

'Religion' and the religions in the English Enlightenment

PETER HARRISON



The origins of the modern idea of religion can be traced to the Enlightenment. This study shows how the concepts 'religion' and 'the religions' arose out of controversies in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. The birth of 'the religions', conceived to be sets of beliefs and practices, enabled the establishment of a new science of religion in which the various 'religions' were studied and impartially compared. Dr Harrison thus offers a detailed historical picture of the emergence of comparative religion as an academic discipline.

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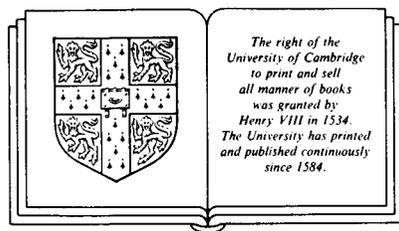


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To my parents,
Jean and Duncan

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INTRODUCTION



And such is the deplorable Condition of our Age, that a Man dares not openly and directly own what he thinks in Divine Matters, tho it be never so true and beneficial... and yet a Man may not only make new Discoveries and Improvements in Law or Physick, and in the other Arts and Sciences impunibly, but also for so doing be deservedly encourag'd and rewarded.

John Toland, *Christianity not Mysterious*, Preface

'That there exist in the world such entities as 'the religions' is an uncontroversial claim. There may be discussion about whether the beliefs and practices which are said to constitute the various religions are legitimate or 'true', but few would deny that these systems exist. So too, the term 'religion', as a generic description of what the plural 'religions' are about, is part of everyday discourse and is used with some precision by scholars. However, it was not always so. The concepts 'religion' and 'the religions', as we presently understand them, emerged quite late in Western thought, during the Enlightenment. Between them, these two notions provided a new framework for classifying particular aspects of human life. The task of this study is a twofold one: first, to examine the emergence of the twin concepts 'religion' and 'the religions'; and second, to give an account of the new science of religion which they made possible.

The first part of this project owes much to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's classic *The Meaning and End of Religion*. It is Smith's contention that during the age of reason the name 'religion' was given to external aspects of the religious life, to systems of practices. Whereas in the Middle Ages the concern of the Christian West had been with faith—a 'dynamic of the heart'—in the seventeenth-century attention shifted to the impersonal and objective 'religion'. Increasingly this term came to be an outsider's description of a dubious theological enterprise. Along with 'religion' came the plural 'religions'—'the Protestant Religion', 'the Catholic Religion', 'Mahometanism', 'heathen Religion', and so on. These too were abstracted, depersonalised systems which were intended to represent in propositional terms the sum

total of the religious lives of other peoples (a task which, incidentally, Smith believes the concepts were inadequate to perform).¹ In the present work I shall be examining in more detail this process of the objectification of religious faith, focussing particularly on the English contribution to the ideation of 'religion' and 'the religions'. In the course of this examination I shall be paying particular attention to the unique contributions of Protestant scholastics, Platonists, and those rationalists generally referred to as 'deists'.

The second theme of this book is rather more neglected. Most accounts of the history of comparative religion or of *Religionswissenschaft* have the 'dispassionate' study of the religions beginning in the nineteenth century with such figures as Max Müller and C. P. Tiele.² Yet for a number of reasons the science of religion had to begin earlier. In the first instance, it would be rather curious if in the seventeenth century—the age of developing natural science—attempts were not made to place the study of religion on a similar footing. This was the projected discipline which that champion of free thought John Toland urged upon his more conservative contemporaries. It was an undertaking made all the more urgent by a crisis of authority within Christendom which highlighted the need for an honest and unbiassed appraisal of the competing forms of Christianity and, for the most thorough-going thinkers, of the claims of other 'religions'. The great revolutions in science and religion which took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries thus paved the way for the development of a secular study of the religions, and equally importantly, of a concept 'religion' which could link together and relate the apparently disparate religious beliefs and practices found in the empirical 'religions'.

Another reason we would expect the 'scientific' study of 'religion' to begin at this time is to do with the process of ideation itself. Paradoxical though it may sound, it is evident from the philosophy of science that objects of study are shaped to a large degree by the techniques which are used to investigate them. If we apply this principle to the history of 'religion', it can be said that the very methods of the embryonic science of religion determined to a large extent what 'religion' was to be. It would be expected that 'religion' and the strategies for its elucidation would develop in tandem. For this reason 'religion' was constructed along essentially rationalist lines, for it was created in the image of the prevailing rationalist methods of investigation: 'religion' was cut to fit the new and much-vaunted scientific method. In this manner, 'religion' entered the realm of the intelligible. It lay open to rational investigation while its specific forms—'the religions'—could be measured against each other, or against some intellectualist criterion of truth. As we shall see, inquiry into the religion of a people became a matter of asking what was believed, and if it was true. The emergence of the idea of religion thus entailed tests of religious truth, theories of religion,

comparisons of 'religions', in short, a whole set of rules which governed the manner in which the nascent concept was to be deployed. Toland's wish had come true, though perhaps not in the way he would have liked.

If the time of the appearance of this new interpretative framework was the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, then the place was England. Of course, England was not the only country in the Western world where a secular approach to the religions was evolving. The *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment have some claim to be considered as co-pioneers of comparative religion.³ Yet it was in England, in the previous century, that the groundwork was laid down. Here the Enlightenment first dawned in an historically tangible way. The religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant that Englishmen enjoyed a freedom of religious expression which was matched nowhere in Europe, with the possible exception of the Netherlands. The early Enlightenment in England is attested by a body of literature, by controversies, and by certain figures in a way that is not true of France, or anywhere else.⁴ Most importantly, England, during the time-frame of this study, underwent considerable changes in religious orientation. As Locke put it, the kings and queens of post-Reformation England had been 'of such different minds in point of religion, and enjoined thereupon such different things', that no 'sincere and upright worshipper of God could, with a safe conscience, obey their several decrees'.⁵ Not only did this diachronic pluralism contribute greatly to secularisation, but it led also to the comparison of the various forms of Christianity with each other, and shaped to a significant extent the way in which the English were to view other 'religions'. The whole comparative approach to religion was directly related to confessional disputes within Christianity. As we shall discover, these confessional conflicts were the single most important factor in the development of comparative religion.

Another reason that England was the setting for the emergence of these new ideas of religion was that it was here that historical criticism of the Bible got under way in earnest. While within Christendom, religious pluralism had provided the impetus for the comparison of 'religions', from without, discoveries in the New World and the Pacific were calling into question biblical views of human history. This challenge to sacred history, reinforced by the writings of such thinkers as Spinoza, La Peyrère, and Hobbes, was to set the more radical of the rationalising theologians on the path of biblical criticism.⁶ 'Religions' thus came to be credited with a natural, rather than a sacred history.

It remains only to indicate something of the plan of this book. After a brief examination of the backgrounds of Enlightenment ideas of religion, we shall move, in the second chapter, to a consideration of the rise of the idea of religion in theological controversy. Two countervailing tendencies

will be examined: Calvinism, in which 'genuine religion' is construed as 'saving knowledge', and Platonism, in which 'religion' is deemed to be 'natural'. In the third chapter we shall see how in a creative combination these two tendencies, the so-called deists modified 'religion' to make it a natural object constituted primarily by propositional knowledge. These two chapters thus describe how religious ideas of religion were secularised. In the final two chapters, we see how the history of 'religion', once thought to be exhausted in biblical accounts of idolatry and apostasy, came to be credited with its own, non-sacred or natural history. Thus, just as the theology of 'religion' was secularised, so the sacred history of 'religion', became simply the history of 'the religions'.

We turn now to antecedents – the reformers, Renaissance Platonists, and classical atheists who were important precursors of, respectively, the seventeenth-century Calvinists, the English Platonists, and the 'deists'.

ONE
ANTECEDENTS



Nor think, in NATURE'S STATE they blindly trod;
The state of nature was the reign of God . . .

Take Nature's path, and mad Opinions leave
All States can reach it, and all heads conceive;
Obvious her goods, in no extreme they dwell,
There needs but thinking right, and meaning well;
And mourn our various portions as we please,
Equal is common sense, and common ease.

Pope, *An Essay on Man*. III.247–8, IV.29–34

The concept 'religion' involved the relocation of religious faith into a new sphere, a sphere in which the presumed substance of religion could serve as an object of rational investigation. The new context for 'religion' was the realm of nature. In much the same way that the world became the object of scientific enquiry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through a process of desacralisation, so too, religious practices (initially those of other people) were demystified by the imposition of *natural* laws. As the physical world ceased to be a theatre in which the drama of creation was constantly re-directed by divine interventions, human expressions of religious faith came increasingly to be seen as outcomes of natural processes rather than the work of God or of Satan and his legions. For both scientists and students of the new-found 'religion', most of whom maintained religious convictions, it remained to be determined what role could be found for God in the natural world. This in turn hinged upon what was meant by 'nature' and 'natural'.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the term 'nature' had taken on a variety of meanings. This polyvalence is reflected in the variety of evaluations of natural religion.¹ In the treatment of religion, three quite distinct understandings of 'nature' developed, from which there arose three discrete interpretations of religion and the religions. These three positions

between them delimit the range of seventeenth-century notions of religion. According to the most conservative interpretation, the natural order is opposed to the supernatural. In this scheme of things 'natural' religion is the result of human sin and stands in opposition to 'revealed' or supernaturally based religion. While this distinction did not originate with the Reformers, it was they who fashioned it into a sharp dichotomy, damning those who presumed to construct a religion based on reason. Protestant Christianity remained within the ambit of divine operation: Papism and all other forms of piety were regarded as the degenerate products of a fallen nature.

Such a view of nature was not acceptable to more enquiring minds in the seventeenth century. In opposing the *Scientia inflat* of divines of the reformed tradition, Francis Bacon put forward two quite different understandings of nature. The 'light of nature', he said, 'is used in two several senses':

the one, that which springeth from reason, sense, induction, argument, according to the laws of heaven and earth; the other, that which is imprinted upon the spirit of man by an inward instinct, according to the law of conscience, which is a sparkle of purity of his first estate; in which latter sense only he is participant of some light and discerning touching the perfection of the moral law.²

Bacon here spells out the two views of nature which were to dominate the intellectual landscape for almost two centuries. Kant was eventually to label them 'pure reason' and 'practical reason'. The latter, Bacon's 'inward instinct', is derived from Renaissance thought and has deeper roots in Stoic philosophy. 'Nature', according to this view, is simply another mode of divine operation. Here the natural is not opposed to the supernatural, but rather complements it. Nature participates in original divine essence because the divine power pervades nature itself.³ In their reaction against the Reformers, the seventeenth-century Platonists were to adopt this view of nature, proposing that natural religion, in its most perfect expression, was a legitimate, and indeed *the* legitimate form of religion. In theory, this potentially universal religion of morality should not differ from revealed religion, for both issue from a common source – God.

As the Enlightenment progressed, a third view of nature – Bacon's 'reason, sense, induction, argument' – came into prominence. The 'light of nature' in this scheme has to do with 'the laws of heaven and earth'. An inchoate natural *order* was invested with its own laws of operation and ultimately came to admit investigation without any reference to the divine. 'Religion' was similarly constituted as something that was amenable to rational investigation, or more importantly, to rational justification. The laws of heaven

pertaining to 'religion' were not less mutable than those which described the physical universe. In what amounted to a victory of the natural over the supernatural, reason, in this last sense, came to be a criterion of revelation. Equally important was the perceived contrast between the independent operation of a lawful nature and the human social realm of 'convention'. This orientation harks back to the ancient sophists' distinction between nature and convention. English free-thinkers were eventually to collapse putative revelations into the category of human conventions, for what is truly natural is universal. The diversity and incompatibility of beliefs supposedly based on revelations automatically placed positive 'religions' outside the ordered realm of nature and into the category of arbitrary human conventions. The classical age provided free-thinkers with not only the nature – convention distinction, but also more specific theories about the origin and maintenance of diverse religious conventions.

The chief ideological sources for the seventeenth-century construction of 'religion' were then the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Classical Age. The importance of these sources is difficult to overestimate, for in the seventeenth century, if not the eighteenth, the superiority of ancient learning was virtually unquestioned. In one sense, seventeenth-century religious disputes were about which ancient authorities were to be normative – the New Testament and the Church Fathers, Plato and his interpreters, or the 'atheists' of the classical period.⁴

THE REFORMATION

It is a commonplace that the Reformation established the material conditions which led to secularisation, and consequently to the growth of secular views of religion.⁵ Our concern here, however, is not to retell the story of how those conditions were established, but rather to isolate those ideologies of the reformers which led more directly to the 'naturalisation' of matters of faith. Of these, the most important was the sharp distinction drawn between natural and revealed knowledge of God.⁶ This distinction had been fully worked out by Medieval theologians, although significantly, the term 'natural religion' is a seventeenth-century one.⁷ Thinkers of the Middle Ages generally maintained that through the exercise of human reason alone man can come to a knowledge of the existence of God in his works, to a knowledge of the human soul with its attributes of freedom and immortality, and can discover Natural Law. This view found its way into traditional Catholic theology.⁸ According to the medieval synthesis, two types of knowledge of God, the natural and the revealed, complete each other.

For the reformers, however, these two kinds of knowledge – natural and revealed – were fundamentally opposed. Following Augustine's lead, Luther

and Calvin had stressed the negative consequences of the Fall, arguing that it had resulted in the corruption of human reason. Since natural theology resulted from the exercise of fallen human powers of speculation, it became for the reformers a highly suspect enterprise, which, viewed in the light of the cardinal doctrine of justification by grace, was no more than man's arrogant attempt to storm the ramparts of heaven. Thus John Calvin conceded a natural knowledge of God, but claimed that this knowledge had been corrupted by the warped minds of men, and served only to render them without excuse.⁹ Since all non-Christian religious beliefs were thought to be based on this dubious foundation of natural knowledge, it followed that all the forms of heathenism were bereft of truth, and that no salvation was to be found within them.¹⁰ This stance was further reinforced by Calvin's view of the nature of salvation. Only to 'the elect' – those predestined by God for salvation – is saving knowledge of Christ given. The elect, from the time of the advent of Christianity seem implicitly to be confined to, though not identified with, the visible church. Calvin could thus endorse the traditional formula '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*' (no salvation outside the Church).¹¹

Luther also conceded that there was 'universal knowledge of God among all heathen' and that 'this light cannot be subdued or extinguished'.¹² But he qualified this judgement with the insistence that this 'God' cannot be properly identified: 'reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil'.¹³ This illusory God of reason was not only the object of heathen worship, but was also the God of 'the papists and the religious', and of 'the Jews during Christ's sojourn on earth'.¹⁴ Followers of the heresiarch Muhammad were similarly deluded by their natural inclinations. Muhammad's law, Luther insisted, teaches 'only what human wit and reason can bear'.¹⁵ Luther was thus left with the conclusion that all of these religious forms, while superficially different, shared a common essence:

Jews, Turks, papists, radicals abound everywhere ... Even if they do not all pursue the same course, but one chooses this way, another that way, resulting in a variety of forms, they nonetheless all have the same intent and ultimate goal, namely, by means of their own deeds they want to manage to become God's people.¹⁶

Jews, Turks and papists also shared the characteristic of 'hard-heartedness'.¹⁷ All erroneously believed that they would be saved by works;¹⁸ all their holy writings were human fabrications.¹⁹

There is an important element to Luther's treatment of other faiths which is almost entirely absent in Calvin, and which has far-reaching implications for the development of 'the religions' in the following centuries. Luther,

at the vanguard of the Reformation, was far more involved in controversy than Calvin. The heathen, the Turks, and the Jews are most often discussed in the context of anti-Catholic polemic. Norman Daniel has ably demonstrated that there was for the medieval polemicist a ready-made 'image' of Islam which could be appropriated to bolster the claims of Western Christianity.²⁰ Luther appropriated this image but deployed it in an entirely new context – that of confessional conflict within Christendom – to show that papism was simply another form of paganism.²¹ This utilisation of other religions to serve particular religious exigencies was also to become normative. Catholicism, or any creed substantially different from one's own, could be subjected to criticism by virtue of its purported affinity with heathen religion. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this strategy which came to be known as 'paganopapism' played a major role in the rhetoric of sectarian disputes.²²

The Reformation both set up the conditions of religious pluralism which provided the predominant focus for theological disputes in the seventeenth century and furnished a model for the treatment of religious forms, first by positing that other faiths were simply different manifestations of natural religion, and second by giving the non-Christian 'religions' a negative role in parochial conflicts within Christendom. As the religious rites and beliefs of other peoples were discovered, and indeed, as information on the cults of antiquity came to light, the possible scope for comparison continued to increase. As Edward Said has pointed out with regard to 'the Orient', exotic locations and peoples provided for the modern West a backdrop against which could be projected images designed to serve some domestic ideological function.²³ In matters of religion, in the centuries immediately following the Reformation, the exigency which made the most urgent demands in England was to do with the truth of competing Christian factions. Accordingly, the 'religions' of the 'Orient', of the Pacific and the Americas, of ancient Greece and Rome were pressed into the service of the religious interests of the West. They became heresies which were formally equivalent to some undesirable version of Christianity, be it papism, Calvinism, Arminianism, or any other of the myriads of Protestant sects.

Controversy and apologetic thus led to the comparison of 'religions', which in turn became the discipline of comparative religion. But more importantly, the rhetorical technique of paganopapism eroded the privileged status of Christian religion, for the continual assertion of fancied parallels between this or that creed of Christianity and types of heathenism led in time to the view that all forms of Christianity had something in common with the other religions. The Christian faith inevitably came to be seen as different only in degree from other creeds. Equally momentous was the fact that Christendom came to be viewed as a microcosm of the world. In the projection