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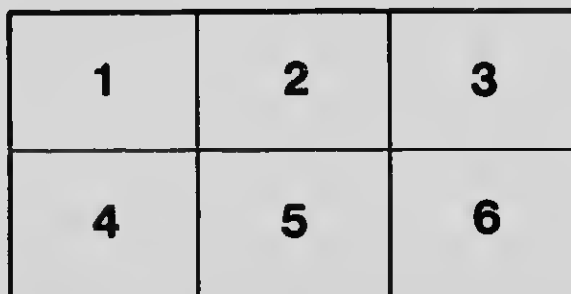
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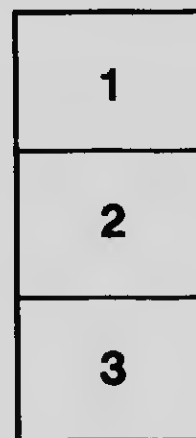
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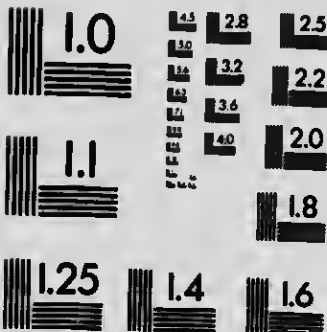
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COMPARATIVE RELIGION

ITS RANGE AND LIMITATIONS

A LECTURE

BY

LOUIS HENRY JORDAN, B.D.

MEMBER OF THE INSTITUT ETHNOGRAPHIQUE INTERNATIONAL, PARIS

AUTHOR OF 'COMPARATIVE RELIGION: ITS GENESIS AND GROWTH

'COMPARATIVE RELIGION: ITS ADJUNCTS AND ALLIES'

ETC. ETC.

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FOREWORD

If some of the theories which are current to-day should ultimately gain acceptance, the range of Comparative Religion would become practically unlimited. According to Professor Hobbhouse's definition of Sociology, 'that study is endowed with a truly enormous capacity ; and contemporary scholars show a disposition to stretch alike inordinately the circumference of a rather different department of research, whose boundaries are comprehensive already. Thus Comparative Religion has been held to include not only large sections of the field covered by Anthropology, but to be actually commensurate in scope with that vast domain which is known as 'the Science of Religion'. Regarded as a sort of boa-constrictor, and invited to swallow successive titbits appreciably bigger than itself, Comparative Religion has been subjected to a severe but unwarranted test ; and, according to report, it has satisfactorily disposed of its victims !

In the following lecture it will be shown that the widely-received opinion, just referred to, is entirely erroneous. It is a belief no better founded than the majority of filmy superstitions. In the latter part of this pamphlet, something is said concerning those lofty prerogatives to which Comparative Religion rightly lays claim ; but, even at its best, this study is still confronted by many formidable barriers. It is upon these hindrances and restraints that, meanwhile, it is peculiarly opportune to dwell.

Nothing is more satisfactory than the steady advance which has accompanied the gaining of clearer ideas concerning the range and limitations of Comparative Religion. Former perplexities and

current misconceptions are daily being dispelled. Prejudices likewise, and the unrest they often inspire, are demonstrably passing away.

The substance of this lecture has already appeared in print, as it seemed desirable to incorporate it in the closing pages of *Comparative Religion: Its Adjuncts and Allies* (1915). It has been suggested however that, as its message is timely and frank, it ought to be given the wider circulation it would secure if published separately in a handy form and at a trifling cost.

EASTBOURN,
January, 1916.

COMPARATIVE RELIGION

It is proposed in this lecture to emphasize two considerations which pertain to the next stage of development in the study of Comparative Religion. Both of the conclusions in question need to be affirmed, and re-affirmed, with an increasingly-insistent stress. On the one hand, the definitely-restricted area of Comparative Religion must in future be more generally acknowledged and observed. On the other hand, the legitimate scope of Comparative Religion must be defended against all who venture to ignore—and especially against all who assail—its independent and indefeasible authority.

I. ITS RESTRICTED AREA.

Comparative Religion, and the meaning of the name 'Comparative Religion', ought to be confined within much narrower boundaries than those which ordinary usage seems to justify. Hitherto this designation has been applied, often in an exasperatingly casual fashion, to different units of a whole group of sciences, all of which differ fundamentally from one another. In a word, it is fully time that Comparative Religion, exempted from the hazards of roaming at large in a practically world-wide domain, should in future be constrained to occupy a definitely-restricted area.

This study must never be confounded with the SCIENCE OF RELIGION,¹ of which it constitutes merely one department. It must never be confounded with the PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION,² seeing that it is only one among many tributaries which supply material for the philosophic interpretation of religion. It must never be confounded with ANTHROPOLOGY, ETHNOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY, ARCHAEOLOGY, MYTHOLOGY, PHILOLOGY, or PSYCHOLOGY; for each of these sciences, employing its appropriate and distinctive method, is limited (in the main) to the discharge of functions which are

¹ Principal Galloway, in his able book on *The Philosophy of Religion* (p. 29: Edinburgh, 1914), seems to fall into this not uncommon error.

² This misconception is very frequently encountered in the writings of well-known German authorities.

peculiarly its own. From one point of view, it may not seem unfair to claim that Comparative Religion is merely a branch of Anthropology, or of Ethnology, or of Sociology. But such a contention overlooks the fact that, for the anthropologist, religion is only *one* of those factors in humanity which demand scrutiny and careful analysis; for the comparativist, religion is *the one* factor upon which he concentrates his researches. For the ethnologist, religion is an influential cultural element, dominating—or tending to dominate—a given group or race; for the comparativist, religion is that subtle constituent in *every man* which accompanies him unbidden from the cradle to the grave. And it might be shown that a similar penetrative cleavage separates Comparative Religion from each of the other 'subsidiary' sciences whose recent literature might easily be subjected to survey.

In particular, Comparative Religion must never be confounded with the HISTORY OF RELIGIONS, a science which should no longer be allowed to usurp an academic position to which it can establish no claim. The historian of religion—whenever he deals with his subject fairly—confines himself to the study of a *single* faith, which he traces (if he can) to its sources, which he interprets through making clear the successive stages of its growth, and which he makes immensely more intelligible by arranging its distinctive practices in their strictly chronological order; the comparativist, on the other hand, is bound to study *all* faiths, and to appraise them in the light of their verifiable *relationships* with one another. The History of Religions concerns itself with facts, arranged (if possible) in orderly sequence; Comparative Religion is in search of those laws (discoverable behind the activities of all religions) which tend invariably to produce certain results under certain given conditions. The History of Religions, moreover, lays stress upon such factors in a (tribal or national) faith as set it *apart* from others; Comparative Religion, on the other hand,—seeking to disclose the *connexion* which links all religions together, and which thus brings them within the purview of a comprehensive synthesis—lays stress upon those influences and aspirations which *unite* rather than divorce and divide.

Comparative Religion must never be confounded with COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY. Yet no misapprehension is more common; volume after volume might be cited wherein the writer uses these designations as if they were synonymous. Nor could any misapprehension

be more unfortunate. Comparative Theology, which undertakes to compare merely the *doctrinal* beliefs existent—or at some time existent—among the numerous races of mankind, restricts itself obviously to a very narrow segment of the circle which Comparative Religion represents.¹ Comparative Theology is a field in which a good deal of 'comparativist' work has been accomplished, although accomplished generally in a fitful and irregular way; it is the field in which the great majority of researchers in Comparative Religion are busy to-day; but it must never be supposed that such investigators are comparativists in the full meaning of that term. Their task is comprehensive and exacting; yet its boundaries are very much more limited than those of that more capacious science which they indirectly yet materially promote.

Finally, Comparative Religion must never be confounded with APOLOGETICS. The latter study, still governed all too markedly by its traditional and hereditary purpose, seeks to erect an impregnable *defence* around an individual faith; the comparativist, on the other hand, merely seeks to *understand* the multifarious faiths of mankind, that afterwards he may correctly estimate and interpret them. Apologetics, representing an intensely practical piece of research, is swayed inevitably by considerations of a manifestly *practical* character,² and is quite willing to describe itself as 'The Applied Science of Religion'; Comparative Religion, on the other hand, being a purely *technical* study, is pursued for purely academic ends, and is totally undisturbed by the character of the goal which gradually emerges into view. The apologist (like the historian) lays continual stress upon the *differences* which separate religions, and he often (consciously or unconsciously) exaggerates these differences; the comparativist, penetrating beneath the peculiarities of outward guise, deliberately emphasizes the existence of those aims and interests wherein diverse religions agree, and those

¹ Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: A Survey of its Recent Literature, 1910-1918*. [Ready, but publication postponed.]

² Principal Garvie is not prepared to allow any comparativist to discredit the uniqueness and originality of Christianity: cf. *The Christian Certainty amid the Modern Perplexity*, pp. 62, 112, etc. London, 1910. This writer thinks, moreover, that 'we should treat with . . . respect . . . the great mass of reverent, serious and responsible Christian scholarship that has an unbroken tradition within the Christian Church' (*The Expository Times*, vol. xxiv, p. 374). Quite so. But that argument leaves altogether unmoved the great world of 'reverent, serious and responsible non-Christian scholarship'.

common purposes in whose presence local animosities tend to become assnaged and forgotten. The apologist is never tired of asserting the undonbted *truth* of his beliefs; the comparativist 'has nothing to do with religions values',¹ seeing that he is 'simply concerned with ascertaining and comparing *the ideas* which various races have had of their gods and worship, and with tracing the continuity of the religious idea'.¹ He is content with partial knowledge, having little or no hope of ever arriving at ultimate truth; all the teaching he imparts is admittedly relative and contingent. 'We know nothing for certain; that is the condition of our lives in this world, the only condition upon which all our value of noble things is founded.' The apologist claims to be an exponent of *the best* faith known among men; whether Comparative Religion is capable of lending support to this or that religion, or whether it is likely to become a solvent influence (destructive of the lofty claims of every existing religion), are alteruatives which the comparativist does not usually pause to consider.

The fact that Comparative Religion is a very modern science may perhaps sufficiently account for this singular (and seemingly inveterate) habit of confusing things which differ. Our knowledge of the science is still, at many points, admittedly imperfect. It can hardly be wondered at, therefore, that several books which have deliberately been labelled 'Comparative Religion'—and many other books which do not aspire to that title,² but which are commonly referred to as expositions of Comparative Religion—have in reality only a very uncertain connexion with the study in question. Instead of occnpying themselves specifically with their proper theme, the majority of such volumes touch merely upon the onter fringes of the snbject, or (with a curions lack of discrimination) introduce into it a variety of discussions which are more or less irrelevant. The comparisons instituted are, for the most part, obscure and unreliable. The advances made, if any, are conspicuously tentative, provisional, and diffident.

In a word: the study of Comparative Religion, in the jndgement of competent scholars, is still in process of transition. Its

¹ Cf. Thomas J. Hardy, *The Religious Instinct*, p. 290. London, 1913.

² Cf. Stephen Langdon, *Tammuz and Ishtar*. London, 1914. This volume is reviewed in *The Oxford Magazine* (p. 228: February 26, 1915) under the heading 'Comparative Religion'.

boundaries—and therefore its contents—cannot yet finally be determined. Notwithstanding its vigorous growth, many mysteries remain unsolved, and many difficult heights have still to be surmounted. The comparativist, confident and adventurous, is abroad; but he has not yet tested and matured his powers. In an age when settled conclusions are everywhere being revised, none are more often called in question than those which pass current under the ægis of religion. The faiths of mankind, assembled in a single arena, no longer hesitate—deliberately, and sometimes even aggressively—to confront and challenge one another. What will be the outcome of this tryst? The issue cannot yet be predicted. We are viewing the birth-throes of an entirely new religious environment. The solution of existing perplexities would, however, more quickly be reached if—in so far as Comparative Religion is concerned—the boundaries of that science were not so often carelessly overstepped and its great heritage inordinately extended.

II. ITS LEGITIMATE SCOPE.

Although admitting that the study of Comparative Religion is still in a transitional stage, and that most of the work thus far accomplished—and still being accomplished—is preparatory and subsidiary in character, it must at the same time be affirmed that an immense and permanent advance has happily been achieved. Misconceptions touching the real import of Comparative Religion are rapidly disappearing. These mistaken opinions, natural and even inevitable at the outset, have largely been outgrown. As remarked elsewhere, 'the range of the science is . . . being brought within definite and carefully prescribed boundaries'.¹ The goal towards which it is advancing has at last risen clearly into view. One has only to look back for a moment, contrasting 1916 with 1900, to feel convinced that a new branch of research has successfully been inaugurated. It is now only a question of time, skill, and perseverance until the alluring dream of half a century ago shall gloriously and completely be fulfilled.

'If any reader of these pages entertains the idea that Comparative Religion is already a robust, fully-developed, and self-reliant science,—definite in its dimensions, and grown to such maturity

¹ Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: Its Adjuncts and Allies*, p. 328. London, 1915.

that it can now formulate in confident and systematic detail its principles and laws—it is important that all such beginners should be disillusioned without delay.’¹ Comparative Religion is emphatically a science of the twentieth century, and accordingly no very pronounced results need be looked for as yet. ‘It is still a science in the making. It is only gradually assuming concrete and confident form. The contents of this volume—and, not least, the carefully-ordered arrangement of those contents—serve in the best possible way to demonstrate that most existing books on Comparative Religion are merely preliminary treatises.’¹ The ground, in many places, is still in process of being broken up. At other points, the seed sown has already produced an excellent harvest. It is quite correct to say, with Dr. Clifford, that ‘the literature is astonishingly extensive, and it is growing from month to month’,² provided the pronoun ‘its’ be not substituted for the definite article. The books thus far available lead towards a goal which, even in 1916, is apparently somewhat remote. No popular or scientific Manual has thus far been produced. Less than a dozen expositions of Comparative Religion have been penned—whether in Great Britain, America, or on the Continent—during the last six years! Of systematic and adequate expositions, even after the lapse of nearly fifty years, there are none. Several such volumes are at present in course of preparation; some of them, it is well known, have long been in hand; but not one of them has been completed and printed. No *Journal of Comparative Religion*, national or international in its scope, has yet been launched. Even in the standard Encyclopædias the subject is still very imperfectly dealt with. In the latest ‘Ready Reference’ copy of the *Subject-Index* of the British Museum Library, even in 1916, the heading ‘Comparative Religion’ is sought for in vain!³ Nevertheless, of volumes which throw a good deal of light upon this study, the number is practically unlimited.

¹ Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: A Survey of its Recent Literature, 1910–1913*: vide *supra*, foot-note, p. 7.

² Cf. John Clifford, *Comparative Religion and Missions to Non-Christians*, p. 4. London, 1912. Professor Geden goes inordinately far when he says that ‘Comparative Religion is already abundantly furnished with handbooks and introductions’: cf. Alfred S. Geden, *Studies in the Religions of the East*, p. viii. London, 1913.

³ In the latest printed volumes of the *Subject-Index* (1901–1905 and 1906–1910), books on Comparative Religion must be looked for under the heading ‘The History of Religions’.

It has often been imagined, moreover, that Comparative Religion is secretly the foe of every individual religion; that it teaches the composite origin of literally every faith; and that it entertains the hope of gathering ultimately all religions into a single comprehensive synthesis. Its hostility towards Christianity, in particular, has been widely proclaimed. 'The attack from the side of Comparative Religion', exclaims a usually discriminative writer, 'is one of the most formidable with which the Christian apologetic has to deal at the present time; and, if that attack were driven home successfully, it is difficult to see how the missionary motive could survive in any adequate form.'¹ But, as already pointed out,² no more erroneous misconception could possibly prevail. All that Comparative Religion asks of Christian believers is that they allow their faith to be honestly and fairly examined. In point of fact, Comparative Religion restricts itself exclusively to the demands of a twofold purpose. 'It is that science which, by means of comparisons, strives to determine with exactness (1) the relation of the various religions of mankind to one another, and (2) the interrelation of conceptions current within a single religion at different periods in its history.'³

It is plain, therefore, that this science has a function to fulfil vastly different from—and infinitely higher than—that which some of its critics assign to it. Happily a saner judgement is now finding expression on every hand. It is beginning to be recognized that Comparative Religion and Apologetics are studies which stand entirely apart from each other.⁴ The former branch of research never seeks to exalt unduly either Jesus Christ or any other religious teacher of men; neither does it seek to shadow the glory rightly belonging either to one leader or to another. Accordingly, the modern spirit of inquiry finds immediate and congenial fellowship amongst investigators who, while striving to solve the fundamental problems of religion, are seeking to solve them quite independently of their local and traditional hearings, and (not less) of their subtle yet potent interactions. As a consequence, a new conception of religion—of its universality, of its essential unity, of its wondrous variety,

¹ Cf. Joseph H. Oldham in *The International Review of Missions*, vol. ii, p. 305.

² *Vide supra*, pp. 7 f. It is no evidence of antithesis or ill-will if Comparative Religion, again and again, has disclosed the indebtedness of Christianity to numerous non-Christian faiths.

³ Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: Its Genesis and Growth*, p. 65. Edinburgh, 1906.

⁴ *Vide supra*, pp. 7 f.

of that Infinite and Supreme Power that stands behind it all—has everywhere raised strange and pregnant questionings among thoughtful men.

It is no part of the duty of Comparative Religion to assume the rôle of a prophet. It has nothing to say concerning the future. Accordingly it has absolutely nothing to say concerning the probable future of Christianity, or of any other faith; those teachers who actually *make* such pronouncements have no real right to speak in its name. It is quite as permissible to affirm that *all* religions lead to God as it is to declare that only *one* of them enjoys that distinction. None can find fault with a scholar who, feeling constrained to record his convictions, publicly affirms that a given religion is superior to all others,—or even, perhaps, that it is the absolute and final religion for all mankind. But when any such investigator claims to be a comparativist, he is in duty bound to make it clear that, in voicing the opinion in question, he is *speaking merely for himself*, and not with the authority of a science which (over and over again) has repudiated its responsibility for statements of this kind. The legitimate scope of Comparative Religion is restricted to the past and to the present. It would be a more popular science if, utilizing for purely secondary purposes the vast stores of material it has accumulated, it gave itself rein in the framing of attractive hypotheses, the creation of fanciful analogies, the undue straining of actual likenesses, etc. etc. But neither guesses nor exaggerations possess any scientific value. The mysteries of religion will *continue* to make their mute appeal to every serious student; and, as long as these mysteries persist, it is man's duty to adhere to his resolve to master and unravel them.

The real aim of Comparative Religion is to investigate and expound, through the competent comparison of data collected from the most diverse sources, the meaning and value of the several faiths of mankind. It seeks to give a coherent and consistent account of the result of the operation of those laws which underlie man's religious development, that development being studied as a *whole* and not merely as a series of *unrelated eruptions*. It is hardly likely to prove a universal solvent of differences in religion,¹ but it has at least demonstrated the wondrous solidarity of the race in its

¹ Cf. C. Stanley G. Mylrea's article on 'Points of Contact and of Contrast' in *The Moslem World*, vol. iii, p. 402. London, 1913.

religions needs and aspirations. It detects, and seeks to interpret, the resemblances which are characteristic of the whole array of human faiths; but it recognizes, also, the existence of divergencies for which meanwhile it is wholly unable to account. It is strongly of opinion that these differences, which temporarily set religions more or less widely apart, rest upon a foundation of universally diffused constituent elements which unite all faiths indissolubly together; yet it does not presume to frame or pronounce any verdict in the premisses. It is convinced that the soundest basis for confidence in the claims made by *any* faith is to be found in a scientific examination of the facts and principles which it defends, and which account for its (more or less progressive) vitality.

Before any new advance in this department of inquiry can be secured, a vast amount of *regional* and *intensive* study will have to be faced. The collection of necessary data is not yet complete. A sufficiently close examination of already available data has not yet been made. The final processes, connected with the sifting and classification of data, will not probably be accomplished for many years to come. Factors which, in one form or another, are bound to enter ultimately into the texture of this science will need to be more accurately determined than has been possible hitherto. Meanwhile, however, this task has been begun. Many of the returns hitherto tabulated, though compiled with scrupulous care, have proved to be unreliable. Unfortunately they have had the effect of spreading erroneous opinions, and of bringing discredit upon the science which they were meant to promote; but, their untrustworthiness having been discovered, they have already been revised. Yet further, the comparativist of to-day is cheerfully subjecting himself to a long course of close and exacting study. 'Comparative Religion must no longer be given over to the tender mercies of well-meaning but often very poorly qualified exponents. It must be delivered from the reproach which rested so heavily for a time upon the History of Religions, viz. the mischievous intermeddling of the dilettante scholar. The competency and ease with which the genuine expert in such work confronts and accomplishes his task is very different from the uncertain advances and withdrawals of those to whom such investigations are admittedly unfamiliar. A certain dexterity is essential; and it can be acquired, like skill of

other kinds, only by careful training under capable masters.'¹ The comparativist of to-day fully realizes that, in his study of religion, he must be one who—to adopt words recently used in another connexion—has 'immersed his mind in the matter with which he has to deal, and who has learned in the process . . . what methods of treatment are appropriate to the matter in question'.² Mere amateurish inferences are inadmissible; for while such guesses may prove 'happy hits', they are in reality more or less vagrant conjectures. Mere amateurish comparisons are equally inadmissible. The qualities really demanded are the keenness and doggedness of the sleuth-hound, which refuses to be balked of its prey. The comparativist knows that the difficulties which await him are numerous and grave. He has no longer any illusions in this connexion; he is quite prepared to comply with the demand for whatever patience may be needed during years of laborious research. For, at last, he is persuaded that it is only through the fruitage of such discipline that he can hope to frame and justify hypotheses which—constructed, 'not by random guess-work but by the trained imagination of a man of science, or by the true divination of genius—will enlarge the horizon'³ of human knowledge, and (in particular) impart to the study of Comparative Religion that definiteness and restriction-of-range which are essential to its vigorous growth.⁴

Accordingly, while a considerable amount of pioneer work still remains to be overtaken, an amazing change—a practical revolution—has been wrought in current opinion touching the legitimate scope of this science. 'It is not very long', remarks Dr. Hastings, 'since a book on Comparative Religion would have been refused by the publishers, however well written and authoritative.'⁵ Such an offer, if backed by some real achievement, would certainly not be refused by any publisher to-day! Comparative Religion is already in being, but at many points its aim and field are still somewhat obscure. The present lecture embodies a genuine attempt to lessen that

¹ Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: Its Method and Scope*, pp. 12–13. London, 1908.

² Cf. *The British Weekly*, p. 497. London, January 22, 1914.

³ Cf. R. Bosworth Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, p. 2. London, 1874. [3rd edition, 1889.]

⁴ Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: Its Method and Scope*, pp. 13–15.

⁵ Cf. James Hastings, *The Expository Times*, vol. xxv, p. 323. Edinburgh, 1914.

obscurity. Three other publications seek to carry the process of elucidation several further stages on its way.¹

Comparative Religion is already a science, although some of its ultimate prerogatives cannot be foreseen. Experts are considering indeed the advisability of subdividing this study into a number of subordinate departments.² Meanwhile, it is growing daily through a judicious employment of the methods of observation and experiment. It is not alarmed, or ashamed, because it has itself sometimes been labelled 'an experiment'. The designation is not inapt. In harmony with the experience of all living and developing instrumentalities, Comparative Religion will always *remain* an experiment. Nevertheless, because of the sturdy and continuous expansion of this study, competent guidance is essential. Its advances must be made under the control of leaders who are experienced, prudent, and courageous. They must be masters of their craft, and must be immune from the usual effects of unforeseen delays and irretrievable disasters. With such leadership, reinforced by the endowments of patience and openness of mind, it is not too much to affirm that there does not exist to-day—in the entire circle of progressive human inquiry—a domain more needy, more fruitful, or more inviting than the definitely-restricted area assigned to Comparative Religion.

¹ Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: A Survey of its Recent Literature*. [Vol. i, Edinburgh, 1906 and 1910: vol. ii is ready, but its publication is postponed]; *Comparative Religion: Its Meaning and Value*. [Nearly ready]; *Comparative Religion: Its Adjuncts and Allies*. London, 1915.

² Cf. Jordan, *Comparative Religion: A Survey of its Recent Literature*, vol. ii, pp. v f.

