

Book Reviews

A DICTIONARY OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION.

Edited by *S. G. F. Brandon*.
(Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 110s.).

Review by **Whitall N. Perry**

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Not so long ago the very term Comparative Religion carried a faintly snide overtone of "I thank thee, that I am not as other men"—a resonance maintained by the more enlightened coterie of the Protestant Theological Establishment, who conducted a sort of academic safari through world cultures in a *reductio ad Christianitatem* that would logically abut against the vindication of scientific skeptical inquiry over any Faith whatsoever. As might be anticipated, their Roman compeers were not long in exploiting the first position, only to be drawn ineluctably towards the second, in the words of the Jesuit philosopher Bernard J. F. Lonergan, "a little breathless and a little late."

All this is now changing, at least ostensibly. Not that the world has grown wiser, but that the scientific method by swinging full circle has obliged investigators in the interests of detachment and impartiality to assume a more objective view of things. Hence the timeliness and need for a comprehensive documentation along the lines of *A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*.¹ With this very considerable undertaking in fact, one could even say that the pendulum has swung too far: the bane of competence is virtuosity; and in the aim of the general editor to give non-Christian religions—ancient and actual—their due setting in the world picture once for all, it is Christianity that now suffers, having been accommodated through the psychological wringer to emerge in different shades of Bultmann, Barth, Heidegger, Niebuhr, Teilhard de Chardin, *et al.*—even though admittedly this does not belie the character of what is generally understood in the academic world by Comparative Religion.

The field is immense, covering everything from the Absolute to Atheism and just about all that lies between, so that the matter of selection for a 704 page dictionary composed of articles and not just definitions is bound to be somewhat arbitrary. In order to keep this potentially unwieldy material viable, the general editor has secured the collaboration of a staff of scholars (mainly from Manchester University), headed by a sectional editor each for Buddhism, Hinduism, Islâm, and China and the Far East. The many fine articles covering the lesser religions are all listed for easy reference on the Contents page, and a Synoptic Index gives the entire range of subjects pertaining to each major religion, while the General Index lists the remaining items not found under separate headings. Each entry, besides indicating the author responsible, has a bibliography attached, and a system of cross-referencing by arrows to complete the interrelationship of

topics. Thus the great value of this book lies in the immediate accessibility, in a single volume, of basic information pertaining to any world culture, past or present. The documentation on Oriental religions forms the high-water mark: the Buddhist articles carry welcome clarifications on the real meanings of Extinction, Samâdhi, and Nirvâna; while Professor J. Robson deserves special credit for conveying what is probably the truest image of Islâm to be found in a non-specialized reference work. A multitude of things are listed, from the Ninety-Nine Names of God, to the little-known fact that the amulet designated as the "hand of Fâṭima" is called by Levantine Christians the "hand of Mary". Material on the Far East, however, calls forth some reservations: e.g., Lao-tzu is just as "legendary" as is the founder of any other religion;—Shintô is not "without an eschatology", which is presupposed by it rather than explicitly formulated;—in the same vein, Confucianism is no more latently atheistic than is Christianity potentially bolshevistic.

The American Indians among smaller groups are well covered, as is the Tibetan tradition in a scholarly survey by Professor D. L. Snellgrove. Polynesians, Scandinavians, Carthaginians, Celts, they are all there, as are the tribal divisions of Africa, although we can discount the cavalier remark that the Maasai of East Africa have "no belief in personal survival after death"—excusable, perhaps, for the untutored layman, but an impertinence on the part of anyone pretending to expertise in Comparative Religion. As for the assertion that "onanism was not morally reprobated" by the ancients, Atum having created the cosmos thereby, this is a remark the Hindus would call *tamasic*! Elsewhere, over four columns are taken up in the demonstration that "there are no witches", but only "scapegoats for the ills of society"—a proposition that the late Margaret Murray would have found a howler.

But the chief liability with a dictionary of this sort is that in the temptation to say everything, it does not say enough. The very presence of cross references betrays the absence of others. Thus, for example, the entry under Boehme (described as "pantheistic" or "dualist") has a reference to Theosophy, but under Theosophy is no mention of Boehme. Nor does the Index always clarify: Law, W. refers the reader to Boehme, who it is said influenced W. Law; but does this tell the reader what he wants to know about Law, W.? In this way do the cross references sometimes pass the ball back and forth without approaching the goal. The bibliographies are very uneven; Schuon's essential *Understanding Islam* is nowhere listed, nor Coomaraswamy's *Hinduism and Buddhism*. Niffari's *Mawâqif* and *Mukhâṭabât* get a listing after Sufism, but Niffari himself does not make the dictionary. The same with Kalâbâdhî. And where is Hujwârî? Since books issued as late as 1968 are included, where is Burckhardt's indispensable work, *Alchemy*, under this caption? And how is it possible that Scott's masterly 4-vol. *Hermetica* is not given after Hermes? If there is an article on Rûmî, and on Dhul Nûn, why not on Ibn al-Fârîdî, or Jâmî, 'Aṭṭâr, Jilî? If Buddhadatta, why not Anangavajra? As Vivekananda and Aurobindo each have a rubric, where is Sri Ramana Maharshi? Under Law (legislation) is material pertaining to China and Japan, but there is nothing to guide the uninformed reader to *Dharmaśâstra*, or Canon Law, or *Shari'a*, or to anything whatsoever for that matter pertaining to Jewish or Roman law. *Cit* is in the book, but neither *Sat*, nor *Ananda*, nor the combination of the three (apart from a mention of being and bliss as concomitant with the term named). Varuna gets attention, but not Mitra. *Mantra* is explained, and *Japa* missed. The Parousia is there, but not the Pantocrator, or the Paraclete. Since the Dance of Death

is given space, something might have been said about the Ship of Fools, although this is not so serious a *lapsus* as omission of the widespread devotion to the Fourteen Holy Helpers. As Noah and Chaucer have made the dictionary, why has Melchizedek been left out? Why should Anaxagoras have priority over Heraclitus or Parmenides? Iamblichus, and even Apuleius, over Plotinus? Scholasticism is summarily treated, while the Cambridge Platonists--unnamed—are only alluded to in passing, under Plato. Nowhere is there mention of Pico della Mirandola, Campanella, Ficino. Bunyan gets in, but not Eckhart, Suso, Tauter, Ruysbroeck, the *Theologia Germanica*, or the *Imitation of Christ*. Three-fourths of a page is devoted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but no room is found for Pascal, Jansenism, Savonarola, St. Thomas More, St. Catherine of Siena, or St. Bonaventura. The sole Christian artist who rates mention is—Hieronymous Bosch... And the reader will have to consult another dictionary if he wants information on the *Philokalia*, Hesychasm, Mount Athos, or St. Gregory Palamas. By contrast the Orthodox, or Eastern, Church is acknowledged—in half a column (the Reformation gets four and a half).

Certain entries on the other hand add little to the value of the book. How many readers are going to be taken in by the assertion that "the most notable examples [of Sacred Books] are: Bible; Qûr'an [*sic*]; Book of Granth; Book of Mormon"? All that is missing is *Science and Health*. About Noah we read that "N. was orig. a culture-hero of Heb. folklore who alleviated toil of agriculture by inventing wine (Gen. 9:20). The Yahwist writer obscures this theme by making N. hero of Flood."...Christ "was executed as a Messianic pretender, as were many others" (the article on Jesus reads as though taken from a Jewish encyclopedia: to confirm this the reader need only consult *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, by Werblowsky and Wigoder, Israel, 1966, and London, 1967)... Belief in Mary's perpetual virginity "evolved" in the 4th cent. because of "the emotional need, evident in many religs., to venerate the female principle."...Apostolic succession is a "theological theory rather than a historic fact." ...Original Sin is a doctrine "gradually developed" until its decline with 18th cent. rationalism and science... "Adjustment of Chr. eschatology caused by delay of Parousia led to invention of idea of Purgatory for accommodation of dead... until Last Judgment"—a little no doubt in the way that doctors invented pain in order to establish a practice.

Generous space is allotted to Judaism, getting seven pages to Christianity's one column (not counting the bibliography), but it is compromised by a progressivist approach that downgrades Moses, finds rabbinic Judaism the "clearest product of [Christ's] time," and sees the modern Jew untroubled by "the distinction between the sacred and the secular" in his aim "to bring about brotherhood of man and thus to estab. God's kingdom on earth." While speaking of space, the Psychology of Religion occupies more than three pages, and the "Honest to God" Debate more room than Christianity, as is also the case with Ecumenical Movement, Second Vatican Council, Sociology of Religion (eight and a half columns), Birth Control, etc. (equal space with Christianity is given to Marx and Tillich). There is also the equivocal use in dating of CE rather than AD throughout (Clement of Alexandria being the only exception spotted by the reviewer). It could be argued that this betokens impartiality in a reference work aimed for all faiths, but as in fact this book is largely intended for the Christian world, the constant recourse to CE brings in a slightly artificial or "antiseptic" note.

A truer dictionary in the sense of *lexicon* could be achieved by halving the thickness and doubling the number of pages of this book, using smaller type, and including every conceivable item, with entries limited to the briefest factual who/ what, when, where, and why. This would also largely eliminate the need for cross references, since any subject named would presumably appear in its, proper place alphabetically; the neutrality of such an approach would likewise shield contributors from the liability attaching to precarious evaluations. But the cost of a comparable undertaking would doubtless exceed the demand, then restricted to specialists in the field; whereas this dictionary is designed to attract a wide audience of students and general readers precisely by its claim to a ready stock of useful information abridged into small and legible articles spread over a vast field of subjects. Care should be taken before another printing to weed out a number of misprints which especially compromise the quality of a reference work.

¹ "It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization" (the United States Supreme Court, in its 1963 decision [*Abington v. Schempp*] ruling on prayer in public schools).