On Grading Religions

The idea of grading religions and placing them in an order of merit is to some repugnant, as involving a pretence to a divine perspective, whilst to others it seems entirely natural and proper, at least to the extent of their confidently assessing their own religion more highly than all others. We shall have to consider precisely what it is that might be graded, and in what respects and by what criteria. But, if we think for a moment of the entire range of religious phenomena, no one is going to maintain that they are all on the same level of value or validity. Indeed the most significant religious figures, the founders and reformers of great traditions, have invariably been deeply critical of some of the religious ideas and practices around them. Thus Gautama rejected the idea of the eternal atman or soul, which was integral to the religious thought of India in his time; the great Hebrew prophets criticised mere outward observances and sacrifices, proclaiming that what the Lord requires is to ‘let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (Amos 5:24); Jesus, in the same tradition, attacked the formalism and insincerity of some of the religious leaders of his own time who ‘tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God’ (Luke 11:42); Muhammad rejected the polytheism of his contemporary Arabian society; Guru Nanak in India and Martin Luther in Europe attacked much in the accumulated traditions into which they were born; and so on. Thus some kind of assessing of religious phenomena seems to be a corollary of deep religious seriousness and openness to the divine.

And we lesser mortals, who follow in the footsteps of these great spirits, can see that within our own tradition, even without attempting comparison with others, different aspects have to be regarded as higher or lower, better or worse, even divine and demonic. It will be sufficient for the moment to make the point as a Christian looking at his own tradition. Christianity, as the strand of history which began with the life of Jesus, is immensely varied.
The beliefs held by Christians have ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous – from, for example the belief that God loves us human creatures as an ideal father loves his children, to the belief that, to quote the 1960 Chicago Congress on World Mission, ‘in the years since the war, more than one billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of these went to the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ, who he was, or why he died on the cross of Calvary’. Again, Christian practice has ranged from the saintly to the demonic – from, for example, the marvellous self-giving compassionate love of St Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, to the hatred expressed in the Christian persecutions of the Jews through some fifteen centuries. Thus it is obvious to a Christian, even without looking beyond the borders of the Christian tradition, that religion is not necessarily or always good and that some kind of assessment of religious phenomena is in principle in order. And the examples that I have given could readily be paralleled by an adherent of any other of the great world faiths looking at his or her own strand of religious history. Each tradition has to distinguish between higher and lower within its own life. Is there not then at least a prima facie case, not only for grading within a given tradition, but also for grading traditions, according to the adequacy of their conceptions of the divine and the value of the forms of life which flow from those conceptions?

In response to this question I am going to restrict my discussion to four of the world’s major religious movements, two of Semitic and two of Indian origin: Christianity and Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. This selection will, I hope, be narrow enough to prevent the discussion from being completely unmanageable and yet wide enough to allow for comparison within each group and between the two groups. It does, however, mean leaving out of account immense ranges of the religious life of humanity, including primitive, or primal, religion; the ancient religions of Asia and the Mediterranean world which were in place when the great world faiths emerged; much of the religious life of China; and all of the new religious movements originating in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including those that are springing up around us today. It also means leaving aside the whole vast and immensely important phenomenon of modern secularism, both in its humanist and in its Marxist forms. A complete discussion would of course have to include all these other areas. But the central issues will I think confront us sufficiently, and indeed inescapably,