

REVIEW ARTICLE

Gustav Mensching

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Gustav Mensching, *Structures and Patterns of Religion*.
Translated from German into English by Hans F. Klimkeit and
V. Srinivasa Sarma. Delhi, Varanasi, Patna: Motilal
Banarsidass, 1976. viii + 366 pp. Rs. 75.00

The present book is a distressingly bad English translation of the late Professor Mensching's book *Die Religion: Erscheinungsformen, Strukturtypen und Lebensgesetze* (Stuttgart Schwab Verlag 1959; Goldmanns Gelbe Taschenbücher 882-3, n.d.). This appeared in 1959 and leant heavily on the author's *Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft*, published in 1949, which in its turn was a reworked second edition of a first edition of 1937. This means that we have to do here basically with data and ideas which were launched more than thirty years ago and represent the work of a German scholar immediately before and after World War II, shortly after the death of Rudolf Otto in 1936, with whom Mensching had worked and to whose ideas he remained loyal, even in the trying years of Nazi Germany.

Given the distance of most present-day scholars from Mensching's work and the fact that few of his many writings (1) have appeared in English, and also given the fact that the present translation is only comprehensible for a reader who has the German original at hand, a somewhat lengthier description of the author's approach in this book seems to be justified.

In his *Introduction* (pages 1-3) he speaks of an effort to arrive at comparison and understanding, the latter

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being the opposite of an approach 'from a preconceived theological or confessional position' (page 1) which aims to measure the value or truth of religions, religious views and practices. The author concedes, however, that it is impossible to work without presuppositions; an 'inner involvement' and a 'capacity for sympathy' are needed for a scholar who wants 'to do justice to the living reality of religion', and who is opposed to a 'detached rational perspective' which produces a false image of what religion actually is.

Comparisons should only be carried out between analogous elements of different religions, that is to say elements which have an essentially analogous significance and perform the same vital functions within the life of their respective religions or 'religious organisms'. The scholar of religion is concerned with life: in the first place he has 'to seek the *life* that is effective in and behind the perceived phenomena of religious history', and in the second place he has to look for every religion's 'unmistakable *living core*' which manifests itself on two levels - that of phenomena and that of religious intention. The comparison of religions has suffered not only from rash identifications which confuse, for example, homologues with analogues, but also from hasty differentiations which contrast the religious ideals of the scholar's own religion with the practices of other religions. Instead, he should strive for an exact correspondence between what is compared, and seek 'to understand what is *meant* by all religious phenomena' (pages 2-3). Too often, indeed, theologians and others speak of so-called basic differences 'where the differences exist only on the phenomenal level, and not on the level of religious intention' (page 3). Just as it is necessary to pay attention to the 'living core' of a particular religion in order to do justice to the life behind its phenomena, so the 'religious intention' of religious phenomena must be discerned in order for differences and analogies to be appreciated in their just proportion.

Understanding religious phenomena presupposes comparison, because it is through comparison and discrimination that the meaning which 'enlivens' the phenomena is discovered. The next step then is to understand the phenomena 'as "possibilities" for the manifestation of religious meaning' (page 3; German: 'religiöse Inhalte'), so that the historical facts 'are apprehended as the "possibilities" for the embodiment of religious intuitions and intentions'. 'If the historical facts are thus comprehended as possible

manifestations of living meaning, then their essential character will also become apparent'. In order to arrive at this understanding of the inner life of such phenomena one should take them into one's own experience, so that the quality of their life can be grasped. This is 'the taking of the historical facts into one's own experience in order to grasp their inner life and to bring this life into our own feeling and consciousness through the medium of conceptualization'. It is 'their mysterious relationship to a life which gives them all their meaning' and this life which confers on the religious phenomena their particular symbolic character is what should be sought (page 3).

The book first deals then with three basic themes of reflection, of which that of the essence of religion is of foremost importance. By the essence of religion in general the author understands 'the basic essence of religion, that which is common to them (sc. "the different historical religions") all' (page 4). Mensching rejects the ways in which Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel conceptualized the essence of religions, saying that definitions are not meant to be norms but that they must be 'abstractions from the wealth of historical phenomena' (page 5). Such an abstraction requires, however, a certain preliminary understanding of what is to be called 'religion'. It is here, of course, that the real problem starts, and Mensching tackles it only from his own 'minimum understanding of the nature of religion'. The starting-point used is that in the history of mankind there are attestations of peculiar experiences of 'unusual realities' which are designated by the term 'sacred'. The next step is to examine all the different modes of man's experience of and reaction to this sacred reality. Once this has been completed, a subsequent process of abstraction leads to defining 'that which we...would tend to regard as belonging to the concept of religion: *Religion is experiential encounter with the sacred and the responsive action of man affected by the sacred*' (page 5; German: Religion ist erlebnishafte Begegnung mit dem Heiligen und antwortendes Handeln des vom Heiligen bestimmten Menschen', pages 18-19). Encounter and response are considered to be the two basic elements of every religion.

The advantage of this definition, the author notes, is double: it encompasses the diversity of all historical religions, and it consists of merely formal structural categories for these basic relations with the sacred - which leaves open the possibility that in historical reality these relations can have very different contents. The sacred itself can have different contents (for example, the sacred

One, impersonal sacred reality, sacred beings), and the encounter can be of various sorts (religious insight, vision, experience of faith, hearing of the word, inner enlightenment, and so forth). In principle everything can become an object of 'divination' in Rudolf Otto's sense, that is to say an object in and through which an encounter with the sacred can take place, and it is such encounters which become the initial basis for the establishment of religion. As for the responsive action of man when affected by the sacred, it may consist of cultic, magical or ethical deeds, and it may contain mythical, conceptual or artistic forms of expression. Mensching contends that according to his formula the two basic elements of religion - encounter with and response to the sacred - are expressed in purely formal terms, and that the specific diversifications of these two basic elements leads to a historical multiplicity of religions. Here his notion of the 'living core' of a religion becomes clearer, since he considers this to be 'the distinctiveness of both the encounter with the sacred and the response to it' (page 6; German: 'die jeweilige Besonderheit sowohl der Begegnung mit dem Heiligen als auch der Antwort auf sie', page 20). The term is also designed to convey the idea that religions are forms of life and not constructed systems of intellectually comprehensible truths. In short the living core is the distinctive spirit of the different historical religions, arising out of specific ways of encountering and responding to the sacred.

The second theme of reflection proposed is the relationship between religion in the singular and the plurality of historical religions. The author contends that 'religion' is historically real only in concrete religions with their own living cores. He notes, however, the existence of a great number of structural similarities and differences throughout the world of religions - for example, ethnic and universal religions, prophetic and mystical religions - and considers that 'beyond the basis of an essential similarity (sc. encounter with and response to the sacred), religions are both differentiated and related by many structural relations and parallel formations' (page 7). Not only the religious phenomena but also these structural relationships should be studied, in phenomenology and typology respectively.

The third theme mentioned but hardly treated here is the relationship between religion and society. This relationship can be studied in a general manner, so that ethnic religions, universal religions, sects etc. can be differentiated, and for instance the various attitudes can be

investigated which have been taken in the universal religions toward the established secular order. This is the subject of the author's *Soziologie der Religion* (1947, 2nd revised edition 1968). It is also possible to investigate the relationship for each religion separately, so that the sociological structure of each religion is laid bare. This implies that an inquiry should be made both into the living core and into the sociological structure of each religion in connection with its sociological phenomena. This is the subject of the author's *Soziologie der Religionen* (1966).

Mensching then proceeds to treat what he calls the basic structures of religion. These basic structures are derived from the idea of a structural differentiation of religion, closely connected with structural changes in the modes of human existence itself. The basic distinction which Mensching makes is that between ethnic and universal religion, the first being subdivided into ethnic religions of non-literate peoples and more developed and differentiated ethnic religions. The ethnic religions are bound to natural communities which experience salvation as a mysterious 'life' uniting all members, and certain basic structures determine the nature and limits of ethnic religion. In the ethnic religions of 'primitive' peoples the author finds a basic attitude to life and world which - following C. H. Ratschow's *Magie und Religion* (1947) - he characterizes with the concept of *unio magica*, magical unity, under which heading the 'primitive peoples' are put. The ethnic groups may also be peoples with developed and differentiated religions; these Mensching treats successively, starting with the religion of the Greeks and ending with the Israelite religion, indicating in each case their distinctive spirit or 'living core'.

In due time, however, a process of *universalization* occurs so that ethnic religions are nearly always replaced by universal religions. This may happen, for instance, through self-universalization: the development of universal tendencies out of ethnic religions retaining their outward form. But it may also happen because an ethnic religion is replaced or complemented by a foreign universal religion, or because a supra-national world religion establishes itself within an ethnic religion. Mensching insists that the rise of universal religion implies a fundamental change in human existence, a change linked to man's growing control over the world. Whereas in the ethnic religions the individual believers are completely dependent on the comprehensive communities to which they belong, in the universal religions the individual replaces the collectivity of ethnic religion

as the 'subject' of religion. Whereas in the ethnic religions the initial situation of man is that of *Heil*, in the universal religions it is one of *Unheil*: lack of welfare or salvation. Universal religions have as their starting point a fundamental breach in the profundities of human existence, and they then seek to re-establish a reunion with the holy so that the breach is healed. In these religions there is an inner universality in that the message of salvation concerns everyone, whatever his specific setting. In short, universal religions present an answer to a newly arisen need of man when he has awakened to self-consciousness. The claim of the message of these religions is total, and so they have a strong tendency to expand, whereas the ethnic religions tend to perish because they no longer provide an answer to the newly developed 'plightful' or rather woeful condition of man. The three great universal religions - Buddhism, Christianity and Islam - are considered. Within the universal religions Mensching, like Friedrich Heiler, distinguishes two basic forms of religiosity, the mystic and the prophetic.

Mensching's *typology of religion* developed in a section on 'Structural Types of Religion', is less easy to understand. He starts by saying that 'type' itself is an ambiguous concept. On the one hand it indicates something which is common to various religious 'organisms', so that a typology requires the investigation of typical common elements of various religions. On the other hand it indicates what is 'typically' unique and peculiar in every religion, so that a typology of religion ought to be based on the typical uniqueness of each individual religion, in particular its specific living core. Whereas phenomenology is concerned with individual phenomena and their 'parallels', typology views religions as totalities or organisms and pays attention to the typical 'commonness' in the totality as well as the typical uniqueness in the totality. The concept 'type' in a typology of religion is 'a summary of essential common features' (page 58) which exist in the totality of the individual religions. A genuine type ('echter Typus') of religion has to be based not on incidental symptoms but only on 'common features which determine the essence' (page 59; German: 'wesensbestimmende Gemeinsamkeiten', page 80). Differing from N. Söderblom, F. Heiler and H. Frick, Mensching prefers not to use only one principle of division but several, with the result that a number of types is developed which may partially overlap one another. He defends the scholarly interest of such typological work which is much more than a useful division of religions: 'throwing over the variegated abundance of historical religious organisms a net of as fine a mesh as possible... promotes the knowledge of religion itself' (page 58).

Consequently, there are many types of religion, and one and the same religion is often to be included under several types, and the author claims that his 'type-pictures' ('Typenbilder') take into account the same number of 'essence-sides' ('Wesensseiten') in the phenomenon as a totality. Religions which are included under one and the same type constitute a 'group of relationship in the type' (page 59; German: 'Gruppe der Verwandtschaft im Typus', page 80). It is Mensching's sincere scholarly desire 'to investigate into all typological common features in the domain of the history of religion' (page 59; German: 'alle typologische Gemeinsamkeiten im Bereich der Religion zu erforschen', page 80), and so uncover 'a finely differentiated system of diverse cross-connections within the world of religion' (page 59; German: 'ein feindifferenziertes System mannigfaltiger Querverbindungen innerhalb der Religionswelt', page 80). As such, typology of religion can be seen as a valid branch of *Religionswissenschaft*.

The two basic structures of ethnic and universal religion constitute 'ultimate and most general exactitudes of essence' (page 60; German: 'letzte und allgemeinste Wesensbestimmtheiten', page 80) on the basis of which the types are constructed. In ethnic religion, Mensching believes, there is only a small differentiation of types, whereas in the later universal religions there are many more types; consequently, in the course of history there develops a growing abundance of types. The following are then described: nature-religion and culture-religion; dynamistic, animistic and theistic religion; 'demanding and granting' (German: 'forderend und schenkend') religion; revealed religion and book-religion; naturally-grown and founded religion; mystic religion and prophetic religion.

The first part of Chapter Three, 'The Reality of the Holy' deals with 'holy power'. Mensching contends that religion presupposes a confrontation with the holy which is possible at all times and places. The reality of the holy itself is not directly accessible to scholarly investigation but only indirectly, through the person who has come into contact with the holy. A basis for scholarly statements on the holy is provided by 'the evidences of several inner certainties' ('Bezeugungen verschiedenartiger innerer Bestimmtheiten') of religious man, and religious man is essentially someone with an 'awareness of his being determined by holy reality' (page 103). Mensching is here elaborating the ideas of Rudolf Otto on the holy and its manifestations. The reality of the holy is experienced and

represented by man 'in several ways which are structurally different' (page 104; German: 'in strukturmässig vielfältig verschiedener Weise', page 130). If religion is an experiential confrontation with the holy and leads to different forms of representation ('Vorstellungsformen'), research has to be carried out into the basic structural forms of the experience of the numinous reality as confrontation with the holy. This leads, after Mensching's view on magic as a kind of charming, or rather enchantment, to a kind of *phenomenology of religion* which consists of four parts which can be summarized as follows:

1. The phenomena of holy power ('Erscheinungsformen heiliger Macht'), inanimate and animate, spirits and demons, gods and the one God(ly);
2. The reality of the world, subdivided into:
 - (a) The world outside man as object of religious opinion. A difference is made between 'world-image' ('Weltbild') as 'the sum-total of the ideas of a religion regarding the structure of the visible world' and 'world-view' ('Weltanschauung') which is 'concerned...also with the world as a whole of being and happening'. Both are based on religious experience, and therefore dependent on the 'living core' or 'life-centre' of the religion concerned, and have not yet grown out of scientific knowledge or philosophical speculation: 'All world-images and world-views have their origin...in the encounter with the holy' (page 186). Distinctions between optimistic and pessimistic views on the world can be made and further explored.
 - (b) Man. Much attention is given to different views held about the soul as the essence of man, so that the outlines of a 'religious-historical anthropology' (page 170) become apparent. As a prototype of religious man Mensching then treats the master (Meister); here he is indebted to Joachim Wach's study of the different relationships which can exist between a master and his disciples or followers.
 - (c) Man's encounter with the world of the holy, as the first element in the 'Wesensbestimmung der Religion'. This encounter implies 'divination', that is to say 'the perception for the godly and the experience with it' (page 185; German: 'Die Witterung für das Göttliche und die Erfahrung mit ihm', page 221). The only essential point in all religions would be acquiring existential contact with the world of the holy. The media of encounter, the ways of encounter, and the contents of the encounter including notions of salvation, are all considered.
 - (d) The responding acting as the second element in the 'determination of the essence of religion'. This is subdivided into two parts: 'Reply as act', where symbols

and the main cultic forms are treated, and 'Reply as community-forming and community-binding', where some kinds of religious communities are mentioned.

Chapter Seven deals with what the author calls the 'Life-laws of religion' and is subdivided into three parts. The first (published separately in 1954) deals with the problem of development in the history of religion. The second part treats the typical stages of the development of religions. This presupposes the identity of the religious 'organism' in which the stages take place. The transition from ethnic to universal religion implies a structural change of man, whereas certain universal religions like Gnosticism and Manichaeism, too, are replaced by another 'more profound and superior universal religion' (page 273). The third part, on 'Typical tensions in religion' is very interesting and indeed may be called one of the best sections of the book. Five such tensions are reviewed successively:

(a) Tradition and new creation. The author distinguishes mythical, scriptural, doctrinal and cult tradition and holds that what is to be transmitted through the media of tradition is 'supra-temporal numinous life-reality' (page 291). There is a dialectic in the relationship between tradition on the one hand and creative protest on the other, the latter expressing the basic spontaneity of the holy.

(b) Form and spirit ('Form und Geist'), where the symbolic forms and their intrinsic ambiguity are treated.

(c) Authority and freedom, with attention given to the problem of the masses and the requirements of guiding them.

(d) Religion of means and religion of directness ('Religion der Mittel und der Unmittelbarkeit'), where the beginnings of universal religions are also discussed.

(e) Tolerance and intolerance (first published 1953), where the relations and discussions between religions are discussed and various kinds of tolerance distinguished.

Mensching's own concept of tolerance as recognition of the limitless possibilities of the play of the divine spirit in the special forms of religions in history leads to his concluding chapter on 'The unity of religions'. There can be no doubt as to the differences between religions and kinds of religiosity; the author himself elaborates for instance on the difference between Central and East Asia with its predominantly mystical religion, and the Middle East, Europe, America and Africa with their predominantly prophetic-activist religions. Nevertheless several attempts have been made to arrive at unity of religion: unity *instead of* a multiplicity of religions (for example, by the victory of one religion over all the

others), unity out of the multiplicity (for example, by what is common to all religions, as the 'natural' religion of the Enlightenment), *syncretistic* creation of a unitary religion out of individual religious elements from various religions, or grasping a unity which is already existing in the multiplicity of the existing religions. According to this latter view 'the life of the religions appears as a unitary power in the depth of the multiplicity of forms' (page 319). This is the view held by Mensching himself, who observes that in the depth of the historical religions there are often ultimately identical basic features, like a yearning for the holy, a bringing of sacrifices, a profession and defence of basic values provided by religion. This 'can be impartially explained in no other way than by presuming that in all religions a real encounter with the holy was experienced' (page 320). This ultimate unity of religions has remained concealed for a long time because little factual knowledge of religions has been available, and because in Christian theology all non-Christian religions were considered as 'heathen'. Present-day *Religionswissenschaft*, however, leads to a recognition of substantial relationships between religions; for example, in all religions there are religious 'prime-experiences', and religion is encounter and response. Thanks to this discipline, better knowledge is acquired of how the holy is experienced by religious man, and the fact of such religious 'prime-experiences' proves that a deep unity runs right across the various religions, while the knowledge of the basic structural forms encourages a recognition of unity of the ethnic religions (whose carrier is the vital religious community) and the universal religions (where the individual who has woken up to metaphysical individual consciousness and to religious independence has become the carrier of the religion). The same modern *Religionswissenschaft* shows the true nature of the intermingling of religions with one another: the great common elements in the phenomena of the holy and in the world of ideas, the uniform manner which religions have of giving expression to their inner life, and the vast areas of values which are everywhere recognized. And so the book concludes: 'The consequences of the recognition of the ultimate unity in the diversity of religions can only be that attitude which I shall call substantial tolerance: the recognition of foreign religions as true possibilities of encounter with the holy' (page 324).

In a way this book, or rather its German original, is the legacy passed on by the late Professor Mensching to succeeding generations, and it has thus seemed appropriate to describe the outlines and main points of what already

belongs to the history of *Religionswissenschaft*. The bibliography, consisting practically exclusively of German publications, rarely goes beyond 1950, and the majority of its titles date back to before World War II or rather the fatal year 1933. Through such a book the blow which German *Religionswissenschaft* received from the Nazi period and its consequences may still be perceived, and rather than being reproached for his outdatedness in terms of modern research its author should rather be hailed for having carried, at least in principle, the torch of free scholarship through a time of ideological and theological turmoil which was utterly destructive of free research into religious matters on an empirical basis. Those familiar with Mensching's work will recognize some of his hobby-horses: the many quotations from Luther, his stress on the needs of the masses and their pressures in universal religions, a resentment against different forms of established Christianity, a heavy leaning on the authorities of the 1920s and 1930s in the field, and so on. Scholars will observe that Mensching was often more familiar with the secondary scholarly publications than with the primary sources, which was the price of his attempt to encompass the whole of *Religionswissenschaft* - just as it made his ideas rather fixed and his methodology somewhat schematic, especially in view of the high aims he set himself and his readers for the understanding of religion.

The mistakes in the English rendering by Sarma and Klimkeit (not, of course, to be confused with Professor Hans J. Klimkeit of Bonn) are infinite. First of all, there are what may be considered printing mistakes: that the Israelite religion is an ethnic religion of the Far East (page 32), that there is a rationalistic *international* (instead of intellectual?) interpretation of myth (page 279), that Friedrich Schleiermacher was a great *theologician* (page 319). Especially from pages 57 onwards there are the most curious expressions and mistranslations: *shall* instead of *ought to, must* (pages 58ff), founder-religion for *Urheber-Religion* (page 58), essence-sides for *Wesensseiten* (page 59), division of religion for *Einteilung der Religionen* (page 59), divine knowledge for *Gotteserkenntnis* (page 59), exactitudes of essence for *Wesensbestimmtheiten* (page 60), culture-folks for *Kulturvölker* (page 61), pre-folk existence for *vorvölkische Existenz* (page 62), godhood for *Gottheit* (pages 66ff), wonders for the plural *Wunder* (page 186f), symptoms (as translation of 'semeia') for the German correct translation of *Zeichen* (page 187). There are also tragico-comic mistakes proving ignorance, for instance the translation of Israeli religion for *israelitische Religion* throughout the book (for example on page 68: 'The Israeli religion

of the Old Testament'), or when the German titles of translated books are re-translated literally into English: Eliade's 'Religion and the Holy' (page 120), William James's 'Religious experience in its diversity' (page 200), or Schleiermacher's 'Talks on religion' (page 319). And what can one make of the first lines on page 223 where not only have some words been omitted, but convincing proof is given that the translator did not understand anything of the original German text:

...for it is the confession of faith contained in rational concept-formulation (often still of a mythical nature) which originates in the theology that is formed out of necessities and which wants to convey further its religious possessions. Confession of faith also serves to represent religious experience-reality (page 223).

...denn sie ist das in rationale theologische Begriffsformulierung (vielfach auch noch mythischer Art) gefasste und aus den Notwendigkeiten der sich bildenden Religionsgemeinschaft, die ihren religiösen Besitz weitergeben will, entstandene Glaubensbekenntnis. Auch das Glaubensbekenntnis dient der Repräsentation religiöser Erfahrungswirklichkeit (German text, page 263).

The poor author would turn in his grave if he realized that the term *vergleichende Religionswissenschaft* has been rendered by 'comparative theology' (pages 58, 324 and elsewhere), and that in this English translation 'theology' stands for *Religionswissenschaft* (page 141, compare German text page 169, and elsewhere). So we can read, with more or less pleasure on pages 222-3: 'According to theological view there is....But theologically we must say...' for: 'Nach theologischer Ansicht ist also....Religionswissenschaftlich müssen wir aber sagen...' (German text, page 263). And further on, comic for analytical philosophers but incomprehensible for any reader depending upon common sense: 'But we must remember that we are pronouncing here theological, that means empirically founded, judgments, and not judgments of faith'. The line occurs on page 258 of the English edition, and it is suggested that the reader should compare this with page 304 of the German original, in the middle of the page.

No scholar, whether admired or despised, deserves to be betrayed in the rendering of his ideas or the translation of his words. The best advice which can be given to the publishing house of Motilal Banarsidass is to withdraw this book from circulation or to present a German copy together with each English copy sold. No adherent of the

phenomenological school of 'understanding' (*Verstehen*) can have conceived in his wildest dreams of the perversion of meaning and consequent misunderstandings exemplified here.

NOTE

- 1 A list of the published work of Gustav Mensching up to 1971 can be found in his *Topos und Typos*, Bonn, Röhrscheid Verlag 1971, pp. 225-52.

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