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1923.

651ST ORDINARY GENERAL MEETING.

HELD IN COMMITTEE ROOM B, THE CENTRAL HALL,
WESTMINSTER, S.W., ON MONDAY, MARCH 12TH, 1923,
AT 4.30 P.M.

GEORGE ANTHONY KING, ESQ., M.A., IN THE CHAIR.

The Minutes of the previous Meeting were read, confirmed, and signed, and the Honorary Secretary announced the election of Miss D. Johnston as an Associate.

The CHAIRMAN then introduced the Rev. Professor A. S. Geden, M.A., D.D., to read his paper on "Value and Purpose of the Study of Comparative Religion."

VALUE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION. By the Rev. Professor A. S. GEDEN, M.A., D.D.

IT is no longer necessary to apologise for the claims or to urge the importance of the study of Comparative Religion. The youngest of the sciences, it has won for itself a place in the foremost rank, and in importance and interest is second to no other. If there is a science of sciences, the science of Comparative Religion may reasonably claim to hold that place. It concerns itself not with dead matter, if matter indeed there be, but with the living thought of man; and not with the present thought only, but with every thought of the past as it has touched and been illuminated by the spirit of truth and faith and unbounded hope. If the mind is greater than the body, then a science that endeavours to understand and to classify and to make available for present and future profit the highest activities of the mind is not of secondary importance, but primary, and should be of interest to every one. And although the movements and endeavours of the mind may be more elusive than material qualities and forces, and lend themselves less readily to dogmatic assertion and description, they are incomparably more influential for the happiness and well-being of the human race. The wedlock of mind and matter, close as it is, is not equal. Mind

is greater and regnant. And if we know and can know nothing of mind separate from matter, it is a long step forward of assumption and defect of logical faculty to declare that it does not and cannot so exist. The science of Comparative Religion has taken as its study man's thought of God, the greatest of all themes, his relation to the supernatural and the Divine, and the many and various ways in which he has sought to express that relationship and to make manifest in religious act and observance his consciousness of dependence on a higher power.

It is no doubt true that in this science all or most of that which has been hitherto accomplished may rightfully be described rather as the clearing of the ground and the laying of foundations than the raising of great superstructures of concept or theory. The workers in this vast, almost limitless field have never been other than few. The science is yet young in years. It has been established only within the recent memory of most of us. And that so much has been effected and so widely recognised and authoritative a position won is a tribute to the zeal and ability of those who have constituted themselves its advocates. Nevertheless, to change the metaphor, it is still feeling its feet. And its history during the comparatively short period of its existence is unfortunately strewn with the wrecks of premature theories and of generalisations based on insufficient data. Perhaps therefore it may be permissible to urge once again, as has often before been urged, the need of patience. The sure results already attained have been worth all the labour. The field of research, however, is as wide as the human race in all ages; its resources will not be exhausted, or all its secrets unravelled for many generations to come. But the profit is already here, in part. The fulness will be for those who come after us during many fruitful years.

Religion, moreover, as the highest and noblest occupation of the human mind and thought cannot remain unaffected by the narrowing of the world that has taken place and is taking place all around us. Nations and lands are nearer together in these days, owing to facilities and increase of communications, than they have ever been. And if nearer in the possibilities of merchandise, and of civil and political intercourse, then surely in the greater things of the religious life and faith. It is no longer possible to live in water-tight compartments, to ignore or refuse to consider sympathetically the convictions and thoughts of other peoples. And if it were possible, it is neither desirable nor

right. It is due to this richer intercourse that it is less difficult to understand and appreciate modes of thought and ideas different from our own, the various ways in which others regard the world and the super-world, whether of man or of gods. If we believe that we have received and know something better than they, we have no right to withhold it from them. They also have something to teach us, and we have much to learn. Contact with the richest and purest thought of other peoples has shown us that we cannot refuse the position of the learner, even while we are anxious to communicate the best that we know. That is essentially the attitude of the serious student of comparative religion. He investigates other schemes and systems of religions, partly no doubt, and sometimes, from an intelligent curiosity, the acquisitive desire to know, but also that he may make the best that is in them a part of his heritage of inmost conviction and hope and joy.

It is necessary to attempt to define religion. It is not, however, easy, as is evidenced perhaps by the many definitions that have been given, some of them sorely complicated and difficult to understand. The more simple and comprehensive the definition that we frame the more adequate we may hope that it will be to the need, and the greater the contribution to exact and fruitful knowledge. In what does religion consist? What is the motive or thought that is more or less consciously in our minds when we speak, not of a religion such as Christianity or Buddhism, or of religions, but of religion itself? The definition must be adequate not only to civilised but to uncivilised man. For it is acknowledged to-day that to be religiously inclined is a universal instinct of the human race. As some one has expressed it, "man is a religious animal." If there is a universal emotion or propensity of the human heart, present in some degree in all men, it is the religious. No definition will be sufficient or true which does not take this fact into account. It seems to me that the essential motive and well-spring of religion is the instinct of worship, of reverence paid or payable to some higher power, it may be hurtful or merely mischievous, but at least greater than the man himself, and requiring even in his own interest propitiation and homage. The definition may perhaps appear at first sight to include emotions and thoughts that we have not been accustomed to regard as religious. It is admittedly difficult to draw the line. I would venture to urge, however, that it is better to be generous in inclusion, than strict in exclusion.

Where there is reverence or worship there is the spirit of religion. In its absence religion does not and cannot subsist. If you find a man worshipping, though the object of his worship may be utterly unworthy, there at least in its beginnings, in embryo, religion finds a place in his heart.

Religion then is universal, the possession of all peoples and of all times. God "hath not left Himself without a witness" (Acts xiv, 17). "He is not far from each one of us" (*ib.* xvii, 27). The solidarity of the race is reflected and repeated in the universality of the religious faith. There is everywhere above and beyond that which commands our homage and claims our worship. And if the witness is of God it is not false. It may be buried beneath the accumulations of human invention, or the rubbish of human fancies and fears. But it is there, Divine truth, cloaked and disguised almost beyond recognition, but not altogether or hopelessly lost. In other words, in every religious system, and even in the unsystematised and fluctuating beliefs of primitive and savage peoples, there is an element of truth, a conviction that is not entirely misleading or false, whose witness is real and reliable, and points the way to higher things. And if you want to sort out and classify religions in a gradation of better or worse, of more or less superiority and outstanding excellence, it is this measure you must use; only on this standard can you justify the claim of Christianity or any other faith to be the best, or press its acceptance upon all men. Especially in all the so-called great religions, and in faiths present or past which have won the allegiance of considerable numbers of men, we must recognise that there is much that is right and worthy, the destruction or loss of which would be to the impoverishment of the human race. This also is part of the theme or subject of research of the science of Comparative Religion, the thoughts which have engaged the minds of men with regard to the nature of their god, their relation to him, and the communications which he can or does make to them. And, on the other hand, its attention is given not only to the facts of human belief, but to the practice of faith by way of ritual and ceremony, forms of worship and prayer, and in general the external means or manner in which the faith finds more or less adequate expression.

In all these things Christianity is not isolated, alone and solitary. It is related both in belief and practice to other religions, as other faiths share with it their forms and creeds. It would not be impossible to draw up a pedigree of the main

religious systems as a genealogical tree is constructed or imagined of man's physical relationship and descent. Such a pedigree would be instructive, and its teachings of the utmost interest. There is no need to fear the results of such investigation or comparison as far as Christianity is concerned. It would argue a poor confidence in the excellence and permanence of any faith to refuse to submit it to a comparative test. The science of Comparative Religion should be a most welcome ally to any man or to any religion that believes itself to have anything worth holding, knowledge or belief that is worth imparting to others and that will bring them good.

The study of man is the greatest of all studies, and the most profoundly interesting and important. Anthropology has taken as its province his bones, his physical framework and material surroundings. Psychology his soul, and the relation of one soul to another, and of each to the body. Philosophy his speculative thought and his conjectures as to the unseen. The science of Comparative Religion, however, has adopted all human thought as its subject, and uses these and other sciences as its handmaids, unifying and transcending them all. Theology, the science of the knowledge of God, is at its side, and they are mutually interpretative. The only condition imposed on the student is that of fearless loyalty to the truth, to follow whither it may lead, to weigh in an impartial balance every theory or preconceived dogma, and to formulate a judgment without prejudice and without fear.

(1) Among some of the tribes of Central and North-Central Africa it was early reported that there existed a belief in a great supreme God, who was beyond and above the host of minor gods and goddesses who worried or assisted mankind. Active worship was not offered to him, for he was believed to be too distant and great to concern himself with the affairs of the human race. He was the source of all, and the Creator, but in his remote majesty was now indifferent to the needs and inaccessible to the prayers of man his offspring; and the latter therefore had recourse in his need to the hosts of lesser deities, malignant or beneficent, by whom he was closely surrounded, and whose influence on his life for well-being or for ill was most potent and unceasing. The unseen and inattentive Lord of all was therefore ignored, and his existence often forgotten. The students of Comparative Religion, and indeed many others, were attracted by this doctrine or discovery, and their interest greatly aroused. It seemed to

indicate a larger, purer faith, as it were in the background, above and almost certainly earlier than the degraded systems of polytheism and magic now accepted and current. Many inquiries were instituted, and it was found that such beliefs existed dim and faded among many uncivilised and savage peoples on more than one continent. It was a fair inference from the ease and facility with which such a supreme divinity passed into oblivion, that tribes among whom a belief of this character is not now to be found may very probably have possessed such a belief in former times. It was obviously impossible to prove its existence among ancient or extinct peoples; nor was it natural or to be expected that a place should be found for it in the rude records of primitive tribes. The nations also that are possessed of higher and more elaborate systems of religious faith have passed beyond the stage at which such beliefs would be noteworthy or significant. Moreover, it is only by those in the close confidence of the natives themselves that beliefs of this nature can be verified or reported. The traveller, who passes by, has no opportunity of knowing these things, or of discovering a vague and half-forgotten religious faith. To the Christian apologist, however, this widespread belief in the existence of a supreme God, unique in attributes and power, is of supreme interest. Such a belief is not now, and it is impossible to prove that at any time it was, universal. The fact, however, that patient and sympathetic inquiry has so often confirmed its existence where previously no trace of it was known, creates a strong presumption that it was formerly more prevalent than it is to-day. The tendency of the belief is towards oblivion. Its resuscitation or revival never takes place so far as our knowledge goes. Where it is renewed it is in a different form and under the inspiration of new teaching and a new faith.

(2) In a royal tomb in the so-called Valley of the Kings at Thebes there have been found great treasures of gold and jewellery, of furniture and ornaments and food, stored there after the death of the king Tutankhamen, to whom the tomb belonged. Tutankhamen was the last monarch of a short-lived dynasty, of greater religious significance than any other that at any time reigned in Egypt. Its brevity is illustrated by the fact that Tutankhamen, the last to occupy the throne, was son-in-law of the founder of the dynasty, and apparently restored at Thebes the authority and practice of the idolatrous worship of Amen, which his father-in-law had sought to discredit and destroy.

The religious worship and faith which Akhenaten endeavoured to establish, dissociating himself from the ritual and creed of his predecessors and of the priests of Egypt, embodied perhaps in its purest form a belief and cult almost as widespread as the human race itself. Christianity alone together with the faiths associated with or derived from it has been free from a worship which has drawn and captivated the mind and thought of man throughout the ages; and from the furthest part of India to the uttermost coasts of the new continent you will find its influence more or less yet potent. To the savage or uncultured man it would seem as natural to pay homage to the sun, the source of warmth and of all good, as to breathe the air or welcome the light. The reform of creed and worship in Egypt, which owed its initiation and strength to Akhenaten, endeavoured to substitute for the gods many and lords many of the established religion, with its splendid temples and elaborate ritual, the simple reverence for the sun, the only life-giver and benefactor of all. In the familiar pictures Akhenaten, his wife and daughters, are seen nourished and upheld by the sun's rays, which stretch down to them and hold to their lips the symbol of life. To quote the eloquent hymn of praise to the sun, the authorship of which there is some reason to attribute to Akhenaten himself, would be out of place here. But it breathes the spirit of a true monotheism, of simple faith and a pure devotion. It is the fashion to decry Akhenaten as a weakling and a dreamer because, forsooth, he did not go forth to war. But though he may have failed to maintain the pomp and outward success of his predecessors, that king was no weakling who in the valley of the Nile three and a half millenniums ago could break away from the debased religion of his forefathers, and set up a true monotheistic faith and worship for himself and his people. It is one of the most amazing feats of religious history and accomplishment, none the less wonderful because the worship of the sun is so constant and prevailing. Akhenaten's setting of the worship and his enunciation of its creed, as far as we know, were the most pure and elevating that have ever been formulated and held. That a religious counter-revolution so soon destroyed his work was a loss to the Egyptian nation, and to future peoples through their influence, which his opponents were neither capable of understanding nor cared to appreciate.

(3) A leading doctrine of the Christian faith, without which it would not be Christian, is the doctrine of Divine Incarnation

in human form, of the revelation of Himself by God in tangible and visible shape before the eyes of men, the Eternal taking upon Himself for a set purpose and at a definite time a transitory and perishable material garb. In Christian thought this purpose is the redemption of man from sin. And by many earlier thinkers and teachers the doctrine has been regarded as unique, confined to Christian theology, a sole as it is a pre-eminent possession of the Christian confession of faith. It is now universally understood that in this we have been mistaken. Most forms of religious belief have a more or less well-defined doctrine of incarnation, and teach that at some time or other the Divine was self-revealed upon earth in a mortal shape. To other faiths the idea of an incarnation is abhorrent, and they reject the doctrine with indignation and scorn. These latter systems are known as theocentric, and the most familiar types or examples are Muhammadanism and Judaism. Other religious creeds are anthropocentric, as Christianity itself and Hinduism, and many others of less importance, and regard the link thus established between the Divine and the human as the most precious bond between man and his God, without which no communion is possible or redemption of man from the bondage and slavery of evil. A theocentric faith, carried to its logical extreme, erects an impassable barrier between God and man. Judaism is inconsistent, as the earlier pages of the Old Testament bear abundant witness. Muhammadanism has always been much more true to its professed faith. And this article of its creed is both an element of its strength, and an insuperable barrier to its ever becoming a universal religion or winning the allegiance of all peoples and tongues.

The study of Comparative Religion, however, while establishing this fact of the wide prevalence of a doctrine of incarnation has not failed to note the great diversity of teaching and belief connected with it. Perhaps the best illustration that could be given of the different forms assumed would be a comparison of the Hindu belief with the Christian. The superiority and uniqueness of the Christian doctrine are I venture to think manifest at every point. The chief elements of difference are twofold. In Hinduism the incarnation of the Divine in bodily form is not a central or solitary fact in human history, undertaken once for all, but may be and is repeated as often as seems desirable, and is not only an event of the long ago, but has often recurred throughout the centuries, and is a present-day experience in the

society and life of modern times. Incarnation, moreover, admits of degrees. It is not the whole of the Divine that has been or is incorporated in the bodily form ; it may be only a very small part, or there may be virtually the entire Godhead manifesting itself upon earth. Every intermediate gradation may be and is found. These earthly forms, possessed of the indwelling deity, are worshipped with offerings suited to their character. It cannot be a strength to a religious faith that so defective and humiliating, as it appears to us, a doctrine should be taught. The study of Comparative Religion has rendered a service by bringing to the light and emphasizing the fundamental differences which underlie doctrines called by the same name, which earlier and even present-day controversialists have endeavoured to identify or confuse.

(4) In the early centuries of its establishment and diffusion within the Roman Empire Christianity found itself among a host of religious and philosophical faiths, which with more or less insistence endeavoured to commend themselves to the mind and thought of men. Most of these had their origin, like Christianity itself, in the East, and had advanced westwards. Egypt also had sent to Rome notable contributions to a veritable hot-bed of religious controversy and pretensions ; and some of these appeared with all the pomp and prestige of Imperial favour. The Christian faith did not stand alone in its claim to possess and to proclaim the eternal truth. Nor in its missionary efforts within the great towns and in the great centres of populations—and it was, of course, to these that of necessity the early preaching addressed itself—did it approach a people destitute of religious convictions or a formal faith, or find the popular mind a *tabula rasa* upon which to write without let or hindrance its novel doctrines and comprehensive creed. In this great tangle of competing religious systems—nowhere more disordered and more mischievous than at Rome, the centre of the political and religious world—it was impossible that the Christian faith, as preached and practised, should remain unaffected by its environment. That it also strongly influenced some of them is no doubt true. And there is no more interesting theme or subject of research within the circle of Christian history and thought than the interaction of the varied creeds and systems of belief that found home and expression in the capital and chief cities of the early Roman Empire. To trace the threads of communication and interdependence would be the difficult task of a lifetime ;

and cannot even be approached, much less undertaken here. Into the rich edifice of Christian belief and practice there have certainly been incorporated elements, which have their primary roots elsewhere than in the authoritative documents of the Christian faith.

Or, from another point of view, take Augustine, whose influence on Christian theology has been second only to that of St. Paul and St. John. His affirmation of doctrine confessedly went beyond anything contained in the writings of his great predecessors, and his constructive scheme of the Christian faith owes much to his own intensive and logical thought. Some of the doctrines, however, most characteristic of the teaching of Augustine had been taught and proclaimed in the schools and halls of Athens and of Rome, in Alexandria and elsewhere for centuries before his time. Was he ignorant of all this? or, if not ignorant, did he resolutely throw it all off, and build up *de novo* an original system, which yet arrived at surprisingly similar results? It is not easy to accept this conclusion. The truth is rather, that every thinker and teacher is a child of his own time, is indebted to the spiritual and mental environment of his own country and age, and that originality so-called is in the main at least the capacity to assimilate and recombine in fruitful ways the thoughts and knowledge that lie ready to hand. In many respects, and not least in religious and theological conceptions and beliefs, we are returning to the dictum of the old sage, "There is nothing new under the sun." Much, no doubt, depends upon the definition that is proposed of "new," and the limits drawn.

The point it is desirable to emphasize, which the study of Comparative Religion has most suggestively and fruitfully brought out, is the universal kinship, the confraternity of the human race in its highest aspirations, and in the way in which it gives to them expression. Systems of religion are not shut off from one another by high walls through which there run no connecting roads; within which it may be contended there is a monopoly of truth and no suggestion of error. Unquestionably in some there is more of error than in others, error that has almost altogether dimmed or defaced the truth, but truth is ever present in some measure, disguised but not destroyed, and has never entirely yielded its pride of place. It is a question of degree, not of total error or absolute truth. In all the great systems of faith and worship which men have devised to give expression to their thought and longing for the Divine, there

is something right, an element or aspect of the truth which its adherents see perhaps more clearly than others do, which is worth preserving even if much or most of the creed and form passes into disuse and oblivion.

(5) A further and brief illustration may perhaps be allowed. It is taken from the most earnest and spiritually minded form of faith, with possibly one exception, that is to be met with outside of Christendom and the systems that are more or less immediately derived from it. In the so-called northern school of Buddhism, whose chief home at the present day is in China and Japan, the most popular and widely worshipped deity is Amida Buddha, the goddess of grace and mercy. Like all the members of the Buddhist pantheon, and the Buddhist creed and system in general, Amida Buddha was brought to the new lands from India; where her prototype was a male deity, with similar attributes of compassion and grace. Under what circumstances the Indian Buddhist god became transformed into a goddess is entirely obscure. Conjectures as to Christian influence have not been wanting, and may be true, but for want of evidence have not been and cannot be substantiated. The images of the goddess which may be seen in Japanese and other temples would in many instances pass unrebuked and unnoticed in a Roman Catholic church. Upon Amida Buddha, her Divine tenderness and compassion, Buddhist writers linger with unwearying appreciation, and lavish upon her purpose and work their most eloquent descriptions. Many other Buddhist divinities share her character of beneficence and love for the whole world; but Amida is supreme. Faith in Amida, if accompanied by a sincere repentance and resolve to forsake sin, will always avail for the salvation of the sinner. No sincere prayer for help and deliverance is ever rejected. Even at the hour and article of death if the sinner invokes the name of Amida he will be saved and will pass into Paradise. Her power is as unlimited as her willingness to deliver from the bondage of evil all who call upon her. And of many a Buddhist deity it is said that he refuses to accept supreme happiness for himself, or to desist from his labours, as long as there remains even one poor human soul unrescued from the pains and thralldom of sin and of death. The prayers addressed to Amida often breathe a most simple and earnest piety, and if read in a Christian church would not be pronounced alien to the spirit of Christianity itself.

(6) Other points of contact might be noted. They are numerous, and of the greatest interest. The science, moreover, is yet young, and its richest harvest is to be garnered in the future. It is also true that it has been discredited in some degree and to some readers by premature and ill-advised theorising. The present gain, however, is not slight, and much has been contributed that is of value for religious thought, and aids in bringing into relief the great central truths of the being of God and the relation between God and man, which in every age and race the human mind has craved to know. It is safe to say, on the other hand, that nothing has been lost, either in creed or thought, which was worth preservation.

Foremost among the gains which may be expected from a study of religion from a comparative point of view, and one which has been already in part achieved, is the growth of sympathy and broadmindedness, the desire and the capacity to consider the beliefs of others, and even their prejudices, from their point of view, to appreciate the thought which underlies their cherished convictions, and to understand the light in which our creeds and practices appear to them. The comfortable self-assurance which denounced all foreign religions as false and malignant, labelling them heathen, has been replaced by an eager desire to know the best that is in them, to harmonise and to elevate, not to uproot and destroy. This is true of all research into ancient and obsolete forms of faith. It is most striking to note the discerning sympathy with which the forms of belief and ritual of the past are considered and interpreted. No doubt the sympathy is sometimes overdone, and the comparison stretched to the disadvantage of the present. Similarly the attitude of missionary workers abroad towards the beliefs and practices of the tribes and peoples with whom they come into contact, and of the home churches under whose commission they work, is, generally speaking, entirely changed. They do not wish or endeavour to establish a *tabula rasa* of the heathen mind, but to find points of contact, equations of interest and belief, through which they may reach the thought and guide it on the upward way. We are not after all so unlike as we imagined. That which is true of the physical frame, that it bears a common impress and universal characteristics amidst all its diversities, is no less true of the mental and spiritual conceptions, the great heritage and creation of the human mind. There is contact everywhere—no hopeless disjunction or irremediable break. To

have made this evident is a great achievement of religious science. Theoretically, of course, its truth has been proclaimed once and again in the course of the ages, not least by the great philosopher and teacher of Tarsus and Jerusalem and Athens. The unfolding and realisation and practice thereof is the service and work for our own day.

It is this which, as it appears to me, is the great practical gain of the study of the systems of religion from a comparative point of view, and the knowledge thereby attained of religious thought as well in its initial stages as in its widest developments, that amidst the utmost differences of outlook, of race and age, there has been revealed the essential solidarity of human thought in its relations to the other world. The similarity of primitive religious ideas has often been noted and made a subject of comment. Men call their early gods by different names, and attribute to them characters and qualities suggested by their own circumstances, the climate and the land in which they live. The same forms, however, in substance are hardly disguised by variety of costume and definition. Real variety, as would naturally be expected, is a later development, the fruit of independent thought and reasoning and leisure. The longer the history of a religious system, the wider the range of its acceptance and the more diversified the peoples who come under its influence, the greater its complexity, and the more difficult will it be to formulate a concise creed which will cover all the divergent elements of belief. But there is no absolute break. Each is linked to each by lines of thought and conception and faith, which may be subtle and often far-reaching, but which are very real, and unite mankind together in a common web of religious aspiration and design, the wonder and fascination of which grow the more it is pondered. The science of Comparative Religion studies the supernatural from the side of the natural, and has nothing to do directly with questions of revelation, its possibilities or extent. It is the facts of faith that it endeavours to marshal and elucidate. These prove to be not isolated, or entirely disconnected, but parts of a great whole, branching out, as it were, into the most elaborately organised systems of practice and belief, but declaring themselves nearer and more closely akin as they are traced back to their common root. Science in its way, bears testimony to-day to the unity of the faith.

We are justified also in claiming that confidence may be, and has been strengthened in the essential truth, in the ultimate

basis of man's religious and spiritual faith. If it has to be conceded that the wisest and best systems and creeds have carried with them down the ages a residuum of disputable matter, and have not shed all that worldly reason and covetousness have contributed to them of illusion and mistake; if around the most solid and stable nucleus there have seemed to exist ill-defined and misty regions where truth and error, fact and fiction, well-founded belief and light conjecture have intermingled in a maze of unreason and doubt; it is nevertheless true that the foundations of the faith have never been more firmly set than they are to-day. The science of Comparative Religion or her students in her name have unhesitatingly affirmed that they have not found truth to be a monopoly of any one race or age. Nor have they set themselves the futile, perhaps impossible, task of weighing the merits of one system of religious faith against another, and apportioning to each its place in a descending or ascending series of the possession of a more or less quantity of unassailable truth. Nothing but disservice, of course, would be rendered to the Christian faith at least by any such endeavour. If its high claims or those of any faith are to be justified, they must be justified elsewhere and on other principles. Comparative Religion, however, in finding a measure or proportion of truth everywhere, not seized or understood with equal clearness or successfully disentangled always from motives or mixture of error, has, I venture to think, rendered no small support to the confidence that truth is mighty and prevails. That much misused and misinterpreted maxim might well be taken by the science I have the honour to represent this evening as its device and watchword. The truth is greater than any system or assemblage of beliefs. But it is present in them all, beyond and rendering support to all, and testifying not only to the essential unity of the human race, but to the unique and common source of their most treasured faiths.

Once again also it may be permissible to add that, were all the practical uses and advantages of this study denied or misapprehended, there is something gained in the enlargement of outlook, and in the addition to the stores of human understanding and knowledge. When the problem of climbing Mount Everest was discussed a few years ago, and a difficult and costly expedition was promoted with the object of reaching the summit, there were many who doubted its utility, or half-cynically asked what benefit was to accrue to the world at large from the toilsome

and dangerous venture. The question has been more than sufficiently answered. It has been something also to have stood on the heights where mortal foot had never stood before, and in the exhilaration of the loftier purer air to have "surveyed the landscape o'er," even if a descent had to be made later to the darkness and turmoil of the world below. And if the study of Comparative Religion had done no more than extend the bounds of human knowledge in the abstract by an arduous and long pursuit and research, which had been unattended by any immediate gain of practical utility in the affairs of men, it would have done that which would have been worth all the time and endeavour. Every increase of knowledge is an increase of wealth, more real than the piling up of silver and gold. If man's greatest and noblest study is man himself, then greater than all is the study, not of his skin and bones, his bodily habits and material needs, but of his spiritual life, his thoughts of the Divine and the Divine thoughts of him, and how he may acceptably approach his God in reverence and prayer and praise. The religious thoughts and conceptions of other peoples are of the most intense interest, and always of vital importance in all direct dealings with them. From these much may be learnt by the wisest. It is as true in religion as in philosophy or in the problems of practical science, that no two persons, man or woman, think exactly alike. And in this field of sympathetic investigation of the ways of man with his God there is room for many workers, and none will serve without satisfaction or without reward.

DISCUSSION.

After the usual remarks of the CHAIRMAN, who moved a vote of thanks to the speaker.

Lt.-Col. G. MACKINLAY said: I strongly deprecate any approximation to the placing of any other religion on the same platform (p. 101) with the teaching contained in the Bible, inspired as it is by the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus Christ claims to be and is *The Truth*, and He stands absolutely alone. Other religions contain *some* fragments of truth, but the Evil One has skilfully made use of this fact to cause men and women to believe his fearful lies and errors. On the other hand, I warmly approve of the words of our oath in a court of law, "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

By all means let us view with sympathy the beliefs of other peoples, distorted though they are, and let us use every effort to send faithful missionaries to tell them of the Truth of God.

Our author dwells on the *similarities* of religious belief,—let us think for a moment on the important *differences* between the religions of the world and that of Christ.

Incarnation (pp. 104 and 105), as is stated in the paper before us, is common to many religions ; but in how many, besides Christianity, is it said that God became man *in order* to die a shameful death to take away our sins ?

Let us consider Amida Buddha (p. 108) with her attributes of mercy and tenderness. Talking to a Christian Japanese yesterday, he told me, as our author has informed us to-day, that faith in her is said to take away sin ; but he agreed with me that she has no power to do so, she has never died for our sins.

I fully agree with our lecturer in his twice-repeated statement (pp. 99 and 109) that harm has been done by premature and ill-advised theories on this subject ; I should therefore be very chary in accepting “ the sure results ” (p. 99), and the “ present gains ” (p. 109), derived from the study of this subject.

Lt.-Col. RIACH said : There are two phrases in the paper to which I wish to refer : on p. 112, “ *If* man’s greatest and noblest study is man himself . . . ” and on p. 99, “ The science of Comparative Religion has taken as its study man’s thought of God . . . ”

Is “ man’s greatest and noblest study ” man himself or is it not the study of the revelation which the Almighty God has given to man of himself ?

One thing more. I have just returned from India, where I have been touched by the willingness of a number of Muhammadans, Hindus, and others, such as members of the Ahmadiyah, Bramo Samaj or other “ reformed ” sects of Muslims or Hindus, to read and discuss the Bible. My experience has been that as soon as mention is made of Jesus Christ as the Divine Son of God, all contact is lost.

Dr. F. E. MARSH said : I am, like some other friends, disappointed with what is left out of the paper ; for in dealing with such a theme as “ The Study of Comparative Religion,” the religions of the world should have been compared, not merely with one another, but essentially to show the distinctiveness between them and Christianity. In the religions of the world, blood is flowing from the

devotees to appease the gods ; but in Christianity, blood is flowing from God for man. God meets His own demand in the Christ of Calvary. Christ did not come to make God love us, it was because He loved Christ came. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself and not reconciling Himself to the world.

In the religions of the world, their systems remain intact without their founders. Buddha can be taken away from Buddhism, and Buddhism remains ; Muhammad can be taken away from Muhammadanism, and the system remains ; and Confucius can be taken from Confucianism, and his morals and maxims remain ; but if we take away Christ from Christianity, we have nothing left but "Ianity." Christianity is focussed in a Person. As Prebendary E. B. Rowe has finely said, "Christianity differs from every other known religion in the fact that it is based on the person of the Founder. He is the Sole Foundation on which the Church rests ; the Principle of its unity ; the inspiring motive to holiness ; the spiritual power which makes the Christian strong in the discharge of every duty ; in a word, Jesus Christ may be said to constitute Christianity itself." Gladstone was once asked the question, "What is Christianity ?" His reply was "Christ."

The distinctiveness of Christianity is seen again, in that it has a song in it, and bestows an "unspeakable joy" ; and yet, once more, the religions of the world make demands and give commands, but they fail to minister the power to carry them out. But not so Christianity—it gives what it demands ; as Augustine finely said long ago, "Give, Lord, what Thou dost command, and then command what Thou wilt" ; or, as Ralph Erskine, "All God's commands are His enablings."

Mr. THEODORE ROBERTS commented on pp. 102 and 103, regarding the belief of certain African tribes in a great Supreme God beyond the minor gods they usually worshipped. He thought this belief pointed to that original knowledge of one Supreme Deity, from which it would appear the human race had in early days departed.

He very much objected to the lecturer's comparison of the heathen myths of the gods taking human form with the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He thought the lecturer wholly failed to seize the distinction between the theophanies recorded in the Old Testament, which the great Augustine refused to attribute to any

one person in the Godhead, and the Son assuming the condition of Manhood, which thus became an integral part of His Person and would be eternal. The theophanies of the Old Testament might be compared to the heathen myths, but not the Incarnation.

He wholly disagreed with the lecturer's congratulation on p. 109, that Christian missionaries were now learning to recognise and build on what was good in the heathen religions, and pointed out that the Philosopher of Tarsus (Paul) had written that, "the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God" (1 Cor. x, 20). History showed that the early Christians regarded the heathen religions as having come direct from the bottomless pit, and it was in this belief that they conquered the world, and he ventured to think that so far as this was lacking, evangelistic efforts would fail.

In conclusion he pointed out that all religions outside Christianity lacked divine sanction for their teaching, and, what was still more important, failed to supply an adequate motive and spring for holy living, such as the Grace of God did.

Mr. T. ATKINSON GILLESPIE said : Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, I rise also with diffidence as a layman, to speak on the interesting paper read by the learned professor, but I cannot reconcile what the lecturer says on p. 109 with the teaching of Scripture. He says, "that there is an eager desire to know the best that is in the religions of the world, and to harmonise and to elevate them and not to uproot and destroy."

I find that the teaching of Scripture clearly and unmistakably shows that all the preconceived ideas or conceptions of man by nature, must not in any way be acknowledged or dressed, but must be wholly and totally uprooted and destroyed. I fail to see how we can possibly make any comparison of the religions of the world with Christianity, and no worship can be effectual apart from that which has for its foundation the Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning work, putting aside entirely all man's thoughts.

In Luke, sixth chapter, our Lord, after giving an epitomised presentation of the Sermon on the Mount, tells us that he who comes to Him, hears His words, and does them ; that he is like the man who digs deep before building, in order to reach the rock, and when his house is founded on the rock it is perfectly safe ; but he who

merely hears His word without coming to Him—has no power to do what He says (for a man has no power apart from the Holy Spirit, given to him when he comes to Christ)—is like one who builds on the earth, and not only does the house fall when the testing time comes, but great is the ruin thereof. Christ must be pre-eminent and comparisons with Him are odious. I hope the lecturer will be the first to admit the truth of this.

Mr. W. HOSTE said : Professor Geden's remarks on p. 102, on the faith in a Supreme God current in Central Africa, tally with one's own experience, travelling in rather wild parts of Angola and coming across villages who had seldom, if ever, seen a white man, and yet held an unquestioning belief in a Supreme Creator. A well-known African missionary, Mr. Dan Crawford, told me once, you would not find an atheist between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans among negroes uncontaminated by ungodly whites. Must not such a faith be explained by an innate faculty in man to believe in a Supreme Being, and also perhaps as a far-off glimmer of a primitive revelation? But this belief, as is generally admitted, has no appreciable effect on life or conduct. The spirits of the departed are the powers to be reckoned with, and this faith is not from above but from beneath, for it is connected with anything but holiness and truth. Roman and Greek culture would have conceded to "Jesus" a place in their Pantheon, but refused to the "Lord Jesus Christ" the pre-eminent place He claimed; so Spiritism, Theosophy, Muhammadanism, etc., will give the Lord a place in their list of mediums, mahatmas, and prophets, but not the supreme place. Must we not then make a great difference between a natural belief in God and the religions of men? Satan is called in 2 Cor. iv, "the god of this world"; and under one of his best-known names, "Beelzebub," was the acknowledged god of Ekron, with such a reputation that Ahaziah, King of Israel, sent to him in sickness to enquire whether he would recover. As has been quoted, "the heathen sacrifice not to God but to demons." We learn from this that the religions of the world, which may seem to have something so beautiful, so pure, so near the truth, are in reality, it is to be feared, cunningly contrived imitations of the accidents of Christianity, while the essentials are denied or ignored. No doubt the worship of God is the eventual object of true religion, but for this men need first

to be reconciled and brought to God. The essential is to acknowledge the fall of man and the fact of atonement. Any religion at home or abroad which is not built on these foundation truths is, I fear, a counterfeit, and not much good comes from a comparative study of base coin and true, except to avoid the former. I would suggest that the vital difference between the mercy of Amida and that of Christ is, that hers is sentimental and ignores the holy claims of God, that of Christ is based on righteousness.

MR. SIDNEY COLLETT writes: (1) The writer lays great stress upon the good that, he says, is to be found in all forms of religion—nearly all of which are *unscriptural*! But, he seems to overlook the fact that a harmless, and ever wholesome, drink may prove *fatal* by the introduction of a little poison! Moreover, is he not aware of the fact that a people holding any form of religion which is *unscriptural*—whether it be the Romanist, Muhammadan, Buddhist, Hindu, or Parsee—offer *far more opposition* to the work of the true missionary of the Gospel of Christ than do those who have no religion at all?

(2) But the author's suggestion that these foreign religions should be "harmonised" and amalgamated with the pure worship of the true God and the simple message of the Gospel as divinely revealed in the inspired Word of God, is a suggestion which one grieves to think could be made at the Victoria Institute!

For it is *these very things*, which the writer of the paper is urging upon us, which are *spoiling* numbers of our missionaries to-day, ruining their work and testimony, and encouraging those to whom they originally carried the Gospel to believe that there is nothing special or unique in the teaching of Scripture or the claims of Christ, and that *their religion* is as good as ours! This is the blight resting upon the mission-field to-day (which leaves the heathen in darkness, and constitutes a great dishonour upon our ever blessed God and Saviour, and nearly breaks the hearts of those who are true and loyal to Christ and His word).

REV. J. J. B. COLES writes: What answer would the Professor give to the question: "How he accounts for the tendency to disintegration, corruption, and decay in all human philosophies and all religious systems?"

AUTHOR'S REPLY.

I regret the misunderstanding which seems to have arisen in the minds of some with regard to the subject and purpose of the paper read. The superiority of the Christian faith, in what it consists and on what it is grounded, might perhaps not unfittingly be made the theme of a paper at the Victoria Institute ; but it has nothing to do with my subject this evening. The difficulty has been that of compression, not of expansion, and it would have been impossible to include a tenth part of the material or topics suggested, even if they had been relevant.

I am grateful to Mr. W. Hoste for his comments, in which I have found both interest and help, although I do not understand what he means by "cunningly contrived imitations of the accidents of Christianity." How did the "accidents of Christianity," whatever these may be, become known, for instance, to the natives of Central Africa an indefinite number of centuries ago, that they might imitate them ? I agree entirely with the distinction that Mr. Hoste draws between the power of Amida and that of Christ. It is the *dynamic* of Christianity, to use the current phrase, that gives it unique place among the religions of the world.