

EDITORIAL NOTE

There has been a marked renewal of interest in religious problems of late. This has come about in many ways. Prominent among them is the course which has been taken by recent philosophy. As is well known, philosophy in English-speaking countries has been largely empiricist and linguistic. At first this involved much scepticism about religion. It was taken that the main ideas we find in religion, the ideas of God or the soul or immortality and so on, could not be accounted for in empiricist terms and had to be ascribed to confusions in which language played a major part. Religious ideas did not make sense and it was important to disabuse us of them by showing how it happened that they seemed to make sense. There was much debunking of religion in this vein. Others sought, in grave desperation, to reconcile the practice of religion with empiricism. Religion would be thought to be entirely a matter of some slant we may have on the world around us or of some moral policy to be encouraged by our entertaining in thought certain stories which have no need to be true in any way. The question of truth and falsity would be shelved by various other devices, such as the suggestion that we may 'believe in' without 'believing that'. A more open exercise of linguistic techniques, following especially the shift in the teaching of Wittgenstein, directed attention to the oddity of religious language and sought to remove it out of the sphere where ordinary standards of truth and falsity applied. Other thinkers found, in the challenge of contemporary empiricism, a means of renewing and sharpening the emphasis on the uniqueness of religious claims and the mysterious transcendent nature of God. The changes rung on these themes are many, and there is little doubt that, in a variety of ways, they have brought about a new insight into the nature of religion and the way its problems should be handled. There is not, of course, agreement about the way forward or about the precise nature of the gains to religious understanding that have resulted from the controversies about religion in recent philosophy. But few will deny that the subject is a very live one again, among the liveliest of all philosophical issues. Meetings of philosophers to discuss religious questions have been outstandingly successful and departments of philosophy at the universities have been prompted by this interest to extend considerably their provision for the teaching of the subject. It has even been suggested that the main advances in philosophy, in the near future, may come through the renewal of interest in major religious questions.

This ferment of enquiry about religion among philosophers has come about moreover at a time when substantial advances have been made in other modes of religious study. New techniques are employed in the study of the history of religions and a wealth of new material is being subjected to exceptionally close analysis. This raises questions about the scope of the subject

and the methods appropriate to it. How far, for example, can the subject be treated scientifically? There are certainly some questions in the study of religions which can be settled in a scientific way and with the high degree of finality with which many scientific hypotheses are confirmed. When religious relics are uncovered in the course of archaeological investigations the times when they were in use can be fairly accurately determined from the scientific analysis of the soil in which they were deposited. At this point the methods of very exact science can be used. It is also possible to apply statistical methods of investigation to matters like church attendance or the formal membership of various denominations. We can learn with precision what implements are used in worship and in what sort of ritual they are used. We can discover, even in the case of religions of great antiquity, how people built their temples in times past, how they buried their dead, what ceremonies of marriage they performed and so on. But the meaning of these performances, the significance of the implements used in the course of them and of the style of building in which they took place—all this is more speculative and elusive. Some scholars, indeed, go so far as to insist that the more uncertain speculative question is not a matter of proper academic and scholarly enquiry. That view was vigorously advanced, in the course of insisting that the study of religions should be severely scientific, at a recent conference of the International Association for the History of Religions at Marburg. Others protested that this imposed disastrous limitations on the conduct of an otherwise colourful and exciting investigation. They found the more distinctive features of their subject in attempts to probe the deeper levels of religious practice and examine the beliefs which appeared to inspire the outward performance. The debate continues, and there are many related questions about the scope and methods of the study of religions which the advances made in the subject, and the availability of new techniques to those engaged in it, have accentuated and made more urgent for the right conduct and direction of the subject as a major and rapidly extending form of scholarly investigation today.

A closely similar situation is created by the developments of new techniques for the study of languages and by the considerable advances made in the investigation of the languages which have not until recently come under the close and careful scrutiny of professional scholars. Here again new questions present themselves. It is well known, for example, that the novice can make exceptionally rapid progress in the mastery of languages by the use of new techniques today, and this leads us to ask what supplementation of this skill is most appropriate to provide richer acquaintance with the substance of the cultures which the languages serve. How far is it possible to proceed at early stages beyond the speedy mastery of linguistic skills? To these problems of general education must be added problems more intrinsic to scholarly procedures as such, namely the problems of the ways in which our understanding of

various religions is affected by our more extensive and reliable knowledge of certain sacred scriptures and similar religious documents. Closely related to this is the very difficult, but most important, question of how far the scholarly study of the text and history of sacred scriptures is dependent on a sound and sympathetic understanding of the main religious matters with which they are concerned. Is religious insight—or religious belief—a condition of sound religious scholarship? Has the believer an advantage, in this field, over his secular colleague?

There can certainly be little doubt that the exciting findings of the scholarly study of religions today raise important questions of interpretation. We have in addition the possibility of closer co-operation between scholars with different cultural and religious backgrounds. With this comes a brighter prospect of removing grievous misunderstanding and of appreciating better what points of affinity there are between religions—and where there also remain radical differences. There certainly seem to be important ways in which one religion may help us to understand another. Those concerned, in a Christian context, about the nature and authority of revelation can learn much from what recent scholars have taught us about the idea of suggestion—as implied in a term like *awhā*—in Muslim writings, and Muslim and Christian alike can benefit much from the reflections of Hindu scholars upon the place of figurative and symbolic terms in their sacred literature.

Co-operation in these ways does not presuppose any easy syncretism—as an achievement or as an ultimate ideal. The concern of scholarly study is with the truth, but the attainment of truth and understanding serves the best interest of all religions—and few of the votaries of any religion will have the boldness to deny this.

Nor can it be doubted that, in the major religions of the world, we have an extensive body of sophisticated thought. It would be absurd to try to understand these religions without investigation of the doctrines they commend and the philosophical notions involved in the presentation of the doctrines. In these cases there can be no final understanding without proceeding beyond the investigation of outward observances to reflection on the inner meaning or the body of beliefs and expectations by which the outward practice is governed.

To all these matters there remain also to be made the contributions of psychology, sociology and anthropology. These can take many forms. There is, for example, the application to religion of principles thought to be established in these disciplines, together with the repercussions on such principles of matters which come most into prominence in religion itself. A particularly important point of convergence for the studies mentioned and for religious studies is that where literary work and literary criticism can be brought to bear on the imaginative examination of the sort of experiences which lie behind the more powerful symbolism and credal affirmations of

the great religions. Contemporary fiction has considerable relevance to certain traditional religious utterances, although this may not be evident on the surface; and that is only one of the many ways in which art and art criticism are of the utmost importance for religion.

It is not surprising, in the light of recent advances in the study of religion and of the ramifications of these in many other areas of culture and study, that the universities should be providing more scope for the subject in its various forms and extending it well beyond the confines of the Christian studies with which our faculties of theology are mainly concerned. Nor is it strange that much space should be accorded to religious topics even in journals which are not expressly concerned with religion. Philosophical journals have published, in recent years, several extremely original and highly controversial articles on religion. Indeed, so prominent have religious topics been in recent philosophical discussions that editors of journals have sometimes set aside entire issues for the treatment of some religious theme. *Philosophy*, for example, devoted the whole of its July number for 1957 to articles on religion and contemporary empiricism, and *The Monist* for the spring of 1963 was given wholly to religious subjects. Some extremely subtle attempts to restate the ontological argument for God's existence have sparked off a spate of discussions of this topic in learned journals. But the articles which have appeared in these ways have been scattered over a number of journals which do not command the same public. The interest tends to be dissipated and the controversies to lack a focus and a means of securing sustained and co-ordinated discussion. The insights gained at the level of expert scholarly study also need to be related more effectively to the extensive renewal of popular interest in religious questions.

It is hoped that *Religious Studies* will help to meet these needs. The number of articles in each issue will not be large, but the space ensured in that way for each contributor must not lead to any lowering of the highest standards of precision and clarity. Those who have important things to say at some length will be encouraged to do so. But the journal will have no room for the exploitation of cloudy metaphor or any other devices for the provision of needlessly elaborate ways of saying things which could be put simply and briefly. No point of view or attitude will be excluded provided the highest standards are maintained in presenting them. It is also hoped from time to time to arrange replies to articles published in the journal. Space will be reserved more for articles than reviews, but there will be book-discussions of outstanding works as they appear, surveys of books on related themes and short book-notes. This should provide a forum for open and instructive debate and also a means of keeping the reader informed about the main developments in the areas of study to which the journal is devoted.