GENERAL CONCLUSION
Our intention in this thesis has been to take stock of the various attempts to explain and interpret religious doctrines, and, from a consideration of these attempts, to arrive at a method of approaching such doctrines so as to gain their true import. In the process, we have rejected as unsound some of the methods employed by writers on religious topics. We have not only rejected their methods as unsound, but have, in fact, tried to develop a way of looking at religions and religious theories different from one's own.

As we are working in the field of comparative religious or inter-religious studies, two doctrines from two contexts were taken for consideration, namely, the doctrines of Karma and Original Sin. Instead of trying to explore the meaning of each doctrine by subjugating it to an analysis that is unaware of the organic roots of the doctrine, we have tried to keep the doctrine in its living context, and to get at its meaning by relating it to the manifold concepts and doctrines that constitute the whole system of thought and experience. This has enabled us to see in what way the doctrines under our consideration have been able to play their role in the life of the people who employ them both theoretically and practically. We have stressed the fact that it is not the doctrines in isolation that perform a specific function; but the whole system as such does it. Thus in our case, the doctrines of Original Sin and Karma provide a plausible explanation to the problem of evil; but they do so only in the context of the total
system. This does not minimise the value of the doctrine. Not even the universality of its application is affected. Only the theoretical limitations of a doctrine are kept in sight; but this enables us to avoid isolating it from its context thus making sure that it is not weakened any further by misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

However, our purpose in this thesis has not been merely to point out the problems inherent in the usual methods of approaching a doctrine, nor even to stop with a rough sketch of a new way of looking at the different religious doctrines, but, more particularly, to draw the implications of these for a comparative study of religions. The present work is envisaged as a project in comparative religion; only indirectly, but positively. Through this study an orientation has been sought to be given to the very idea and discipline of comparative religion. And it is hoped that this has meant a change in the framework of presuppositions which originally used to be more or less partisan.

I

Without really making a survey of the situation with respect to comparative studies in religion, we shall now mention some points regarding this so as to bring out the basic presuppositions of the present-day approaches.

It is important to note that comparative religious studies had its inception and initial phase of development mainly in the West. As a result, the comparative study of religions, significant in so many ways, is nevertheless too 'Western' in basic orientation and framework. Even those who dealt with sacred scriptures and doctrines of Eastern
religions asked Western questions and expected Easterners to structure their experiences in a way which was meaningful to the Westerners. This raises the important problem regarding understanding and interpreting religions different from one's own. It may just be mentioned here that this point, though absolutely important, has not been taken note of, and as a result, the studies in comparative religion have done too much violence to religions to be overlooked.

True that from a stage of denying any truth to the other religions the Western comparative religionists have come down to the stand of giving some value to the truths in these 'natural' religions. But the idea that there can be only one religion that is really true (because truth is one), has led them to compensate for their 'liberal' attitude by a more than explicit 'big-brotherliness'. For instance, Prof. R.C. Zaehner, who was Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford has written thus just two decades ago: "... the 'immanentist' religions of India ... do not contradict any essential Christian doctrine, ... and their representations of an incarnate God, incomplete though they are, are valid prefigurations of the God incarnate in Christ." The attitude of the author towards the Indian religions is too evident to need any explicitation.

Apart from the idea that only one (i.e., one's own) religion can be true religion, the comparison of the two incarnations in isolation from the context of each is also misleading. It is not clear how Zaehner could have said that the incarnations in the Indian religions are 'prefigurations of the God incarnate in Christ', if he had taken any Eastern Religion in its totality and compared it with Christianity, instead of comparing incarnation in
one religion with incarnation in another. Our very thesis in the present work is that comparison of religions is not comparison of theories in different religions. And we have clearly shown the dangers of comparison of isolated concepts or doctrines. Yes, there are many ways of comparing and not all are healthy ways. Similar to the attempt already mentioned, there are attempts to compare Trinity of Christianity with Trimurti of Hinduism, to compare Krishna with Christ, etc., etc. But it may be said briefly here that all such attempts have only added to the huge mass of misunderstanding in the matter.

Coming to the very question of comparison of the doctrines of Karma and Original Sin, it is interesting to note what the usual way of comparison can achieve. One type of comparison has the beautiful name 'blending'. Let us see how this is done: First the question is raised as to the 'beginning of Karma'. As if the Indians had somehow forgotten to ask this question! And then the suggestion is made that Original Sin, if fitted along with Karma, solves this problem! That the problem in the theory of Karma is not a peculiar defect of this theory alone, but resulting from the limitation of theory as such, is not taken note of. That the same type of problems are there with respect to Original Sin is forgotten. (For instance, how could man sin, for the first time, if he was not already 'prone' to it? and, how could we seriously talk about the 'beginning' of the history of sin?). 'Blending' a number of theories does not produce a 'super-theory'.

Another type of comparison is the result of seeing the parallel functions of two theories in two different religions. For instance, while considering the theories of
Karma and Original Sin, one may be impressed by the fact that both serve the function of accounting for the evil in the world. But a little deeper search will show that this 'accounting-for-evil' is a blanket-term and not quite accurately used. The 'accounting' is done not that easily, and how it is done needs to be taken into consideration. Only in this way can the theory be understood and its role explained. When this is attempted, it will become clear that the two theories supposed to have been serving the same function are after all as much different as they are similar; and that their differences really play a crucial role in their efficacy. This would mean that obliterating the differences means really to weaken them. If this is what is aimed in comparative religion, it would be 'comparative' in a manner of speaking, but is really a destructive endeavour.

If follows that the proper way of doing comparison of theories or doctrines in different fields is, first and foremost, by preserving every ounce of strength that each theory has and by constantly exercising a restraint on our urge to arrive at a supertheory too quickly — a theory that embraces both the theories under consideration. For instance, while comparing the two theories of Karma and Original Sin, let us say that we are confronted with the following fact: Both in Karma theory and Original Sin theory there is an acceptance of a certain sinfulness that precedes the personal decision of the individual in this present earthly life. One might be tempted to say that here is a means of tying together the two theories. But he would not mind disconnecting the theory from its already existing natural ties with its context and interpreting it conveniently to suit the purposes of comparison.
In fact, there is a similarity between the two theories in so far as both recognise the problem of the inexplicability of the present evil in relation to the deeds of the present man in his present life. But, the similarity ends there. Because, once this recognition is formulated, it is formulated differently as a result of its being formulated in a theoretical context which, though growing and dynamic, is also always present. And the theoretical attempts to meet the problems are also to be understood and explained primarily with reference to the organic context of each and not with reference to prima facie cases of similarity between theories of different contexts. In short, the attempt in comparative religion should not be to compare the theories of two or more religions, but to compare the religions as such where the theories serve their functions as a member in the body of person. Comparing the limbs of two persons will not lead us anywhere if our intention is to get to know these persons by comparing and contrasting them.

This is not to minimize the role of comparative religion, but to put the whole endeavour in the proper perspective. This is necessary, specially in an age when the approach is to look at the 'other religion' from one's own religious and cultural standpoint, and to pass a judgement too quickly on the basis of the attempts to compare certain isolated concepts or doctrines in each religion. For instance, one might compare 'God' in two religions and then, on this sole basis, decide the merits and demerits of each religion, without bothering to consider what each 'God' is doing and is supposed to do in the respective religions. The very idea of God, in spite of all its similarities, may have such different connotations that they also need as much
consideration as the similarities. In short, the similarities of a particular religion with another, if taken at the level of individual elements, can be more a hinderance than a help to our endeavour to understand religion in its totality. This is especially so when the presuppositions of such a study are, as we have noted, generally incorrect, invalid and unhealthy, if not also motivated by aims and ambitions neither academic nor religious.

II

As to the important question 'can we really understand a religion other than our own?' it is necessary to mention briefly some of the issues involved in this question so as to see its implications for any framework for comparative studies in religion.

Can we understand a religion other than our own? There seems to be a sense in which the answer would have to be 'No', and yet there are indications that in some sense a positive reply is possible. Undoubtedly, it is not enough to gather the 'informations' regarding the doctrines, customs and rituals of the religious community. But, then, is it necessary to be a 'member' of a particular religious community to be able to understand their religion? What is it to be a 'member'? Is membership possible only by birth into that religion as is the case with many tribal and even some developed religions? What about the role of objective, mechanical, ritualistic modes of obtaining membership? Or is a subjective standard sufficient? Proper answers are found to all these questions the moment we recollect that Gandhiji, who refused to give up his religion of Hinduism, is often pointed out to be an exemplary Christian.
It is impossible to deny the need to be involved fully in the religions under one's study. The so-called 'neutral' stand has been criticised by almost everybody as both an impossibility and a wasteful business. Because, a real involvement is supposed to be necessary for understanding the religion which one studies. But the question here is: how is then objectivity possible? And nobody would admit that objectivity should be abandoned in the study of religions. This problem is solved by suggesting that it is the task of theology to investigate, buttress, and teach the faith of a religious community to which it is committed, and that it is the responsibility of comparative study to guide and to purify it. It is true that to love truth understood in any form one must hate untruth, but it is not true that in order to exalt one's own faith he should hate and denigrate those of another faith.

The danger of twisting a religious doctrine out of its shape is natural when the study of a religion is to some extent done 'from outside'. Once we enter the inner structure of a different paradigm, its logic and inner coherence lead us, and teach us, and constrain us, to think in radically new ways. The exploration of a new paradigm leads to startling conceptual discoveries as a strange new world is disclosed. At the same time, this danger is not inevitable. Because no culture has privileged access to its paradigm. It may equally misunderstand itself, deceive and violate itself, and may be as unfaithful to its ontological commitments, as some 'alien' interpreting culture might be. This means that a culture cannot make any special claims to legitimacy. Thus, for example, it is theoretically possible for an interpreter in a 'western' setting to attain a deeper grasp of the Karma paradigm than a given native Hindu might be able to. And yet,
the fact remains that it is the 'insider' who grasps the truth of his religion better than the 'outsider' who is often inclined to make the other man's religion an object of 'scientific' study. What is forgotten is the important fact that for the believer his religion is his very life and soul.

We shall not discuss the question as to whether the methods to be adopted must be scientific or not. It remains to be made clear what the connotations of the word 'scientific' are, and in what way science and religion are related. Unless these issues are made clear, whether the method in comparative religion should be scientific or not is a fruitless question leading only to unending disputes to which many have contributed only too lavishly. We have referred to this during our discussions in the analysis-part of the sections on Karma and Original Sin. But one thing may be said here: Knowing fully well that the method we have employed in this study may be called by some phenomenological, we want to make it clear that a phenomenology of religion is not supposed here to be the best way of approaching religions. True that we keep away from any particular philosophical or theological commitments; but we do not either depend totally on a purely historical, psychological or sociological method. The 'phenomenon' of religion is not so much amenable to the phenomenological method of analysis.

In fact, the more important question is that of having true 'religious experience' which is a pre-condition not only for arriving at the truth of one's own religion, but also for a better understanding of other religions. It may just be mentioned here that we for the present leave open the question as to whether one has to be a member of any particular
religion in any fixed sense to have religious experience, or whether it is possible for one to belong to no religion in particular and yet belong to all religions. But apart from the religious experience gained in the context of one's own religion, it is necessary to realise that there are different 'ways' to be 'religious'. Even if one holds fast to the belief that truth is one, it is possible to concede that there are 'many mansions' in our Father's house. What makes these different mansions different, and what makes them one house? The answer to this question will become clear when we sum up in the following section, our earlier remarks on the role of theories and conceptualisations in religion and draw up the implications of this for comparative studies in religion.

III

Considering two religions in comparison requires that we also take note of the role theories and doctrines have in the making of a religion. In fact, the two doctrines of Karma and Original Sin, as we have already seen, do not provide the final and foolproof explanation to the problem of evil. But we have also seen that these doctrines help people in a very significant sense to solve the problem both theoretically and in actual life. Thus, it is not a mere theoretical explanation; but rather the solution is aided by a theory which, though limited as any theory would be, takes the man beyond his limitations. The ultimate explanation is not given by any theory as such. It is in the relationship between actual life and the theoretical system that a real explanation has its habitat.
This provides us with a clue to what actually differentiates different religions. We have referred to the understanding of Indians regarding the role of theories and doctrines while concluding the first part of this thesis. Again we referred to this towards the end of the second part when we said about the limitations of the doctrine of Original Sin. It may now be said that the whole analysis has hinged on this one point: the idea that, though human nature may be said to be basically one, though religions must unite us in the vision of ONE TRUTH, the differences in our theories and conceptualisations actually differentiate our systems of thought and religion. Admittedly, this idea is reflected in the Indian religions where we see as a predominant feature the idea that theories and doctrines, though extremely important, are ultimately to be abandoned to have the direct vision of Truth. This has, of course, led to the misunderstanding that Indian religions are not ethical but are mystical.

What is important to be noted is the conspicuous absence in the Western Christian situation of the above mentioned view regarding theories and doctrines. As a result, Christianity has all along taken the attitude that if its doctrines are 'correct', then those of other religions must be wrong. This will not only explain the difference between the attitude of a good Hindu and a good Christian towards other religions, but also illumine us considerably regarding a difference in emphasis between the two religions — Hinduism and Christianity, namely, the emphasis in Hinduism on the many sidedness of Truth, and in Christianity on the Oneness of Truth, thus enabling us to see more clearly a difference between the two perspectives, the Western and the Eastern.
It is obviously wrong to imagine that different religions must conflict because they are different. But, can we therefore assume that all religions are just one and the same, and that the differences are insignificant? Any attempt to read complementarity between religions or to visualise a 'cosmic religion' would be an attempt foredoomed to failure if the actual differences between religions are not taken into consideration. Because, all religions have their roots in the context of their origin and development, as a result of which each religious system acquires a definite shape. And when we indulge in the exercise of comparing religions, it is better not to assume that if they are not conflicting they must be one and the same. It is all right to believe that all religions point to the same ultimate goal, but we ought to remember that we are not in possession of the absolute truth; none of us. It is abundantly clear from the foregoing passages that imagining us to be in actual possession of the whole truth can lead us not only into misunderstanding other peoples' religion, but also into falsifying our own.

To sum up, comparative studies in religion, in order to be able to avoid being partisan, have to accept a framework suitable for the purpose of enriching our understanding of different religions. We have attempted not only to say what the presuppositions of such a framework should not be, but also to show what ought to be our approach. In this way the whole religious system, and not merely a particular doctrine, becomes meaningful by being placed in its organic context which is the actual life-situation of man where he constantly makes himself. It is hoped that by bringing life and theory together we have been
able to better understand the theory and use this understanding for formulating the basic principles that must guide any endeavour to know other peoples and their religions. Obviously, such a broad framework for comparative studies in religion has implications not only for a better theoretical understanding but also for more fruitful practical living.

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