POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGIONS IN BRITAIN

TERENCE THOMAS

1. Introduction

The academic study of religions is a comparatively recent addition to the studies that are generally gathered under the title of “the Humanities.” It was not until the modern, post-Renaissance era, that religions of peoples other than one’s own became an object of study in the West. In the East and before the European Renaissance in the West, religions had been studied, one the whole, by the adherents of the various religions for their own edification and spiritual advancement. The reasons for the move from studying religion for the corporate or individual benefits that the exercise brought to the study as an objective intellectual exercise are many and complex. At first the reasons often involve achieving knowledge of the other religion for the purposes of counter-propaganda. Studies were undertaken for the purposes of “knowing thine enemy.” In Britain it was only a very few individuals who studied the religions for the sake of the study alone at first, then much later the studies became incorporated in university curricula. Even in the nineteenth century—one might say especially in the nineteenth century in Britain—the study of other religions was often undertaken for the purposes of counter-propaganda and conversion of the adherents of the other religion. In Britain, this motivation was not a simple religious matter, for counter-propaganda and conversion meant that state and imperial politics were also involved. This statement does not mean that the British government got involved with these studies but individuals and organizations who had political or quasi-political motivations were involved.

Yet it is out of this situation of mixed motivations that methodology in the study of religions developed—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. There was very little conscious attention paid to methodology, but if we observe the historical developments carefully we may also see a pattern of the development of methodology emerging.

The situation has been summarized by Louis Jordan in his massive
study of the rise of Comparative Religion. Jordan interprets 'Comparative Religion' very narrowly and therefore much of what happened in Britain in the nineteenth century in what eventually became the academic study of religions either receives cursory attention or no attention at all. However, he did see the political significance of what happened in Britain in the study that he undertook. Of Great Britain Jordan said:

few other countries have been in a position to carry forward these investigations with equal or even approximate facility. Great Britain has innumerable agents—civil, military, and religious—distributed over the face of the globe; few nationalities, therefore, possess the advantages, in the way of rapid and easy accumulation of the material which the scientific student of Religion requires, which the British people enjoy. (1905: 416)

He goes on to praise the quality of the scholars, libraries, learned societies, and learned journals available in Britain for the task. Among the agents he refers to in the piece quoted, he could also have included—and included first in the list—agents of commerce. The task of commerce was not easily distinguished from the civil and military enterprises, or even, some would add, from the religious enterprises. Some religious propagandists, with the conversion of the "heathen" in mind, saw the expansion of British commerce and Christian conversion going hand in hand. The best known such propagandist was David Livingstone who openly declared this interest in a lecture in Cambridge in 1857.

It is maintained that British colonial expansion happened as much by accident as by design, often because the commercial activities of British enterprises would have suffered without colonial control. Thus the link between colonial expansion and commerce, the extension of political control in order to facilitate trade, shows that politics and commerce often intertwined. Indeed, in the case of the East India Company, for instance, the activities of the Company were both political and commercial. The British Parliament gave the Company powers in India in a succession of charters which were both political and commercial. Thus the Company, though overtly a commercial organization, was also a quasi-governmental organization. The company ruled British India until the Indian Mutiny—so-called in British educational history books—showed the Company incapable of the political control granted to it.

Edward Said, in his work Orientalism (1991 [1978]), offers a differ-