteria for evaluating new forms of a religious tradition;<sup>5</sup> correlation theory; the nature and

function of religious language; the relationship between historical criticism and popular interpretations; and of course problems touching the approach to central religious concepts such as "transcendence" or "enlightenment" and the relation of these concepts to other ways of understanding the world.

*Observing and interpreting.* Finally, it should be stressed again that the comparative study of hermeneutics is not intended to displace the work of the interpreter of a religion, that is to say, of the theologian or the scholar-monk. The work of such persons is itself a religious work, and as such it forms the raw material for the study of comparative hermeneutics. Observed procedures are the material for reflections made on a comparative basis.

It may be that these reflections will in some way be of service to those whose task it is to engage directly in the interpretation of a religion. It may also happen that such reflections will not turn out to be particularly useful. Comparative hermeneutics is not in itself intended to decide questions about the ultimate truths of religion or of life. One might say that it is "phenomenological" (rather than theological or buddhological) in the sense that it does not presuppose the truth or falsity of any particular religious beliefs, but it does take the meaning of a religious system for its participants very seriously indeed.

On this basis it should be possible for comparative studies to be undertaken cooperatively by persons of various religious traditions. They should be able to study together on a comparative basis what is going on when religions are interpreted and how those who do the interpreting tend to deal with the problems they perceive and consider. These same

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5. David Bastow, David Pailin, and Karel Werner give special attention to this problem in the papers they contributed to *The cardinal meaning* (Pye and Morgan 1973).



persons may also discuss and agree or disagree about the truth, falsity, value, and disvalue of their religions, but that would be, so to speak, on another day.

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