

Explaining Tiele's Shift from "History" to Phenomenology of Religion

The classic 19th century founders of the study of religion, such as Friedrich Max Müller, James George Frazer or Edward Burnett Tylor, proceeded under (at last) three major assumptions. First, they simply presumed that religion was a *simple* thing that, second, only required *simple* explanations. Religion therefore required the minimum of description, almost no account of its constitution, and virtually nothing needed to be said about how its constituent parts might articulate. Since the nature of religion was well understood, the founders thought, second, that what was left to them was to work out how existence of this well-known subject was to be *explained*. Third, the founders also took for granted that the only questions worth asking, and thus the only *explanations* worth having, were *historical* ones – in the rather narrow sense of *history* as either *chronology* – what came first – or *developmental* and *degenerational* processes – what historical stages laid the bases for what was to follow.

For Max Müller, latter-day romantic devotee of Enlightenment Deism, religion was thus simply – and for him – self-evidently essentially the contemplation of the Infinite. What required *explanation* was how and why so much of what passed as 'religion' failed to live up to the essence of 'religion.' His answer given in terms of a narrative of *decline*, *degeneration* or *devolution* of essential religion (the same virtually as the "natural religion" of the Enlightenment and earlier) into the many *religions*. For one reason or another, humanity had simply lost its way and strayed from an aboriginal blessedness where humanity and divinity were at one, and the lion lay down with the lamb.

For his part, Frazer sized up religion as just an attempt by 'primitive' peoples (and Catholics!) to control their environment by supplicating the deity. On Frazer's evolutionary scale of progress, religion was an evolutionary prelude to technology, and itself successor to human attempts to manage reality – magic – and nothing more. 'We' had learned that magic did not work, so 'we' resorted to petitioning the deity. When humanity finally understood that religion failed as well, 'we' finally took matters into our own hands and developed technologies.

Tylor too felt that no great mysteries for understanding and explaining religion lay at the surface of things. Religion is plainly just the ultimately childish belief that active spirits lay behind the events of the observable world. Whether this be one single *spirit*, such as the one God of the monotheism of the Abrahamic tradition, or the many souls that many sorts of traditional folk felt inhabited the objects and visible beings of their everyday experience, the answer was the same. Religion is the belief in the active existence of these 'spirits' in the world.

Besides just taking for granted that religion was a simple thing, these thinkers shared an

almost exclusive commitment to an *historical* approach to religion, whether that be evolutionary in the style of Tylor, or devolutionary in the manner articulated by Max Müller. As a result, their problems turned on issues like identifying the chronologically first religion, or discovering the origins of religion in time and place. They sought to know how religion 'grew' out of a particular historically comprehended stage of primitive human evolutionary development or 'fell' from pristine archaic stage of spiritual perfection before the onset of human decline (Max Müller).

With the phenomenologists, we meet a rather dramatic rupture in our way of thinking about religion. Instead of the history or chronology of religion, the interests of a group of innovative students of religion began looking on religion in terms of its anatomy, structure, formal properties, or morphology. Now, while there still were and are religious studies scholars concerned with how religions change over time, how they grow and decline, somewhere around the turn of the last century, this new style of studying religion emerged dwelling on the forms that religion took, on the kind of 'whole' religion was and on the nature and identity of its 'parts.' Again somewhat in the style of an anatomy of religion, the phenomenologists, in effect, reasoned that if religion be likened to a human person, the 19th century historians of religion might be said to have written 'biographies' of religion or traced the 'family trees' and 'genealogies' of the religions. The phenomenologists, on the other hand, ought to be likened to 'anatomists' of religion, 'biologists' or 'kinesiologists' of religion, since they sought to understand how the human body 'hung together,' how its 'bones' and 'muscles' articulated and worked together to make a living active whole. How did this shift, however, come about?

We can approach this question by looking at the transformation of the work of Cornelis P. Tiele, arguably the first phenomenologist of religion. Tiele began his career as an avowed "historian" of religion in the 1870's, but by the century's end had argued for the replacement of history of religion by the so-called "science of religion," replete with an early form of morphology or phenomenology of religion. Thus, in 1896, he published one of the first such studies of the forms of religious phenomena and called it a *morphology* of religion, (Tiele 1896) after having written a widely used *history of religion* some twenty years before. (Tiele 1877) This turn toward "science," oddly enough, served as a vehicle for Tiele's subsequent attempts to theologize the study of religion. I shall seek first of all to interpret the reasons for Tiele's move from "history" to "science," and then try to make sense of how Tiele's theological enterprise took its rise from the very same intellectual move.

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Tiele, C.P. 1877. *Outlines of the History of Religion to the Spread of the Universal Religions* (trans.) J.E. Carpenter. Boston: James R. Osgood.

—. 1896. *Elements of the Science of Religion. Part I: Morphological*. Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood and Sons.