

## Is Christianity Unique?

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Religious leaders who are not strongly attached to biblical Christianity have on occasion recommended a so-called “universal” religion synthesized from elements of all the world religions. This proposal can be buttressed by the allegation that Christianity itself is a synthesis of borrowing from earlier systems of worship. The idea of the Virgin Birth, it is said, has been copied from the story of Buddha's birth or from Greek mythology, and the doctrines of Paul are explained as adaptations from the Greek mysteries. Machioro even asserts that Paul as an intimate to the pagan rites. Conservative Christians, on the other hand, maintain that Christianity is unique.

For example, J. Gresham Machen in his monumental work, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, produces evidence to show that the original account of Buddha's birth contains no extraordinary factor, and that only after Christian had come on the scene were those stories altered in the direction of a virgin birth. The same author in *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, and other authors as well, explode the theory that Paul borrowed from the pagan mysteries. Thus Christianity has been defended as unique.

Such studies are all to the good. Christianity would be compromised if it could be shown to be a mosaic of borrowings. Yet, the fact that Christianity is unique is subject to an exaggerated evaluation, For, when one analyzes the situation, it will be discovered that every religion is unique—Buddhism and Islam as well as Christianity. In fact, failure to recognized this results both in a misunderstanding of Christianity and in a false philosophy of religion as well.

THE ERROR OF SYNCRETISM

Nearly all volumes of the philosophy of religion assume that there is a common, universal phenomenon, religion, which may be the subject matter of a single science. William E. Hocking in *Living Religions and a World Faith* commences by asserting—“In its nature religion is universal and one.” The same author in a later volume, *The Coming World Civilization* (p. 149), emphasizes and elaborates the same idea. Other authors are in essential agreement on this point.

The unity of religion is sometimes sought in an experience of conversion, an integration of personality, or some sort of emotion. The present article cannot discuss extensively this point of view except to say that it is entirely too broad a definition of religion. Any selected emotional experience (abstracted from intellectual or doctrinal content) can be found in politics, marriage business success, and in aesthetic experience as often as in religion. Here the topic must be restricted to religious *ideas*.

TRUTH THE DECISIVE CRITERION

The reason every religion is unique is that each one is a particular complex, and the several factors are independent. If it were not so technical, a comparison might be drawn with Euclidean and noneuclidean geometries, or even with plans and spherical geometry. They may all use the word *triangle*, but the word does not mean the same thing in the several cases. In plane geometry a triangle is a figure that necessarily contains 180 degrees. A spherical triangle must contain more. Both triangles are bounded by straight lines, but “straight lines” do not mean the same thing. So it is in religion, and even more so: a common word may be used in two or more religions, but not a common idea. For example, Christianity, Islam, and orthodox Judaism all talk about God. Indeed, they all talk about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Notwithstanding this striking identity in phraseology, the three religions do not mean the same thing. Obviously the triune God, whose second person is Jesus Christ, is not the God of Judaism or Islam. The disparity is still more obvious if one analyzes the ideas of sin, salvation, or the future life. Each of these ideas is formed in relation to each of the others within a single religion. Clearly *heaven* is not the same in all. When further we add Buddhism to this list of religions, the situation becomes still more complex—or, rather, still more clear and simple. Nirvana and heaven (either the Christian one or the Mohammedan) are not the same thing at all. One form of Buddhism, possibly it is the purer form, is definitely atheistic. All plausibility therefore that heaven, or God, or any other idea is the common definitive element in a universal religion is lost. And it is virtually rubbing an author's nose into it to ask: Is communism a religion? Does one say that communism is antireligious? If so, it is none the less zealously and religiously so.

From a systematic point of view the inductive attempt to find a common element in all religions involves a hysteron-proteron; that is, it requires at the outset the knowledge it professes to obtain at the end. Let us take a parallel case. If Lewis Carroll tells Alice to examine all Snarks to find their common nature, Alice, at least in her waking moments, would not know whether all the objects before her were snarks or even whether any of them were. The philosophy of religion is in the same perplexity with Alice. The objects before it are Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so on. Are they religions or are they not? This question could be answered only after we knew the common element in all religion—only after a list of religions had been drawn up. But to draw up the list requires the knowledge that induction from the list is supposed to provide. Thus it is that so many volumes on the philosophy of religion or on comparative religions proceed on an impossible foundation.

The attempt to consider religion as a common, universal phenomenon ought really to be abandoned. There are religions, but there is no religions. Christianity is unique. Neither the Virgin Birth nor the Pauline theology was borrowed from other religions, and to try to merge these ideas in some syncretistic religion is to destroy Christianity. There would remain neither sin, heaven, nor Jesus Christ. But of course Islam is unique too and would equally be destroyed in a merger. The more important question therefore is not whether Christianity is unique, but whether Christianity is true.

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