

The Significance Of The History Of Religions For The Systematic Theologian

The Rev. Dr. Paulus Johannes Tillich
12 October 1965
University of Chicago

Published in *The Future of Religions*, Ed. Jerald C. Brauer,
Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1966, pps. 80-94.

In this lecture, I wish to deal with three basic considerations. I call the first one "two basic decisions." A theologian who accepts the subject "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian," and takes this subject seriously, has already made, explicitly or implicitly, two basic decisions. On the one hand he has separated himself from a theology which rejects religions other than that of which he is a theologian. On the other hand if one accepts the subject affirmatively and seriously, he has rejected the paradox of a religion of non-religion, or a theology without *theos*, also called a theology of the secular.

Both of these attitudes have a long history. The former has been renewed in our century by Karl Barth. The latter is now most sharply expressed in the so-called theology-without-God language. For the former attitude, either the one religion is *vera religio*, true religion, against all others which are *religiones falsae*, false religions, or as it is expressed in modern terms, one's own religion is revelation, but the other religion is only a futile human attempt to reach God. This becomes the definition of all religion -- a futile human attempt to reach God.

Therefore, from this point of view it is not worthwhile to go into the concrete differences of the religions. I remember the half-hearted way in which, for example, Emil Brunner did it. I recall the theological isolation of historians

of religion like my very highly esteemed friend, the late Rudolf Otto, and even today the similar situation of a man like Friedrich Heiler. Also one recalls the bitter attacks on Schleiermacher for his use of the concept of religion for Christianity. I remember the attacks on my views when for the first time (forty years ago) I gave a seminar on Schleiermacher at Marburg. Such an approach was considered a crime at that time.

In order to reject both the old and the new orthodox attitude, one must accept the following systematic presuppositions. First, one must say that revelatory experiences are universally human. Religions are based on something that is given to man wherever he lives. He is given a revelation, a particular kind of experience which always implies saving powers. One never can separate revelation and salvation. There are revealing and saving powers in all religions. God has not left himself unwitnessed. This is the first presupposition.

The second assumption states that revelation is received by man in terms of his finite human situation. Man is biologically, psychologically, and sociologically limited. Revelation is received under the conditions of man's estranged character. It is received always in a distorted form, especially if religion is used as a means to an end and not as an end in itself.

There is a third presupposition that one must accept. When systematic theologians assume the significance of the history of religions, it involves the belief that there are not only particular revelatory experiences throughout human history, but that there is a revelatory process in which the limits of adaptation and the failures of distortion are subjected to criticism. Such criticism takes three forms: the mystical, the prophetic, and the secular.

A fourth assumption is that there may be -- and I stress this, there *may* be -- a central event in the history of religions which unites the positive results of those critical developments in the history of religion in and under which

revelatory experiences are going on -- an event which, therefore, makes possible a concrete theology that has universalistic significance.

There is also a fifth presupposition. The history of religions in its essential nature does not exist alongside the history of culture. The sacred does not lie beside the secular, but it is its depths. The sacred is the creative ground and at the same time a critical judgement of the secular. But the religious can be this only if it is at the same time a judgement on itself, a judgement which must use the secular as a tool of one's own religious self-criticism.

Only if the theologian is willing to accept these five presuppositions can he seriously and fully affirm the significance of the history of religions for theology against those who reject such significance in the name of a new or of an old absolutism.

On the other hand, he who accepts the significance of this history of religion must stand against the no-God-language theology. He must reject also the exclusive emphasis on the secular or the idea that the sacred has, so to speak, been fully absorbed by the secular.

The last of the five points, the point about the relation of the sacred and the secular, has already reduced the threat of the "God is dead" oracle. Religion must use the secular as a critical tool against itself, but the decisive question is: *Why are religions at all?* Here one means religions in the sense of a realm of symbols, rites and institutions. Can they not be neglected by a secular theologian in the same way he probably neglects the history of magic or of astrology? If he has no use for the idea of God, what can bring him to attribute high significance to the history of religion?

In order to affirm religions against the attack from this side, the theologian must have one basic presupposition. He must assume that religion as a structure of symbols of intuition and action -- that means myths and rites within a social group -- has lasting necessity for any, even the most

secularized culture and the most demythologized theology. I derive this necessity, the lasting necessity of religion, from the fact that spirit requires embodiment in order to become real and effective. It is quite well to say that the Holy, or the Ultimate, or the Word is within the secular realm and I myself have done so innumerable times. But in order to say that something is *in* something, it must have at least a possibility to be *outside* of it. In other words, that which is *in* and that *in* which it is, must be distinguishable. In some way their manifestations must differ. And this is the question: *In what does the merely secular differ from the secular which would be the object of a secular theology?*

Let me say the same thing in a well known, popular form. The reformers were right when they said that every day is the Lord's Day and, therefore, they devaluated the sacredness of the seventh day. But in order to say this, there must have been a Lord's Day, and that not only once upon a time but continuously in counter-balance against the overwhelming weight of the secular. This is what makes God-language necessary, however untraditional that language may be. This makes a serious affirmation of the history of religion possible.

Therefore, as theologians, we have to break through two barriers against a free approach to the history of religions: the orthodox-exclusive one and the secular-rejective one. The mere term "religion" still produces a flood of problems for the systematic theologian, and this is increased by the fact that the two fronts of resistance, though coming from opposite sides, involve an alliance. This has happened and *still* happens.

Both sides are reductionistic and both are inclined to eliminate everything from Christianity except the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. The neo-orthodox group does this by making him the exclusive place where the word of revelation can be heard. The secular group does the same things by making him the representative of a theologically relevant secularity. But this can be done only if the picture and message of Jesus is itself

drastically reduced. He must be limited to an embodiment of the ethical call, especially in the social direction, and this is then the only thing which is left of the whole message of the Christ. In *this* case, of course, history of religion is not needed any longer, not even the Jewish and Christian. Therefore, in order to have a valued, evaluated, and significant understanding of the history of religions, one has to break through the Jesus-centered alliance of the opposite poles, the orthodox as well as the secular.



Now I come to my second consideration: a theology of the history of religions. The traditional view of the history of religions is limited to that history as it is told in the Old and New Testaments, and enlarged to include history as the continuity of that history. Other religions are not qualitatively distinguished from each other. They are all perversions of a kind of original revelation but without particular revelatory experience of any value for Christian theology. They are pagan religions, religions of the nations, but they are not bearers of revelation and salvation. Actually, this principle was never fully carried through. Jews and Christians were both influenced religiously by the religions of conquered and conquering nations, and frequently these religions almost suffocated Judaism and Christianity and led to explosive reactions in both of them.

Therefore, what we need, if we want to accept the title of this lecture, “The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian,” is a theology of the history of religions in which the positive valuation of universal revelation balances the critical one. Both are necessary. This theology of the history of religions can help systematic theologians to understand the present moment and the nature of our own historical place, both in the particular character of Christianity and in its universal claim.

I am still grateful, looking back on my own formative period of study and the time after it, to what in German is called the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,

the School of History of Religions in biblical and church historical studies. These studies opened our eyes and demonstrated the degree to which the biblical tradition participates in the Asia Minor and Mediterranean tradition. I remember the liberating effect of the understanding of universal, human motives in the stories of Genesis, or in Hellenistic existentialism and in Persian eschatology as they appeared in the late periods of the Old and New Testaments.

From this point of view, all the history of religions produced symbols for savior figures which then supplied the framework for the New Testament understanding of Jesus and his work. This was liberating. These things did not fall from heaven like stones, but there was a long preparatory revelatory history which finally, in the *kairos*, in the right time, in the fulfilled time, made possible the appearance of Jesus as the Christ. All this was done without hurting the uniqueness of the prophetic attack on religion in the Old Testament and of the unique power of Jesus in the New Testament. Later on, in my own development, as in that of many other theologians, the significance was made clear both of the religions which surrounded the Old and New Testament situation, and the importance of religions farther removed from Biblical history.

The first question confronting a theology of the history of Israel and of the Christian Church is the history of salvation, but the history of salvation is something within a history. It is expressed in great symbolic moments, in *kairoi* such as the various efforts at reform in the history of the Church. In the same way, nobody would identify history of religions and history of salvation, or revelation, but one searches for symbolic moments. If the history of religions is taken seriously, are there *kairoi* in the general history of religions? Attempts have been made to find such *kairoi*. There was the enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Everything for these theologians was a preparation for the great *kairos*, the great moment, in which mature reason is reached in mankind. There are still religious elements of this

reason: God, freedom, immortality. Kant developed it in his famous book, *Religion Within The Limits Of Pure Reason*.

Another attempt was the romanticist understanding of history which led to Hegel's famous effort. From his point of view, there is a progressive history of religion. It progresses according to the basic philosophical categories which give the structure of all reality. Christianity is the highest and last point, and it is called "revealed religion," but this Christianity is philosophically demythologized. Such a view is a combination of Kantian philosophy and the message of the New Testament.

All earlier religions in Hegel's construction of the history of religions are *aufgehoben*, which can only be translated by two English words, namely, "taken in" and "removed." In this way, therefore, that which is past in the history of religion has lost its meaning. It is only an element in the later development. This means, for instance, that for Hegel the Indian religions are long, long past, long ago finished, and have no contemporary meaning. They belong to an early stage of history. Hegel's attempt to develop a theology of the history of religion resulted in the experiential theology which was strong in America about thirty years ago. It was based on the idea of remaining open to new experiences of religious character in the future. Today men like Toynbee point in this direction -- or perhaps look for that in religious experience which leads to a union of the great religions. In any case, it is a post-Christian era that is looking for such a construction.

It is necessary to mention also Teilhard de Chardin who stresses the development of a universal, divine-centered consciousness which is basically Christian. Christianity takes in all spiritual elements of the future. I am dissatisfied with such an attempt. I am also dissatisfied with my own, but I will give it in order to induce you to try yourself because that is what one should do if he takes the history of religions seriously.

My approach is dynamic-typological. There is no progressive development which goes on and on, but there are elements in the experience of the Holy which are always there, if the Holy is experienced. These elements, if they are predominant in one religion create a particular religious type. It is necessary to go into greater depth, but I will only mention a tentative scheme which would appear this way. The universal religious basis is the experience of the Holy within the finite. Universally in everything finite and particular, or in this and that finite, the Holy appears in a special way. I could call this the sacramental basis of all religions -- the Holy here and now which can be seen, heard, dealt with, in spite of its mysterious character. We can have remnants of this in the highest religions, in their sacraments, and I believe that without it, a religious group would become an association of moral clubs, as much of Protestantism is, because it has lost the sacramental basis.

Then, there is a second element, namely a critical movement against the demonization of the sacramental, making it into an object which can be handled. This element is embodied in various critical ways. The first of these critical movements is mystical. This mystical movement means that one is not satisfied with any of the concrete expressions of the Ultimate, of the Holy. One goes beyond them. Man goes to the one beyond any manifoldness. The Holy as the Ultimate lies beyond any of its embodiments. The embodiments are justified. They are accepted but they are secondary. One must go beyond them in order to reach the highest, the Ultimate itself. The particular is denied for the Ultimate One. The concrete is devaluated.

Another element, or the third element in the religious experience, is the element of "ought to be." This is the ethical or prophetic element. Here the sacramental is criticized because of demonic consequences like the denial of justice in the name of holiness. This is the whole fight of the Jewish prophets against sacramental religion. In some of the words of Amos and Hosea this is carried so far that the whole cult is abrogated. This criticism

of the sacramental basis is decisive for Judaism and is one element of Christianity. But again I would say, if this is without the sacramental and the mystical element, then it becomes moralistic and finally secular.

I would like to describe the unity of these three elements in a religion which one could call -- I hesitate to do so, but I don't know a better word -- "The Religion of the Concrete Spirit." And it might well be that one can say the inner *telos*, which means the inner aim of a thing, such as the *telos* of the acorn is to become a tree -- the inner aim of the history of religions is to become a Religion of the Concrete Spirit. But we cannot identify this Religion of the Concrete Spirit with any actual religion, not even Christianity as a religion. But I would dare to say, of course, dare as a Protestant theologian, that I believe that there is no higher expression for what I call the synthesis of these three elements than in Paul's doctrine of the Spirit. There we have the two fundamental elements: the ecstatic and the rational element united. There is ecstasy but the highest creation of ecstasy is love in the sense of *agape*. There is ecstasy but the other creation of ecstasy is *gnosis*, the knowledge of God. It is knowledge, and it is not disorder or chaos.

The positive and negative relation of these elements or motives now gives the history of religions its dynamic character. The inner *telos* of which I spoke, the Religion of the Concrete Spirit, is, so to speak, that toward which everything drives. But we cannot say that this is a merely futuristic expectation. It appears everywhere in the struggle against the demonic resistance of the sacramental basis and the demonic and secularistic distortion of the critics of the sacramental basis. It appears in a fragmentary way in many moments in the history of religions. Therefore, we have to absorb the past history of religions, and annihilate it in this way, but we have a genuine living tradition consisting in the moments in which this great synthesis became, in a fragmentary way, reality. We can see the whole history of religions in this sense as a fight for the Religion of the Concrete Spirit, a fight of God against religion within religion. And this

phrase, the fight of God within religion against religion, could become the key for understanding the otherwise extremely chaotic, or at least seemingly chaotic, history of religions.

Now, as Christians we see in the appearance of Jesus as the Christ the decisive victory in this struggle. There is an old symbol for the Christ, *Christus Victor*, and this can be used again in this view of the history of religions. And so it is already connected to the New Testament with the victory over the demonic powers and the astrological forces. It points to the victory on the cross as a negation of any demonic claim. And I believe we see here immediately that this can give us a Christological approach which could liberate us from many of the dead ends into which the discussion of the Christological dogma has led the Christian churches from the very beginning. In this way, the continuation of critical moments in history, of moments of *kairoi* in which the Religion of the Concrete Spirit is actualized fragmentarily can happen here and there.

The criterion for us as Christians is the event of the cross. That which has happened there in a symbolic way, which gives the criterion, also happens fragmentarily in other places, in other moments, has happened and will happen even though they are not historically or empirically connected with the cross.

Now I come to a question which was very much in the center of this whole conference, namely, how these dynamics of the history of religions are related to the relationship of the religious and the secular. The holy is not only open to demonization and to the fight of God against religion as a fight against the demonic implications of religion. But the holy is also open to secularization. And these two, demonization and secularization, are related to each other insofar as secularization is the third and most radical form of de-demonization. Now, this is a very important systematic idea.

You know the meaning of the term, profane, “to be before the doors of the sanctuary,” and the meaning of secular, “belonging to the world.” In both cases, somebody leaves the ecstatic, mysterious fear of the Holy for the world of ordinary rational structures. It would be easy to fight against this, to keep the people in the sanctuary, if the secular had not been given critical religious function by itself. And this makes the problem so serious. The secular is the rational and the rational must judge the irrationality of the Holy. It must judge its demonization.

The rational structure of which I am speaking implies the moral, the legal, the cognitive and the aesthetic. The consecration of life which the Holy gives is at the same time the domination of life by the ecstatic forms of the Holy, and the repression of the intrinsic demands of goodness, of justice, of truth and of beauty. Secularization occurring in such a context is liberation.

In this sense, both the prophets and the mystics were predecessors of the secular. The Holy became slowly the morally good, or the philosophically true, and later the scientifically true, or the aesthetically expressive. But then, a profound dialectic appears. The secular shows its inability to live by itself. The secular which is right in fighting against the domination by the Holy, becomes empty and becomes victim of what I call “quasi-religions.” And these “quasi-religions” imply an oppressiveness like the demonic elements of the religions. But they are worse, as we have seen in our century, because they are without the depths and the richness of the genuine religious traditions.

And here, another *telos*, the inner aim of the history of religions, appears. I call it *theonomy* from *theos* -- God -- and *nomos* -- law. If the autonomous forces of knowledge, of aesthetics, of law and morals point to the ultimate meaning of life, then we have theonomy. Then they are not dominated, but in their inner being they point beyond themselves to the Ultimate. In reality, there takes place another dynamic struggle, namely, between a

consecration of life, which becomes heteronomous, and a self-actualization of all the cultural functions, which becomes autonomous and empty.

Theonomy appears in what I called “the Religion of the Concrete Spirit,” in fragments, never fully. Its fulfillment is eschatological, its end is expectation which goes beyond time to eternity. This theonomous element in the relation of the sacred and the secular is an element in the structure of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. It is certainly progressive, as every action is. Even to give a lecture has in itself the tendency to make progress in some direction, but it is not progressivistic -- it doesn't imagine a temporal fulfillment one upon a time. And here I differ from Teilhard de Chardin to whom I feel very near in so many respects.



And now my third and last consideration: the interpretation of the theological tradition in the light of religious phenomena. Let me tell you about a great colleague, a much older colleague, at the University of Berlin, Adolph Harnack. He once said that Christianity in its history embraces all elements of the history of religions. This was a partially true insight, but he did not follow it through. He did not see that if this is so, then there must be a much more positive relationship between the whole history of religion and the history of the Christian Church. And so, he narrowed down his own constructive theology to a kind of high bourgeois, individualistic, moralistic theology.

I now want to return my thanks on this point to my friend Professor Eliade for the two years of seminars and the cooperation we had in them. In these seminars I experience that every individual doctrinal statement or ritual expression of Christianity receives a new intensity of meaning. And, in terms of a kind of an apologia yet also self-accusation, I must say that my own *Systematic Theology* was written before these seminars and had another intention, namely, the apologetic discussion against and with the secular. Its purpose was the discussion or the answering of questions

coming from the scientific and philosophical criticism of Christianity. **But perhaps we need a longer, more intensive period of interpretation of systematic theological study and religious historical studies. Under such circumstances the structure of religious thought might develop in connection with another or different fragmentary manifestation of theonomy or of the Religion of the Concrete Spirit. This is my hope for the future of theology.** [Emphasis added. Typist's comment: without knowing it, Professor Tillich is referring to Sathya Sai Baba, whose first self-revelation in Western countries was three years following the time of this lecture.]

To see this possibility one should look to the example of the emphasis on the particular which the method of the history of religions gives to the systematic theologian. It is to be seen in two negations: against a supranatural and against a natural theology. First, one sees this in supranatural theology which was the way classical Protestant orthodoxy formulated the idea of God in systematic theology. This concept of God appears in revelatory documents which are inspired but were not prepared for history. For orthodoxy these views are found in the biblical books, or **for Islam in the Koran.** [Emphasis added. Typist's comment: Professor Tillich foresaw the struggle Islam would have when exposed to the demand for demythologization of its scriptures by the criticism of a secularism it could not fend off forever.] From there, dogmatic statements are prepared out of the material of the holy books by the Church, usually in connection with doctrinal struggles, formulated in creeds or official collections of doctrines, and theologically explained with the help of philosophy. All this was done without looking beyond the revelatory circle which one calls one's own religion or faith. This is the predominant method in all Christian churches.

Then there is the method of natural theology, the philosophical derivation of religious concepts from an analysis of reality encountered as a whole, and especially from an analysis of the structures of the human mind. Often these concepts, God and others, are then related to traditional doctrines; sometimes they are not related.

These are the two main methods traditionally used. The method of the history of religions takes the following steps: first, it uses the material of the tradition as existentially experienced by those who work theologically. But since one works theologically, he must also have the detachment which is necessary to observe any reality. This is the first step.

In the second step, the historian of religions takes over from the naturalistic methodology the analysis of mind and reality to show where the religious question is situated in human experience both within ourselves and within our world. For instance, the experience of finitude, the experience of concern about the meaning of our being, the experience of the Holy as Holy and so on.

Then the third step is to present a phenomenology of religion, showing the phenomena, especially that which shows itself in the history of religions -- the symbols, the rites, the idea, and the various activities.

Then the fourth step consists in the attempt to point out the relation of these phenomena -- their relatedness, their difference, their contradictions -- to the traditional concepts and to the problems that emerge from this.

Finally, the historian of religions tries to place the reinterpreted concepts into the framework of the dynamics of religious and secular history and especially into the framework of our present religious and cultural situation.

Now these five steps include part of the earlier methods but they introduce that which was done by the earlier methods into the context of the history of the human race and in the experiences of mankind as expressed in the great symbols of religious history.

The last point, namely, putting everything into the present situation, leads to another advantage, or if you wish to call it so, to a new element of truth.

This provides the possibility of understanding religious symbols in relation to the social matrix within which they have grown and **into which we have to reintroduce them today.** [Emphasis added.] This is an exceedingly important step. Religious symbols are not stones falling from heaven. They have their roots in the totality of human experience including local surroundings, in all of their ramifications, both political and economic. And these symbols then can be understood partly as in revolt against them. And in both cases, this is very important for our way of using symbols and reintroducing them.

A second positive consequence of this method is that we can use religious symbolism as a language of the doctrine of man, as the language of anthropology, not in the empirical sense of this word, but in the sense of the doctrine of man -- man in his true nature. The religious symbols say something to us about the way in which men have understood themselves in their very nature. **The discussion about the emphasis on Sin in Christianity and the lack of such emphasis in Islam is a good example. This shows a fundamental difference in the self-interpretation of two great religions and cultures, of men as men.** [Emphasis added.] And in this way, we enlarge our understanding of the nature of man in a way which is more embracing than any particular technical psychology.

But now my last word. What does this mean for our relationship to the religion of which one is a theologian? Such a theology remains rooted in the experiential basis. Without this, no theology at all is possible. But it tries to formulate the basic experiences which are universally valid in universally valid statements. **The universality of religious statement does not lie in an all-embracing abstraction which would destroy religion as such, but it lies in the depths of every concrete religion.** [Emphasis added.] Above all it lies in the openness to spiritual freedom both from one's own foundation and for one's own foundation.