BOOK REVIEWS


The author of this work (from the inside of whose title page it appears that this is the second edition) is a Dutch scholar of the History of Religion and is not an Islamist—indeed, he does not claim to know even the Arabic language. The problem with which he is concerned in this work also lies essentially in the field of Comparative Religion: How is it possible for the follower of one religion to come to a genuine and creative understanding of another. It is, therefore, primarily concerned with methodology. In the work under review the author has chosen as a test case the attempts of the modern West to understand Islam and, hence, it may be considered a practical application of this methodology—or, rather, the methodology is, so to say, “inductively” supposed to be inferred from the actual instances provided in this book. Hence the title of the book “Islam in the Mirror of the Occident”.

The largest part of the work is devoted to the life and work of five selected Western scholars of Islam—Goldziher, Snouck Hurgronje, Becker, Macdonald and Massignon. Their life, background, nature and method of education, nature and method of work on Islam and their conclusions about Islam are analysed in great (and often repetitive) details. In each case it is endeavoured to seek out how the backgrounds—mental and otherwise—of these scholars have coloured their conclusions about Islam. I must confess that the author comes out with certain startling conclusions relative to the five scholars studied. Among them, he finds Massignon and Macdonald as coming nearest to the fulfilment of his requirements for “creative” study of another religion. About Massignon, he asserts that he had “identified” himself with the object of his research, i.e. al-Hallaj and Sufis in general. The only question is whether the selections of al-Hallaj and Sufis in general as Islam or as representatives of Islam is itself not utter subjectivism. Similarly, to state about Macdonald that he “mentally went out of his own milieu” and “discovered the ‘Creator-God’ of Islam by Whom he was spiritually overwhelmed”, seems to me a dereliction of all standards of objective appreciation—particularly when the missionary Macdonald firmly held that Christianity was infinitely superior to Islam. (We are not, of course, questioning here the scholarship either of Massignon or of Macdonald).

This raises the basic question of what is the object of studying another religion than one’s own? Is it pure, objective scholarship—irrespective of whether this is achievable or completely achievable or not? Or, is it in order to create a sympathetic understanding at a human level? Or, thirdly, is it in order to enrich one’s own religious heritage? Or, finally, is it in order to “create” something new? Numerous statements of the author interspersed all over the book lend support to each of the above alternatives. He not only insistently repeats that objectivity is absolutely requisite but this seems to be the legacy of the entire
exercise of this work. On the other hand, he explicitly states that it is neither possible nor desirable for the student of another religion to be denuded of an initial point of view (see especially p. 324)—which, of course, must colour his appreciation. There are other questions of a similar nature which arise from the book but to which it is difficult to give a satisfactory answer. His decided preference for Massignon and Macdonald to the scholarly performance (although this is at times mixed with sarcasm, no doubt) of Goldziher and Snouck Hurgronje would seem to argue that appreciation of religious phenomena is something over and above that of merely historical or sociological facts; on the other hand, he explicitly rejects that there is a particular "religious dimension" to facts or their appreciation and proclaims that religious appreciation "arises out of" the consideration of facts (pp. 319-20). He also nowhere defines what a religious fact is. In the circumstances, we cannot do better than state the process of religious appreciation as the author himself has described it to us. This is contained in the last chapter of the book.

To "comprehend," according to the author, is much more than to "know". After a knowledge of detailed facts, one has to discover (project?) a coherence into these facts so that they make a "whole". In the soul of the researcher, there must be an "openness (ouverture)" for the phenomenon studied and the phenomenon studied must also "open itself up" to the mental eye of the researcher. There is no special method of religious research, which distinguishes it from other forms of scientific research, nor is there a special dimension which makes us appreciate religious facts in a way other than, say, scientific facts. There must be no preconceived prejudices or depreciation of the phenomenon studied; otherwise, there will be no mutual "openness". There has to be, however, an initial point of view, as we have seen before. But there must be total "epochy" or suspension of judgement on the part of the subject (p. 322). The subject must be "attracted" or "drawn" by the power of the object and the former must exhibit a total absence of spiritual activity in face of the religious phenomenon. Among the objective facts of a religion, certain aspects have to be "selected" as central. Thus, in the case of Islam, the concept of Allah, the God, the centre of human activity, pervasive and transcendent, in Whom there is a sense of total dependence, must be given the central weight. (One wonders if this is quite true of al-Hallaj and his disciple Massignon!).

The question of all questions is, no doubt, what is the criterion of selecting central concepts of a religion and structuring them. The book of Jean-Jacques Waardenburg is extremely interesting because it raises all these questions at once. The difficulties that we have underlined are not so much criticisms of Dr. Waardenburg but represent a frame-work of so many tensions endemic to the field of comparative religion—for all study of a foreign religion is in the final analysis an exercise in comparative religion. These difficulties are not perhaps so much objections to be answered or impediments to be removed but constitute genuine tensions within a healthy balance of which lies the hope for a fruitful inter-religious dialogue for humanity.

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