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History of Religion (Chs. 11, 13–15, 20–22, 46)

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William J. Hamblin

Comparative Religion

In chapters 11 to 15, Roberts presents a short discussion of the major religious traditions of the world. These chapters are brief summaries of materials he originally researched and published in his *Seventy's Course in Theology*, which essentially consists of summaries and quotations from various standard books on world religions written around the turn of the century. His secondary sources are, therefore, now nearly a century old. Due to the general advance of Western knowledge about Asian religions, the information presented by Roberts about the religious traditions of the world is both dated and frequently inaccurate, especially in the sections on ancient Near Eastern and Asian religions.¹

The two major problems in most works on comparative religion from the early twentieth century are implicit racism and imperialism—the view that Western civilization is inherently superior to non-Western civilizations. These problems tend to make sympathetic understanding of non-Western religions difficult. Although Roberts's writing reflects some of these problematic attitudes, his Latter-day Saint background provided a partial corrective. His position is that the great religions of the world represent, in part, broken fragments of revelations (108) which were given to Adam or other biblical patriarchs and have been diffused throughout civilization. Thus, for Roberts, some valid and valuable principles of truth can be found in all the main religious traditions.²

The Great Apostasy

Chapters 20 and 46 summarize Roberts's views on early Christianity and the Great Apostasy. More complete presentations of Roberts's interpretation can be found in his other works on the subject.³

Roberts's ideas basically parallel those articulated in James E. Talmage's better-known work on the same topic.⁴ Both men based their interpretations in part on their understanding of unique Latter-day Saint revelations and on standard turn-of-the-century Protestant ecclesiastical historians. Roberts's ideas on the universal apostasy in early Christianity fit well within the context of early twentieth-century Latter-day Saint ideas on the subject.⁵

NOTES

¹In notes to these chapters, I have provided bibliographical references where interested readers can obtain recent and accurate information.

²For a sampling of current Latter-day Saint views on the non-Christian religions of the world, see Spencer J. Palmer and Roger R. Keller, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1989); the series of articles by Spencer J. Palmer and Arnold H. Green, "World Religions (Non-Christian) and Mormonism," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1588-95; and Soren F. Cox, "Interfaith Relations: Other Faiths," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2:696.

³See my annotation, page 188 above, and Roberts's introduction to vol. 1 of Joseph Smith, Jr., *The History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971).

⁴*The Great Apostasy, Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909).

⁵For a general discussion of the idea of the apostasy and a basic bibliography of Latter-day Saint writings on the subject, see Todd Compton, "Apostasy," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 1:56-59.