WILLIAM FAIRFIELD WARREN (1833-1929), MENTOR OF WORLD RELIGIONS

By Donald H. Bishop

Among the eulogies in the March, 1924 issue of The Methodist Review was one by the late Bishop Edwin Holt Hughes in which he paid tribute to William Fairfield Warren as a "pioneer and master of Comparative Religions." During his lifetime Warren was known as an outstanding administrator at Boston University, but viewed in perspective his greatest contribution may have been made as a teacher of comparative religions. In any event, the contemporary revival of interest in the world's religions makes relevant a study of this phase of Warren's career.

Beginning in 1873, Warren taught a course at Boston called "The Religions of the World and The World Religion," the first course "ever instituted in an American university for the instruction in religions and religion in the widest possible sense." Warren's breadth of outlook, his personal experiences, and his sensitivity to the needs of the time prompted him to add the course on comparative religions to the curriculum.

After graduating from Wesleyan University in 1853, Warren studied at Andover Newton and the universities of Halle and Berlin. In the German schools, then leaders in studies in comparative religions, he squarely faced the problem of the relation of Christianity to other religions. How could the Christian minister and missionary coming into contact with the sincere adherents of non-Christian faiths uphold the universal claims of Christianity? This became the central problem of the course he taught at Boston from, amazingly enough, 1873 to 1920, a span of forty-seven years.

Warren's course was divided into three parts and extended over the academic year. Part I dealt with the religious phenomena of the world historically considered. It centered around the history of particular religions and the developments common to all religions. Part II took up the religious phenomena of the world systematically considered. In it he analyzed the concepts of God, creation, salvation, immortality, and other ideas found in all religions. Also, the ethical systems and institutional forms of various religions were classified and evaluated. Part III considered the religious phenomena of the world from a philosophical viewpoint. To Warren this was the most important aspect of the study and it was centered

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2 Warren was Dean of the School of Theology from 1867 to 1873, President of Boston University from 1873 to 1903, and Dean of the School of Theology from 1903 to 1911.
3 In his tribute to Professor Warren, Daniel Marsh describes him as "one of the world's greatest authorities in the field of Comparative Religions." Daniel Marsh, William Fairfield Warren (Boston, 1930), p. 6.

36
around three themes, God the object of religion, man the subject of religion, and the inter-relation of man and God as found in man's religions.

Warren described his position as that of Christian theism and his course was grounded in several basic presuppositions. In regard to metaphysics, he accepted a process view of reality which held that a major characteristic of reality is change, not random change, but orderly, purposive change directed toward an ultimate end. Further, reality is basically good or moral in structure. It could not be otherwise because it is the work of a moral creator. This leads to the third characteristic of reality, its divine nature.

Warren's second presupposition concerned man. There are, he declared, several observable facts of human existence. First, man is neither "self originated nor self sustaining." Second, man aspires to fellowship with a being worthy of fellowship and worship. The third fact is man's consciousness of wrong, and the fourth is the duality or two-fold nature of man which gives rise on the one hand to self-surrender and dependence and on the other to self-assertion and rebellion. The first three facts imply the existence of God. The fourth is partially responsible for the rise of religion, for "religion grows out of the instinctive effort of the soul to reconcile its own antagonistic impulses." Man being neither self-originated nor self-sustained requires an antecedent cause for an explanation of himself. That man aspires to fellowship implies that there is a being with whom he can have fellowship. Man's sense of right and wrong implies the existence of right, and right must have an author.

That God is, as the cosmological and moral arguments indicate, is Warren's third presupposition. What is God's nature? That he is moral has already been pointed out. That God is a personal being was paramount in Warren's thought. One reason for believing such is that meaningful relationships with a Deity are possible only if the Deity is in some sense personal. This led Warren to reject pantheism, and every kind of religious naturalism, for all of them conceive of God as impersonal.

Three more characteristics of the Deity were important for Warren. God is omnipresent; God is active, and God is love. Regarding the last Warren stressed that God's love is compassionate, forgiving, and universal. It extends to all men. In keeping with his Wesleyan

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6 Warren, op. cit., p. 60.
7 Ibid., p. 80.
8 One interesting statement of his Theistic argument reflecting Schleiermacher's thought is as follows—"The logically inevitable implication of the universal human consciousness of Dependence is the finiteness of the subject, and of all human subjects. And the logically inevitable implication of the finiteness of all dependent human subjects is an extra or super-human Object, independent and infinite. In this all religionists capable of philosophic thought agree." Ibid., p. 50 (1907 edition).
0 In a lecture titled "Scripture Inspiration" given at Ohio Wesleyan University, Dr. Warren said "First of all, I assume that man is not a beast. I assume secondly that there is a personal God who has created man and given him his spiritual nature. I assume this Divine Creator and natural companion of man is not
heritage Warren stressed that God’s grace which is a manifestation of the activity of love, goes out to all mankind. Some in Warren’s time believed that God’s grace was limited to Christians, that the heathen was outside its pale, but Warren asserted the universality of grace. As John Wesley in his day had insisted that God’s grace was extended to all segments of English society, the poor and lowly as well as the more fortunate, the unchurched as well as the churched, so Warren insisted that God’s grace goes out to all men, non-Christian as well as Christian. \(^{19}\)

Warren’s fourth presupposition was his philosophy of history. He stoutly rejected any naturalistic or materialistic view of history. Instead he saw history as the interaction of God and man in time. As an active being, God is constantly reaching toward, searching out man. At the same time man constantly aspires toward or seeks out God. This view enabled Warren to avoid an orthodoxy which based religion on revelation alone, while on the other hand it allowed him to repudiate any religious humanism or naturalism which grounded religion in man or viewed religion solely as a construct of man. He believed religion to be in part the result of divine initiative, of which revelation is one mode, and in part an outcome of a natural yearning in man toward a reality which transcends himself. It is not a process running solely from God to man, or one running from man to God; it is both. The interaction of God and man throughout all of man’s history is what has given rise to man’s religion.

Warren carried this basic presupposition one step forward by asking about the nature of this relationship between man and God in its actual and its ideal form. It has taken many forms in the actual, historical religions of man, but its ideal form must meet two prerequisites. The mode of relationship between God and man must be personal since the most meaningful relationships are personal ones. Also, it must be moral since man can worship and give his highest allegiance only to that which is completely virtuous. These two criteria are met fully only in Christianity. Only in Christianity does the divine-human interaction take the form of a person, Christ, and Christ was pure, spotless, sinless.

These presuppositions lead us to a central thesis in Warren’s thought, viz., the essential unity of all religions. The various reli-

\(^{18}\)In *The Story of Methodism* by Luc-ock and Hutchinson an interesting characteristic of John Wesley is found. “In

\(^{19}\)In *The Ingham Lectures of 1872 on Evi-ences of Natural and Revealed Reli-
gions, past and present, are not separate, distinct, and unrelated. Instead they are simply different "modes of a perpetual, all-inclusive self manifestation of the Divine." Through history, God, out of his infinite love and compassion, has constantly revealed himself to man and man has always responded to God. The various religions are the result of this continual intercommunion. The religions vary in proportion to the nature or capacities of man. Just as a child's understanding and communication with the divine is more limited than that of an adult, so early man's religions were circumscribed by his limited capacities. Man has progressively grown, however, and God's response has corresponded; and this developmental process in religion culminated with the perfect and highest revelation or manifestation of God in Christ.

This aspect of Warren's thought is very important. What we have here is a broad view which incorporates all of human history and all the religions of man. Warren did not reject other religions as false, as many of his contemporaries did. He did not set up an absolute dichotomy between Christianity and other religions. Instead he saw them as parts of an inclusive whole, a total world process. Warren's view reflects his belief in divine providence in history which has resulted in "successive dispensations" to man in the form of the historical religions. Christianity is the final dispensation. It was not a new religion but was a more complete form of the older faiths. It was a "ripening and essential perfecting" of man's religiosity. Christianity was a "consummating not a destroying system, for did not Jesus say, I came not to destroy but to fulfill?"

Warren's view of the essential unity and progressiveness of man's religion had many overtones of the evolutionary theory which dominated the period. His view was determined by two other influences, the dialectical method and the concept of the kingdom of God. In regard to the first Warren was a follower of Hegel who asserted that reality as interpreted by the understanding consists of contraries or apparent opposites. Reason, which enables us to go beyond appearances, shows us however that each pair of contraries can be incorporated into a higher synthesis. Hegel believed that this amalgamating process continues until all such opposites are resolved into a final synthesis, the Absolute Spirit. Warren applied his methodology to the religious history of mankind and declared that a number of religions have come into being which appear to be contrary or in opposition to each other. However, once we get beyond apparent differences into the heart of those religions, we find a sufficient identity or unity which makes possible a resolution of differences and the achievement of a final religious synthesis in the form of Christianity.

11 Warren, op. cit., p. 69. A substantial account of Dr. Warren's thought is found in Leland Scott's doctoral thesis at Boston Theological Seminary. It contains one chapter on Comparative Religions. Howard Hunter has a valuable dissertation on him also.

12 Ibid., p. 34.


14 Hegel's influence on Warren was through Professor Trendelenberg under whom Warren studied in Paris.
Regarding the kingdom of God concept, Warren believed that the end of religious history is the “actualized Kingdom of God on earth.” Christianity, which was the culmination of earlier religions, and which has itself gone through several stages—Apostolic, Latinized, Medieval Christianity—will be completed only when the kingdom of God is actually, fully realized on earth. Warren held to a quite literal interpretation of the kingdom of God concept. He looked forward to a time when all the world would be Christian. The 1911 edition of his book was dedicated to his “beloved former pupils now laboring on every continent to transfigure the Religions of the World into the one perfected and all-regnant world religion.” He believed that humanity “was intended to be an organ of the Divine” and that “through the agencies of His temporal kingdom there shall ultimately come to be a redeemed and renovated humanity, faultlessly expressive of the divine holiness.” He believed that the goal of the incarnation, the purification of man, would take place on earth and that man, freed of his sin of selfishness, would “stand for the first time self-revealed in and before its self-revealed Author, and both, conscious of a oneness which neither life nor death eternal can destroy, face the impicturable experiences of the endless beyond.” Warren viewed the kingdom of God as consisting of purified individuals and purified institutions. It sprang out of his faith in the indwelling divinity in all men and the purifying power of divine love.

The central pillar of Warren’s course and argument for Christian theism was his thesis of the essential unity of all religions and the culmination of that unity in Christianity, the single world religion. His major thesis was buttressed by minor ones. Other religions have been national. They have been limited to particular nations and they have fallen with the collapse of those nations. Christianity on the other hand is universal; it transcends national boundaries. Secondly, other religions have been associated with a particular society or culture and thus have been limited to it and by it, while Christianity transcends all social and cultural walls. Also, other religions tend to be of one type—the ancestor religion of China, the priest religion of Egypt, the hero religion of Greece, or the empire religion of Rome. But Christianity has an intrinsic universality and inclusiveness which prevents it from becoming one-sided. Warren also pointed out the assimilation process in man’s religious history. Throughout the ages larger religious units have resulted from the absorption of smaller ones. This amalgamating process has continued to the present era and is climaxd in Christianity, which has absorbed elements from the Hebrew, Greek and earlier religions. A final thesis held that there is a positive correlation between the religion and the height to which a civilization of a particular culture rises. Since the “most highly civilized peoples of the globe”

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15 Warren, op. cit., p. 46.  
16 Ibid., p. 64.  
17 Ibid., p. 70.  
are western and Christian, we can presume the superiority and truth of Christianity.

As a pioneer in comparative religions, offering the first course of its type in an American university, Warren taught more than 50 students a year for 47 years. It is therefore pertinent to ask in what ways the man and his course influenced Methodism during and after his long teaching career.¹⁹

Regarding Warren's contribution to scholarship, we may note first that, since his course was the first of its type, it was in itself a contribution to the field of comparative religions and that it served as a model for many of his students who became university teachers. Second, because he approached the subject historically, his course was a contribution to the study in America of the history of religions. That approach, then in its beginning stage, was centered mainly in Europe. Warren helped to bring it to America where it has thrived vigorously to the present day. Third, Warren's work was significant scholastically as an illustration of the compatibility of religion and the scientific method. From the beginning he used that method in his course, as the first sentence in his book indicates—"The world is full of phenomena which men call religious."²⁰ Finally, he was one of the forerunners of the "Encounter" theology in his philosophy of history as the arena in which the inter-communion of God and man takes place.

Warren's influence was not limited to the academic world. By strongly emphasizing the realization of the kingdom of God here and now, he laid a foundation for the social gospel movement at the turn of the century. His conviction regarding the actuality of the kingdom of God was grounded in his belief in the "inseparableness of the inward and the outward" and his definition of religion as acts.²¹ The sincere Christian is one who attempts to realize his inner principles and values in society, and, to use Warren's words, "Being religious is not suffering something, but doing something."²² Warren's concept of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man was inclusive. He believed that God's love goes out to all men, regardless of race, creed, or color. He rejected any Calvinistic, lost-saved dichotomy. God does not condemn some and save others. All men are objects of God's love and salvation and all men are brothers.

Warren verified the brotherhood of man on two grounds. Its divine sanction was that all men are brothers because they are children of God; they have a common father. From a purely naturalistic view, however, he asserted that all men are brothers because of their common biological origin and their identical psychological structure. All men came from the same primeval source and have

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¹⁹In his essay of appreciation to Dr. Warren, Bishop Hughes wrote, "William Fairfield Warren has done the greatest work wrought by any single man in Methodism in the last half century." Methodist Review, March, 1924, p. 197.


²²Warren, op. cit., p. 144.
the same needs, longings and aspirations. To Warren the principle that all men are one human family was the only true one and it served as a corollary to his basic concept of the religious unity of man—"As all tribes and races have been and are genetically connected varieties of the one human family, so all religions, living or dead, are or have genetically connected modifications and ramifications of the one ever-growing and changing religious life of the one human race." 23 Such views may seem commonplace today, but it should be remembered that they were at the growing edge of American religious thought in the last half of the nineteenth century.

One notable effect of Warren's teaching was the change it wrought in the attitudes of his students. In describing the impression which Warren made on his students, Bishop William F. McDowell pointed to "that wide, accurate, and sympathetic understanding of all religions that literally transformed the crude, narrow views which most of us took to Boston. . . . Intellectually and spiritually his course in comparative religion made an epoch in the lives of the men who took it." 24 Warren helped his students to realize that there is truth in all religions. "He gave us a new sense of the universal search after God and his witness in every nation," said McDowell.25 At the same time Warren taught them that all religions are not equally good or true. "We students of those days at Boston University were kept from the folly of thinking that one religion is about as good as another at the same time that we at least got foregleams of the truth that all that is worth while in any religion belongs by right to Christ," wrote Bishop Francis J. McConnell.26 Warren urged that other religions need not be feared or seen as a threat to Christianity. He insisted that a sympathetic understanding of other religions need not result in one being converted to them. Understanding did not imply assent but was rather the path to honest dialogue between Christian and non-Christian. Warren especially urged his students to treat all religions fairly and not to be contemptuous of non-Christian faiths. Interestingly, at the beginning of his course he would tell the students that one of its benefits would be "to guard one against that narrowness and uncharitableness of judgment, that caste-pride and self-righteousness into which all ignorant religionists are sure to fall." 27 That his teaching was effective is shown by a statement of one of his pupils. "If I ever had any inclination toward contemptuousness in regard to non-Christian faiths, Doctor Warren delivered me from it. I went out from his classes with respect for all sincere human effort to find God." 28 One notes in Warren's course book the absence of such words as "pagans," "heathen," "savages," "lost," and "unregenerate," terms often found in the missionary literature of the nineteenth century. Warren used objective words such as ethnic, historic, early, or non-Christian religions.

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23 Ibid., p. 74.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 204.
28 The Methodist Review, March, 1924, p. 204.
Thus it may be fair to say that William Fairfield Warren's contribution as a teacher was more significant than his work as an administrator. Along with a number of other leaders in Methodism, Warren was influential in developing the positive attitude and approach to the non-Christian religions which became evident in Methodist missionary work in the early years of the twentieth century and which has continued to the present time.