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The Work of George Foot Moore¹

Morton Smith

I AM sensible not only of the honor of being asked to speak on the work of George Foot Moore, but also of the danger of accepting the invitation. To discuss the achievements of an enormously learned man, a man of untiring industry and, by all accounts, of prodigious memory, who devoted a long lifetime to learning, is a first-rate opportunity of displaying one's own ignorance. Even Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai lamented that from the vastness of his teachers' wisdom he had taken away no more than a fly does when it dips in the sea. And since the extent of human knowledge so far exceeds any human being's capacity to learn, the new learning of each new generation is apt to be at best coextensive with its new ignorance. We cannot learn more than our teachers, nor even, when our teachers were men like Moore, can we learn as much. Our criticism of their work, accordingly, must be justified, if it can be justified at all, by difference, not excess, of knowledge.

In the present case, I run a further danger in speaking of Moore and his work from the circumstance that I never knew him personally, although many of you did. He died in the midst of his eightieth year in 1931, the year before I entered the College. He had continued teaching, however, to the age of seventy-six (in those days questions of professorial retirement were settled by consideration not of actuarial data, but of actual facts). Consequently many students less than a decade older than I had been his pupils, and most of the teachers from whom I learned most in the Divinity School—Cadbury, La Piana, Pfeiffer, Wolfson—had learned from him. From these sources, then, I first learned the Moore tradition, and found it a remarkably simple one. It was almost entirely concerned with the amazing extent of his erudition. There were very few *personalia*—one or two crushing retorts, the famous epigram on the Moore brothers (“There go a gentleman and a scholar”), and that was that. The other stories—and

¹ An address delivered on 21 April 1966 at the 150th Anniversary Convocation of the Harvard Divinity School.

they were many — were all of them accounts of the *mirabilia* of his learning. Thus, to judge from the oral tradition as it reached me during my days in Divinity School half a dozen years after his death, Moore had made himself, in the thought of the University, the symbol of scholarship. In him had been embodied that concern for learning which should be the core of every university. I have spoken of this first because the impact of a man on the community in which he works is that part of his achievement most easily overlooked and most quickly forgotten, but by no means least important (particularly when the community happens to be a great university, one of the nerve centers of an enormous nation).

Of course, Moore's impact on the community had been far more various and more specific than that effected by his embodiment of the academic ideal. The picture given me by oral tradition showed only the last phase of a ministerial and teaching career extended over more than fifty years, of which almost twenty were spent at Andover Theological Seminary as Professor of Hebrew, and almost thirty at Harvard as Professor of the History of Religion. Throughout this long career, Moore had always been active in academic affairs beyond the limits of his teaching. At Andover, particularly, he had been one of the mainstays of the *Andover Review* and its editor for almost ten years. At Harvard he did most of the work for the foundation of the *Harvard Theological Review* and was for some years its editor, as well as one of its most important contributors. The memorial minute prepared by Kittredge, Ropes, and Robinson for the *Harvard University Gazette* (1932, p. 106) reports that in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences "he served on important committees and was for many years a member of the Administrative Board of the Graduate School. He was also a member of the Library Council, and was much relied upon as a Syndic of the University Press. . . . In the Faculty of Divinity he was actively concerned with the negotiations with Andover Theological Seminary which led to the affiliation and later to the union of that institution with the Harvard Divinity School. . . . until . . . 1926. He took his full share of the administrative work of the Divinity Faculty, and his service has left important results, especially in the organization of the general examination for the degree of Bachelor of Divinity, and in the institution of the higher degrees of Master and Doctor of Theology. In all these developments the influence of his ideas was controlling."

Given this variety of Moore's concerns and the length of his active career, there can be no question here of discussing his achievements in detail. Yet the details should not be forgotten. Historians have a tendency to look for innovations and record them as important but to overlook the less spectacular and more important day-to-day labor of preserving routines and carrying on the functions of institutions already established. Yet even in the most revolutionary generation the amount of change is negligible by comparison with the preservation of established routines on which every society depends for its very existence; and the answer to the question, how well these routines are carried on, is a major determinant of the health of any society. Therefore, although we cannot accurately estimate the importance of Moore's day-to-day work as teacher and committee member and counsellor, we must record it. And those who know more of the personal history of that period than I do could certainly add much to the record, particularly on the subject of Moore's selection and sponsorship of younger scholars — a most important part of the maintenance of any learned tradition. I remark only that among the younger colleagues whose assistance he acknowledged in his published works were George La Piana, Charles Torrey, and Harry Wolfson.

My emphasis on Moore's day-to-day work should not be taken as implying that he had no part in significant changes. Particularly significant was his work as a historian of religion, and his close connection with the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences as well as the Divinity School. These were elements of a great change which was taking place in American scholarship at that time — the recognition of religion as one of the humanities, a proper subject of humane study as well as professional training. With this went also a recognition of the essential unity of the world's religions as various forms of a single subject, religion, which can be studied in each of them and should be studied by consideration of them all.

For the American academic world this distinction between religion *in genere* and its particular instances and interpretations (the various religions actually to be found in the world) is of the greatest importance because of the basis it provides for the introduction of religion into the college curricula of universities where the subject otherwise would be either quarantined in a special school of professional "divinity" or represented by the university chaplain as a matter of moral and social rather than academic concern, a matter for practice rather than

study. As distinct from the chaplain and the professor of theology, a new social type, the professor of religion, now begins to appear. And the aforementioned recognition that religion is one of the humanities, a part of "the proper study of mankind," provides the justification for this non-sectarian and non-professional presentation of the subject to college students. I do not wish to suggest that these general changes were brought about solely by Moore, but the influence of what he was doing at Harvard, as an example for the other universities of the country can hardly be overestimated.

It would be easier to overestimate the importance of these academic developments for the general national attitude towards religion and in particular for the rise of the œcumenical movement. It is clear on the one hand that the conception of the several sects and even of the several major religions as being various forms of one "religion" provides a general intellectual foundation for particular œcumenical projects. On the other hand it is also clear that the actual œcumenical projects in this country have often been independent, not to say ignorant, of this intellectual foundation, and both they and it are to a great extent results of a practical, detached attitude towards religious differences which had already developed in the eighteenth century. Therefore I am anxious not to exaggerate this aspect of the consequences of Moore's work, but I do think it right that it should be mentioned.

The essential work of a scholar, however, is scholarship and, as emphasized at the beginning of this lecture, in Moore's career his scholarship seems to have been the basis of all his other achievements. It was to his scholarship that he owed his position and his influence. It was as a scholar that he imposed his image on the imagination and memory of the university community. And that side of his work which remains most distinct for us today is the embodiment of his scholarship in his books and articles and the long series of critical reviews by which he made himself, for students of the Old Testament and of Judaism, almost an embodied conscience.

His scholarly work falls by content into three parts: first his studies of Old Testament subjects, which occupied him during his years at Andover and of which the publication continued during his first years at Harvard; then his general studies on the history of religion, which must have taken much of his time from 1905 to 1919; and finally his detailed study of Tannaitic Judaism, based, of course, in part on earlier reading, but actually produced during the last twelve years of his life.

From his Old Testament studies we have a long series of articles and reviews, chiefly in the *Andover Review*, the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, and the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, as well as his critical edition of the Hebrew text of Judges in the Polychrome Bible and his great commentary on Judges in the *International Critical Commentary*. The characteristics of his work which appear in these are unvarnished clarity of style, robust common sense, and mastery of all the information available about the subject under discussion. The commentary on Judges in particular is outstanding for its careful examination of the textual evidence and its constant attention to ancient and mediaeval and renaissance commentators, as well as those of the reformation and of more recent times. Although published in 1895, almost three-quarters of a century ago, it is still the most valuable commentary on the text.

This is not to say that Moore's analysis of the sources behind the text, let alone his reconstruction of the history behind the sources, would command universal acceptance today. Nor is it to deny that his book now needs additions in a great many places and corrections in more than a few. Of course the past seventy-five years have seen an immense accumulation of data concerning Palestinian archaeology, Ugaritic religion, and Semitic linguistics, which should be taken account of in a new commentary. But with the exception of the linguistic material these matters are secondary. The primary problem of Biblical criticism is to know what the text says, what words it uses, and how these words (and the passages they compose) are related to one another in grammar, in content, and in style. When I look for answers to these primary questions I still find Moore consistently the most useful commentator.

And even in linguistic matters I am often inclined to trust his explanations, based on the primary versions and on later Hebrew usage, rather than conjectures which appeal to Akkadian and Ugaritic. Because of the extreme poverty of ancient Hebrew material, where the Bible is almost all we have left from the literature of almost a thousand years, exegetes of the Old Testament are forced to turn constantly to cognate languages, and too often forget that the primary context of any text is its own language. Explanation of difficulties in Judges by the discovery of related expressions in Ugaritic poetry and Akkadian legal documents from the middle Bronze Age have no better justification than would explanations of difficult passages in Shakespeare by

the discovery of related expressions in the Niebelungenlied and the Codex Justinianus. That they have more acceptance is due to the fact that the unfortunate Semitic linguists find nothing better to use. For the same reason they are forced to suppose the survival, sometimes for a thousand years or more, of minor linguistic traits, and their transportation, without substantial change of significance, from one culture to another. Yet the same commentators readily suppose that the meanings of many Hebrew expressions were entirely forgotten in their own culture during the three or four centuries which separate the present Hebrew text of Judges from the Septuagint translation! From such general considerations, of course, conclusions cannot be drawn to particular cases. Each case must be considered on its own merits, and there will certainly be some exceptional ones, but as far as the general argument goes, I think Moore has the better of it.

As for the questions of source analysis, which I put aside a moment ago, there too I find Moore's theories usually more plausible than the alternatives proposed since his time. The childish protest against the application of source analysis to the books of the Old Testament has now, I think, blown itself out. In the case of Judges, especially, the differences both of style and of content between the framework and the stories are so clear and so consistent that any attempt to deny the composite structure of the book is simply absurd. Moreover, the date of the framework seems to me pretty well fixed by its resemblance to Deuteronomy and the resemblance of Deuteronomy to Jeremiah. Jeremiah is the dated element. The styles of certain fixed literary forms — law codes, prayers, hymns, and so on — may be perpetuated by convention over centuries. But we have enough Israelite prophecies to know that the style of prophecies was *not* so fixed. On the contrary, each of the major prophets writes in a highly individualistic style. And to suppose that Jeremiah — of all the prophets! — was a sort of Edmund Spenser, laboriously concocting his passionate prophecies in an archaizing jargon imitative of documents composed three hundred years before his time, is utterly implausible. Jeremiah's style, therefore, gives us a relatively fixed date for the preaching material of Deuteronomy, which, so far as it is original, must come from approximately the same period (say fifty years fore or aft — I should not pretend to date literary styles with the fantastic precision with which pottery styles are sometimes dated). Accordingly, I find Moore's date for the deuterio-Deuteronomiac framework of Judges completely plausible. As

for the details of his analysis — the dating of the stories and their assignments to the schools of writers (J and E) whose work was preserved in the Pentateuch, Moore himself was sceptical about these matters, and the alternative proposals which have been made since his work appeared would, I think, have only increased his scepticism, as they have mine. I must plead guilty also to a similarly sceptical attitude anent the historical problems raised by Judges. Here again, I find Moore's theories usually at least as defensible as the alternatives proposed by later interpreters. I am sure such suspension of judgment will be called hypercritical by the hypercredulous. But this is a subject I shall not now further discuss, since I think I have said enough to indicate both my evaluation of the commentary on Judges, and the general lines on which I should defend it.

The *History of Religions*, the main work of Moore's middle period, has never enjoyed the authority of his work on the Old Testament and on Judaism, and has therefore never been an object of much controversy. It is admittedly a masterpiece of condensation. The clear, flat, matter-of-fact style continues with hardly a superfluous word. Every inch of type is packed with material selected from an enormous reading not only of secondary works, but also of primary sources. Consequently, even when it deals with religions outside Moore's field of special competence, it is not merely a derivative work. Moore is always exercising his own judgment, and although his judgment normally leads him to follow the best available scholarly opinions, he himself reshapes these opinions, now more, now less, by the exercise of his common sense and his strong prejudice in favor of what may be called "aristocratic liberalism."

Of this prejudice, Moore himself was well aware. He both stated and defended it with his usual clarity (vol. II, p. xi):

It is primarily the religion of intelligent and religious men that is [here] described. . . . Such men are always the minority, but they are the true representatives of their religion in any age, teachers and examples to their fellows. No religion has ever succeeded in bringing all of its adherents to its standards of right living . . . and in the highest religions the gulf between the intellectual and moral leaders and the superstitious and depraved sediment of society is widest. But it is not from ignorance and superstition that anything can be learned about a religion; at that end they are all alike.

The strength and the limitations of this position are alike obvious.

Somewhat less obvious but equally important are the limitations in-

dicated by the title of the work, *History of Religions*, in the plural. It should by rights have been "Histories of Religions," for the histories, even those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are almost entirely separate. In any one of them references to other religions are rare save when necessitated by some historical encounter, usually a conflict. Of course Moore was aware that religions can be classified by types, that those of the same type commonly develop along similar patterns and decline because of similar failings; he himself occasionally refers to such types and patterns. But he chose to write the histories of individual religions rather than the natural history of religion as a form of human behavior. His choice may have been determined not only by his training but also by the consideration that the histories of the religions are logically prior to the history of religion. Before we can safely generalize about the species we must have full and reliable life histories of individual members. Of such life histories Moore undertook to provide the outlines, and deliberately left for other students the comparison and the discovery of general rules of development and decline.

The wisdom of this decision can be seen from the fate of his last major work, his account of Judaism "in the first centuries of the Christian era, the age of the Tannaim," of which the two volumes of text appeared in 1927, the appendices and additional notes in 1930. It was immediately acclaimed a masterpiece, and deservedly so. I suppose no other Christian author has ever written of Judaism from a knowledge at once so extensive and so critical of the entire range of Israelitic and Jewish literature. And I am sure that no comparable Christian work on Judaism has been written with so much sympathy, so earnest an effort to see the religion from the viewpoint of its own people, to adopt their scale of values and to discover valid reasons for their practices and beliefs. In this effort, as well as in his study of rabbinic and later literature, Moore had enjoyed the invaluable guidance of Professors Solomon Schechter and Louis Ginsberg of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and his viewpoint is often so close to that of these great conservative Jewish scholars that if I were speaking in midrashic style, where Esau is the recognized symbol of the European gentile, I might apply to it the words of Isaac and say, "The hand is the hand of Esau, but the voice is the voice of Jacob."

In this respect Moore's book was the opposite of the tendentious accounts of Judaism which had been given by previous Christian writers

on the subject, writers whose works Moore had surveyed in a crushing article in the *Harvard Theological Review*, XIV (1921) 197ff. Where they had been concerned to contrast the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel with the legal observance of Judaism, and to glorify Christianity as the fulfilment of prophecy and the true perpetuation of the prophetic religion of the spirit, Moore is concerned to demonstrate the compatibility and equal antiquity of the law and the prophets, and to show that Judaism is the legitimate child of both these parents, the true perpetuation of the ancient religion of Israel. Christianity appears by contrast as a heretical sect, engendered by apocalyptic enthusiasm. To its exclusive orthodoxy, based on agreement in dogma, is opposed the inclusive catholicism of "normative" Judaism, innocent of credal requirements, and demanding only agreement in practice.

Liberal Christianity in America was ready to accept this account, and liberal and conservative Judaism of course welcomed it. So Moore's book has had an enormous influence for good in presenting to Christians a sympathetic and superbly informed account of early Judaism, and in presenting to American Jews an idealized picture of their religion in its classical period, a picture all the more impressive because it was not written by a Jew. Of the two sides of this influence, I think that on Judaism has perhaps been deeper and more important.

All this influence resulted in large measure from the nobility of Judaism as Moore portrayed it, and this, in turn, resulted from his principle, stated above, that the true account of any religion is to be drawn from the writings of its most devout and intelligent adherents. To this he added, in composing *Judaism*, the further principle that the true picture of a religion must be drawn chiefly from those documents which it accepts as authentic (*Judaism* I. 125). This supposes, obviously, that the religion has not changed substantially in the course of its history. If what was once a minority party has subsequently won control, and if the works of a former majority have been lost by neglect or by suppression, then the documents now accepted as authentic — the propaganda of the former minority — will give a seriously false picture of earlier times. Indeed, even if the triumphant party was one of the major parties aforesaid, but was then matched by equally important competitors, there is a danger that it will now represent itself as the one true form of the earlier religion, and dismiss the other ancient forms, which, in their day, had equal claims to legitimacy, as heretical sects.

In doing this it will of course appeal to its success and survival as proof that it was right.

Now I think it can be shown that this has happened in the history of Judaism and of the religion of Israel not once but repeatedly. The prophets, if we take them at their own words, unquestionably expressed the position of a minority. The history of occasional reforms under the monarchies is best explicable by the supposition of a minority party which only occasionally and for short periods was able to control the government. I have argued elsewhere that this reform party did not gain permanent control of the temple until the time of Nehemiah, and that even then important groups, especially among the priesthood, remained in opposition. The *façon de vivre* thus established was overthrown at the time of the Maccabean revolt, when another minority came to power and drove out the traditional priesthood. But the Maccabean party never succeeded in winning the support of all Israel. Beside the exiled supporters of the legitimate priesthood, who set up their own temple in Egypt, the northern Israelites continued to worship at Gerizim rather than Jerusalem. We know of another temple in Transjordan, and the communities of the diaspora evidently went their own ways, which were sometimes strange ones. To our knowledge, even within Judea the Maccabean party met serious opposition from the Pharisees and the Essenes, and perhaps from other groups. When the Maccabeans were driven out by Herod, control of the official religion passed to the high priests whom he and his successors, the Roman procurators, appointed, while Pharisees, Essenes and other parties, including, soon, the followers of Jesus, were all in opposition to the government and in competition with each other. That the Pharisees had the largest influence with the people during this period is asserted by Pharisaic sources, but seems unlikely. At any rate, they were unable to prevent the revolt against Rome in 66, and it was only after the revolt, with Roman support, that they became clearly preeminent among the Palestinian parties, while the followers of Jesus, apparently, were winning over much of the diaspora. And even within the Pharisaic party, the controlling factor, that of the Hillelite house, may have been a minority vis-à-vis the Shammaites before 70, and was certainly pushed into the background by an eschatological anti-Roman wing, led by Akiba, in the years before 130. It is the rabbinic literature canonized by this Hillelite party, after its recovery of power, that Moore took as "normative" not only for the time when it was canon-

ized, but for the preceding centuries. The main thing wrong with his great work is its title; he should not have called it "Judaism in the first centuries of the Christian era, the age of Tannaim," but "Tannaitic Judaism of late second and third centuries A.D." Of this Judaism or, at least, of its Stoic and rationalistic side, which was perhaps its most important side, the work is a masterly exposition. And it is perhaps even greater as an exposition of Moore's own religion, the Pharisaic Puritanism which contributed much to the greatness of America and particularly to the tradition of American scholarship. To that tradition, its conscientiousness and consequent self-righteousness, its austerity and consequent accomplishments, we are indebted beyond expression. For better or for worse, its training has formed our minds, and we are united to it in the indissoluble communion of the intellect, which is the communion of the Pharisaic saints.

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