HISTORIES OF RELIGION

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It is a strange phenomenon, perhaps itself in need of historical explanation, that "histories of religion" seem to come in waves. After periods of relative quiescence the market is suddenly swamped with smaller or larger "handbooks" viz. manuals, and with shorter or more ambitious series ranging from two or three to up to twenty or so volumes. All these in addition to the many so-called "introductions" to the history, phenomenology, sociology etc. of religions. Thus the sixties and early seventies have seen the almost simultaneous appearance of several standard histories of religion in Italian, English, French and German (the latter including also a revised and translated version of a Danish original). An excellent critical survey of this avalanche has been given by Kurt Rudolph in Theologische Literaturzeitung vol. 98 (1973), pp. 402-418. The present article will review only two of the more recent series.

The 3-volume French Histoire des Religions edited by H-Ch. Puech ¹ is now complete with the appearance of vol. iii in 1976. The series represents an attempt to do justice to both the phenomenological and historical requirements of the subject and provides and excellent and up-to-date summary and survey of the whole field. It has been wisely observed that whereas a proper "phenomenology of religion" must be the work of a single author, a history of religions — unless it is a piece of popular vulgarisation — must necessarily be the combined effort of a team of experts. Its unity, to the extent that such unity is possible at all, should be the result of the editor's strong guiding hand. In fact, only very few individual authors have been able to produce relatively satisfactory introductions to all the (major) religions of the world, and perhaps Ninian Smart's The Religious Experience of Mankind is one of the more successful attempts in this genre. The series under review is uncompromisingly scholarly, and whilst it must needs forego detailed

technicalities it at least succeeds in presenting and integrating the present state of scholarship and research. The arrangement of the material itself already implies a more modern approach. The series does not begin (as did some older manuals) with “primitive religions” but postpones, in an implicit turning away from evolutionist modes of presentation, les religions chez les peuples sans tradition écrite (prehistoric hypotheses, Black Africa, Oceania, the Americas, Arctic and Altaic religions) to vol. iii. This section in vol. iii is preceded by an account of the later developments of the “founded religions” (Islam; modern Hinduism; Buddhism in Ceylon, South-East Asia and Vietnam; China, Korea and Japan) and followed by chapters on modern “acculturative” cults and movements. It is, perhaps, significant for the style and pre-occupations of French scholarship in the field of Histoire des Religions that after the General Editor’s excellent preface—almost a kind of miniphenomenology (vol. i, pp. vii-xxvii) — the first chapter, the basic phenomenological introduction as it were, had to be provided by an Italian scholar, the late Angelo Brelich (Prolégomènes à une Histoire des Religions, vol. i, pp. 3-59). The last chapter, a critical survey of the history and present state of the art of L’Histoire des Religions (vol. iii, pp. 1279-1328) is done expertly and competently by Michel Meslin of the Sorbonne.

In between these opening and closing chapters we have the whole gamut of the world’s religions, divided (or should we say “chopped up”?) according to criteria which may invite discussion but where a General Editor has no choice but to take at times drastic decisions. Thus vol. i deals with the religions of antiquity (including Egypt; the ancient Near Eastern, Elamite, Western Semitic and Israelite religions; Greek, Vedic, Zoroastrian, Slav, Baltic, German, Celtic, Etruscan and Roman religions as well as ancient China and Japan) as well as with the origins of the “universal religions and religions of salvation” in India and the Far East (i.e., Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Taoism, as well as Chinese and Japanese Buddhism). Vol. ii continues the same category but in the near eastern and mediterranean setting (Sassanian and Mazdaean religion; oriental cults in the Roman Empire; the end of paganism; Judaism from the Babylonian exile to the Bar Kokhba revolt; Christianity till Nicaea; Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Mandaism, Manichaeism, and the beginning of Islam) and then proceeds to the “founded religions” in the West; later Judaism; western Christianity