Today all is changed. It is the modern world that insults human nature, it is Christianity that champions it.

The Church knows that man is forever at risk, always liable to fall—hence her wise insistence upon that belief in original sin so unjustly resented by Voltaire. In ages of presumption, the Church reminds conceited man of the Fall. But the Church knows, too, that sin can be overcome and salvation achieved—hence her equally emphatic insistence that man is the child of God, to be treated with all the reverence that so high a paternity demands. In ages of pessimism, she reminds man of his divine origin and eternal destination. The Church corrects the world by emphasizing that side of man's nature currently being ignored. She knows, as did Pascal, the dangers of presenting too one-sided a view of man, of exaggerating either his strength or his weakness. The *philosophes*, ignoring human weakness, bridled at the imputation of original sin. The modern world, by contrast, in totalitarian and consumer society alike, undervalues the human being, holds altogether too poor a view of his prospects and potential, would confine to transient earth a person born for eternity. Could there be a more disastrous case of mistaken identity? It falls today to Christianity to restore man to his lost self and reinstate him as the heir to heaven. Today we must declare our solidarity with ourselves, with the threatened dignity of the human being.

Seeking Others in their Otherness

Julius J. Lipner

That we live in a world of all manner of racial, cultural and ideological difference, of profound specificities and contingencies, is a trite fact of existence. Such awareness is nothing new. Indeed it was a containing feature of Aquinas' intellectual perspective. The title of one of his major works—*Summa Contra Gentiles*—indicates as much. What is new in our time is a growing if still somewhat grudging *appreciation* of this fact of difference, and the realisation, still halting on the whole, that there is an important sense in which difference is creative and so must be celebrated. In the role of theologian and scholar of religion, and as a tribute to Aquinas' comprehensive philosophical-theological vision, I propose in this article to inquire into this sign of our times (Mt. 16.3), to assess its

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significance, and to indicate, with special reference to the study of religion, how it might orient our lives.

Just over 25 years ago, on the last day of October 1967, John Hick, on assuming the H G Wood Chair in the University of Birmingham, gave his inaugural lecture, entitled 'Theology's Central Problem'. 'Today. . . theology's central problem,' he declared, 'is not so much one within theology as around theology, enfolding it entirely and calling into question its nature and status as a whole.' 'This issue,' he continued, 'at once central and all-embracing, presents itself. . . as a problem concerning religious language. In a sentence the issue is whether distinctively religious utterances are instances of the cognitive or of the noncognitive uses of language.'

In other words: whether religious utterances can properly convey factual truth, can function as fact-assertive—and so be 'cognitive' in this sense—rather than in some instances only seeming to do so by form or intention. Are credal utterances of the kind, 'God is the creator of heaven and earth', 'The Bhagavadgita is not the Word of God' and, 'By Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God's saving grace is poured into us',[1] true or false in straightforward senses of these terms (whatever else they might be), or are they socially acceptable, in their guise of verisimilitude, only in so far as they function in non-cognitive ways, as a release of emotive charge, perhaps, or as proposals for moral action? In short: are they genuine guests or only masqueraders at the epistemologists' ball?

Hick formulated his thesis scarcely a generation after the rise of logical positivism; the fallout of this movement on Anglo-Saxon philosophers of religion and theologians was still considerable. In his slim but potent work, *Language, Truth and Logic,* the first edition of which appeared in 1936, the Oxford positivist, A J Ayer, had declared, at least with engaging candour, that

> no statement which refers to a "reality" transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance, from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense (p.46).[2]

Religious statements of the kind mentioned were explicitly included in the body of nonsensical utterance on the tendentious grounds that 'the criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability'. And which criterion is that? Ayer pronounced:

> We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports

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to express—that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false. (p.48)

The argument is tendentious in so far as it serves a somewhat idiosyncratic notion of fact as a state of affairs verifiable only on the basis of sense-experience (note the logical force given to the term 'observations' in the extract). And lurking in the background lies the conviction that truth is ideally expressed in propositional form, whether this be formulated in mathematical, logical or empirically verifiable terms (note the logical status given to 'proposition', which appears twice in Ayer's declaration). So Ayer and his cohorts had set the agenda for the philosophical understanding of truth and meaning, and for over a generation thinkers about religion were busy with its terms. Some succumbed to the empiricists' dictat,[3] others sought to discover in it some basic oversight or flaw. Indeed, Professor Hick's inaugural lecture may well be construed as a declaration of intent: as giving notice of a long-term campaign to show why the aptly but doubtless unwittingly named H G Wood Chair should not act as fuel for the fire and ire of religion's empiricist critics.

Well, times have changed. Over the last six decades or so a more plural understanding of the meaning of meaning and of truth has taken hold. Truth is widely perceived today as entailing a contextual awareness so that philosophies reducing truth to the realm of atomic propositions fail to convince. Theologians and philosophers of religion now work with models of truth that are personal (as proposed, e.g., by W C Smith), metaphorical (in terms of theories of metaphor as a non- reducible trope), mythic and structuralist, constructivist and de-constructivist and so on. The cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate has been subsumed into the wider discussions of meta-religious discourse, and in the process has been de-fused and diffused.

Twenty five years on, I submit with some prodding from Kuhn, that, to borrow Hick's phrase, theology's—and the study of religion's—central problem is the issue of incommensurability.

Thinking persons live in a world seemingly obsessed by inescapability from interpretation. 'World' fragments into 'worlds', essence gives way to circumstance and changing mode of existence, universal norms and universalising conceptions - that sombre inheritance of the Enlightenment - have been decanonized into constructs, contingencies, and what Ihab Hassan has described as carnivalization.[4] Perhaps some balance is struggling to assert itself here, but with parallels in the biblical quest for the historical Jesus, reflection on what it means to be human can no longer be simply read off, non-interpretively, from the
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text of life. Rather, by way of a threefold dialectic, we are constrained to identify, understand and evaluate the sub-texts of the fabric of our lives in all their historicity and particularities. We affirm the amorphousness of things; we develop perspectives and acknowledge their ambiguities. Flattened intellectual landscapes are out; conception 'by contour' is in. Here we come up acutely against the issue of incommensurability.

It is important to understand what this means. A useful starting point is the following passage about the meaning of 'commensurable', taken from Richard Rorty's book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

> By "commensurable" I mean able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict. These rules tell us how to construct an ideal situation, in which all residual disagreements will be seen to be 'noncognitive' or merely verbal, or else merely temporary—capable of being resolved by doing something further. What matters is that there should be agreement about what would have to be done if a resolution *were* to be achieved. In the meantime, the interlocutors can agree to differ— being satisfied of each other's rationality the while.[5]

I do not find this description entirely adequate. While it speaks of the need for 'construction' and a plural notion of rationality on the one hand, it also talks of residual disagreements in the context of perceived commensurability, as being merely non-cognitive (or verbal or temporary). With this latter stipulation I do not agree. In fact herein lies the *differentia* between compatibility and commensurability. 'Commensurability' is not to be confused with 'compatibility', or 'incommensurability' with 'incompatibility'. By two or more phenomena being 'compatible', I understand their being perceived as in some way reconcilable by an accredited application of the relevant rules *within* a particular system or complex of discourse or logic such that residual differences are somehow not cognitive; the question of commensurability would arise when intelligible reconciliation of some kind is sought *across* parameters or systems *prima facie* non-reconcilable in this way.

In what follows I want to address the issue of incommensurability at the basic level of our existence as human beings.[6] It is at this level, it seems to me, that the groundwork must be laid, both as to theory and practice, for our survival on this planet in justice, peace and love amid the bewildering array of our similarities and differences. It is not possible for me in such short compass to present a developed argument in favour of my stance. All I can offer here is an outline of my thesis and an indication of how the formal study of religion might fit in.

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Theoretically, the issue of incommensurability as it concerns us seems to present itself in the form of a dilemma. Let me try and formulate this. On the one hand, as the increasingly strident tone of competing ideologies seems to indicate, we live individually and tribally in sharply sundered worlds self-identified by their histories, particularities and contingencies. How can one reach across the multiple divides of sex, culture, race, ideology? On what grounds can one know the other *as other*, respecting their very otherness while yet entering into a relationship of true reciprocity? Is the alternative to believing that we are doomed to exist as 'windowless monads' no more than some illusion about the possibility of mutual accessibility? It seems that in reaching out to the other I am constrained to *assimilate* the other in terms of reflexive categories of meaning and value so that rather than engaging with the other in their alterity, I deface the other by reducing him or her to a sort of crypto-ego. Amoeba-like, I have ingested the other into the substance of my own reality, transformed them into a shadow of my self.[7]

This apparently congenital reductive tendency—the original sin of our human condition—seems to underscore the misconstruals, the broken relationships with which our lives and world are strewn. From it arise the dominations, manipulations, exploitations, and simple misunderstandings of daily life. Does it not lie at the heart of that all-too-familiar refrain, 'But you don't understand!'

At this point we may consider an objection. The problem I have outlined as one horn of our dilemma, it runs, is a false one. It sets out to prove that something can't be done in theory when all around I see it occurring in practice! (It's a pseudo-problem like Zeno of Elea's paradoxes of time and motion. . .) The world over people inter-marry, inter-breed, inter-act and inter-relate in all sorts of social, economic, political and psychological contexts. What's more, it's often claimed that this intercourse has led to greater mutual understanding and progress. In fact, commensurability reigns, O.K.

But the objection is too glib. That a great deal of human inter-action occurs continuously cannot, of course, be denied. The question is, what is the nature of this inter-action in terms of genuine reciprocity? How do we know, how can we ensure, that *this* takes place? Indeed, macrocosmically it often seems that in human relations there is more assimilation and misconstrual than the reverse. Alterity seems hardly to be taken seriously. Perhaps this is because a fundamental incommensurability in human relationships remains an insuperable stumbling-block. In fact, in this article I wish to propose on what grounds we need not succumb to such counsel of despair.

But first let us consider the other horn of the dilemma. It seems that if

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one wishes to encounter the other as other, fully respecting the integral alterity of the other without seeking to assimilate or reduce them in some substantial way to oneself, the other needs must recede into inaccessibility. For there do not appear to be any universal or common bridging signifiers across the *prima facie* incommensurable linguistic, cultural and/or personal complexes that constitute individual and communal identities. We have no olympian vantage-point in some meta-grid of the range and variety of existing personal identity-frameworks from which the other may be accessed qua other. In this hydra-headed scenario, the other recedes into the void of his or her own alterity. Our dilemma of incommensurability in short is this: in seeking to live in justice and love, one is caught between the alternative of reducing the other, amoeba-like, to a crypto-ego, and the alternative of losing the other under the hydra-headed canopy of impenetrable alterity. Is there no way out? One avoids the horns of a dilemma by rendering one or both ineffective. I am hopeful of slipping between the horns.

This can be achieved, I submit, by attending, not to some 'common humanity' which each of us is supposed to instantiate (this sounds too essentialist), but to an inherent capacity which each human being has, qua human, to express in the way unique to him or her, what may be described as a *generically shared but open-ended mode of being* (viz. 'human nature'). It is 'generically shared' in that it is a specific mode of being—the human; angels, dogs, lizards, fleas, the hibiscus, do not and cannot exist in this way. As a specifically bounded form of existence, its potentialities are predetermined and predeterminative. There are characteristically human ways of behaving, thinking and experiencing, but there are also some things that it is just not possible for a human being to do.

But human nature is not some static reality, a substance susceptible of being conceptually abstracted or intuited by the essentialist. It is 'open-ended', that is, indeterminable. One cannot determine *a priori* in precise ways the parameters of what it is to exist as a human being or the forms in which human existence can or will be actualised or develop. Generic existential space as human is embodied in our world in countless 'forms of life', in an indefinite variety of ways depending on the vagaries of circumstance and choice. To follow a Buddhist option for living is not the same as following a Christian one; to live as a Theravadin is different from living as a Yogacarin; to practise as a female Theravadin is different from practising as a male Theravadin; to exist as *this* female Theravadin is different from existing as *that* one. And so on for the endless range of options for living available to us in contexts that are constituted by ideological, cultural, religious, sexual and other factors (very often in overlapping or transactive ways).

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This generically shared open-endedness which each of us expresses in his or her own particular way is the basis on which it seems to me we need not succumb to ideologies positing absolute barriers of incommensurability between human beings. There is a means by which we may access the other qua other in a manner that is not intrusive and which can lead to relationships of true reciprocity. This means I shall call the process of *constructive empathy*.

Though the phrase may be new, neither term is. I am referring to our inherent, indeed well-attested, capacity to imaginatively enter the world of the other, to assume his or her perspective. This is hinted at, for example, by those scholars who endorse the use of the 'phenomenological epoché'—the suspension of personal beliefs and value-judgements—in order the more sympathetically to understand a religious life-style to which one is not committed. One might adduce numerous other attestations, implicit and otherwise, of this basic human capacity.[8]

In my formulation, this mode of access is *constructive* in two senses. First, it is a means of understanding in the context of *positive* intentions, viz. the desire to open channels of communication in relationships of true reciprocity. Hence it is not an assault on, a destructive attending to, the other. Second, in deploying it one is required to position oneself, in as sensitive, comprehensive, whole-hearted yet focused a manner as possible, in the *sitz im leben* of the other. As such it is a regulated expression of the creative powers of the imagination.

This mode of access is also *empathetic*. Its goal is no less than to assume the identity of the other by a process of 'becoming' the other. One gets under the other's skin as it were. As such this method seeks to develop to the full the powers of plasticity of the imagination. This can take place only by a disciplined dialectic of training and implementation. It is used with greater success the more it is used in this way. In fact, in so far as it is an ideal to live in relationships of true reciprocity, one must strive to make of constructive empathy an habitual expression of a certain orientation to the world.

At least in inchoate ways, the practice of constructive empathy is neither an unfamiliar nor even an untried objective. People realise instinctively that true understanding of the other requires a passage from egoity to alterity, a transition from self to other. Hence such expressions (and their multi-cultural counterparts) as 'Place yourself in my shoes' and so on. My aim here is to indicate a ground for such locutions and to inquire into how they might be implemented with genuinely reciprocal human relationships in mind. Indeed, some training is (should be!) given in aspects of this method already in the early stages of secondary education. Surely children are taught to appreciate Shakespeare, for

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example, by inserting themselves perspectivally not only into the context of his times but also into the situations and culture(s) of his characters. Problems arise in real-ising (in both senses) the need to develop and extend the method of constructive empathy into the sphere of human relationships as such, and then to implement it. This is by no means a sisyphean ideal (we have our moments of altruism and our saints), though it is hard of accomplishment (neither exists in abundance). I shall take up in due course the question of the relationship of our theme with the study of religion in institutions of higher learning.

In the light of this discussion, I think it will be seen, further, that constructive empathy is also a non- intrusive method. In seeking to understand others in their otherness, to 'become' the other, I seek neither to strip the other assimilatively of his or her identity, nor to confront the other invasively in his or her private living-space (camel-like vis-à-vis the Arab in the fable). On the contrary, I seek a coincidence of identities. For this reason, it seems to me, the regulating paradigm of discourse with the other in the context of constructive empathy alternates dialectically between an 'I-thou' and an 'I-I' mode of locution. For in addressing the other qua other ('I-thou'), I grasp that I summon *myself* by the very token that I am able to summon the other ('I-I'). Or, perhaps more perceptively, the linguistic paradigm in this moment of the dialectic assumes an 'I-we' mode. For in seeking to under-stand the other qua other, I realise the grounds we share as human which make such understanding possible. In other words, the horizon of true understanding and its concomitant—full reciprocity—is the whole community of human beings.[9] In addressing the other, I address myself, and in addressing both ourselves, the whole community of human beings is summoned to bear silent witness.[10]

Such a 'monistic' perspective, it seems to me, lends itself to the task of identifying and redressing many of the confrontational and disabling dualisms of our various cultures—the dualisms of sexism (especially patriarchy), racism, adultism, ageism, religionism[11] etc.—and to restructuring a crucial vehicle of such divisive attitudes, viz. the use of language. In this context, constructive empathy is both a programmatic and an *immediate* means of constructive change and empowerment. In use, it is an ongoing method for redressing injustice and establishing love.

Now the following question presents itself. Am I being realistic enough, or is this ideal of the stuff of pipe dreams? My first response is to say that the point is well taken. The development of this method in our relationships is not easy, and the evidence of failure to do so is glaring. We must act under no illusions. So I go on to say that it is only through what we may call *methodological crises of confidence* that progress can be made. Let me explain. In applying the method of constructive empathy

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we cannot take anything for granted. A blithe confidence in our capabilities for bridging the divides of particularity which beset our relationships can be consequentially devastating. Constructive empathy, to achieve even a moderately consistent success, requires as an inbuilt feature an ongoing sensitivity to the putative parameters of our personal cultural, psychological, linguistic, genderised and other limitations.[12] With sustained effort it is to be hoped that these parameters will broaden or become more porous with time (hence 'putative'), but in one way or another they will continue to inform our best efforts. In human relationships, no one can be, in the totality and particularity of their being, *completely* transparent and so accessible to an other (or indeed to oneself). In his or her fullest reality, every human being must remain, both to self and to every other, a *mysterium tremendum et mirabile*. In this sense constructive empathy as a method for entering into authentic human relationships has innate limitations.[13] Yet the visible evidence of its deployment in this context—informed awareness of the other's situation, the asking of appropriate questions as a result of a patent desire to understand, to reach out even at considerable personal sacrifice, and so on—is itself a mark that the process of trans-relating is achieving success.[14]

One final point in this section of the thesis. I have stated more than once that as a rule the goal of constructive empathy is justice and love, viz. full reciprocity, in our relationships. Logically, the first moment in this process is the mutual accessing of interpersonal understanding. But full reciprocity cannot exclude, indeed demands, *evaluation* as to goodness and badness, right and wrong in both moral and cognitive respects. Logically, this is the second moment in the 'conversational' dialectic between persons, peoples, cultures. It is on the basis of mutual evaluation that ultimately a decision will be made as to the prospects of any continuing relationship in justice and love. In theory, I submit, these prospects should always be acknowledged as realisable; in practice, perhaps on occasion they just cannot be.[15]

How might evaluation take place? The debate on this question continues.[16] But there is no doubt in my mind that on the basis of constructive empathy each participant must be prepared, as an ongoing feature of the conversation, to reconsider and so to reformulate the criteria according to which *both* understanding and evaluation are taking place. In other words, one's own categories of understanding and evaluation are continually and dialectically being subjected to a revisioning scrutiny. I do not see how the quality of a *reciprocal* relationship is attainable otherwise. Reciprocity, I take it, entails as a built-in feature the awareness in each participant, of openness to revision, as and when it seems called for, in

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every 'other' involved, as well as in oneself.[17]

We can turn now to the second, if shorter, part of my thesis. Earlier on Hick was quoted as saying that theology's central problem, as he perceived it, was 'not so much one within theology as around theology, enfolding it entirely and calling into question its nature and status as a whole.' I believe the same description holds for the issue of incommensurability as it applies to the study of religion by both theologians and others (i.e. the sociologist, the anthropologist etc.), whether these be accomplished scholars or still only students. The dimension of religion is one facet, albeit a very important one, of the central issue of incommensurability as it pertains to people, gender, ideologies and cultures in our world. Yet the study of religion, if it is to be perceived at all as a respectable and worthwhile occupation, must make its contribution both to the articulation and positive handling of this issue. In fact, I believe that the study of religion is peculiarly suited, for reasons I shall mention, to dealing with the issue both theoretically and practically in all sorts of promising ways.

As a beginning observation let it be said that I do not think that it is possible to understand in any depth what religion is as a distinctive human activity without reference to interdisciplinary and inter-religious parameters. In this enterprise it would be futile to proceed along the lines of Pastor Thwackum who, when asked to elaborate on his declaration that only religion could save errant humanity, thwacked 'em indeed with the reply that by religion he meant, of course, Christianity, by which he indubitably implied Protestantism, which in turn could only mean Anglicanism, which found its consummation in the faith of the Church of England. To succeed, the academic study of religion needs to be somewhat less restrictive in scope than that.[18]

It is because of the differing linguistic, cultural and other contextualities of religions (more pertinently, of their adherents) that it becomes necessary to study religion inter-religiously. But for reasons I have given in the first part of this lecture this is a feasible enterprise. It is only when religious and non-religious persons (and religious and non-religious ideologies etc.) are accessed as other that the limits of their apparent cognitive, psychic, behavioural and other compatibilities and incompatibilities, commensurability and incommensurability, may be assessed. Not only, however, is it necessary to study religion inter-religiously, it is also *desirable* to study it thus.

Religion, by definition, touches, and touches to the quick, the whole person in his or her deepest beliefs, values and aspirations, in short, in the depth of his or her identity, individually and communally. In this context, the issue of incommensurability, with its historical, social and other

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wideranging implications, confronts us most starkly. We see all around us not only the unitive but also the divisive potentialities of religion in human affairs. Here the imperative to reciprocity, to relationships of justice and love, becomes particularly insistent. The inter-religious study of religion then as the ineluctable means available to study the nature of religion—not only of particular beliefs, values and hopes, but by the methodological analyses of their varying frameworks and presuppositions, of the dynamics of faith, commitment, belief, value, truth etc.—in the process helps us come to terms with what it means to be human, and with what it might mean to be more fully human. The inter-religious study of religion has a privileged status in that inquiry.

And it is in institutions of higher learning, it seems to me, that this study of religion may be pursued to best effect. For such study is (i) systematic, (ii) specialised, and (iii) (potentially) interdisciplinary. It is systematic in the sense that it is pursued rigorously according to accredited canons of 'sensitive objectivity', viz. analyses in terms of theory of method, cause and effect, the accumulation of data, covert presuppositions and preconceptions etc. It is here that rigorous *training* in the method of constructive empathy begins. But such study is also specialised. It may be historical, theological, philosophical, psychological, anthropological, sociological etc. Different skills, techniques and approaches, and their concomitant insights, are brought to bear on the cognitive evaluative study of religion. In this context, the development of constructive empathy acquires certain strengths (and also certain weaknesses). This is why, ideally, in order to yield best results, such study must be conducted in an interdisciplinary framework. In this way an ongoing dialogue may be established between the disciplines (or at least some disciplines); constructive empathy can become a more rounded and comprehensive tool. It is vital, therefore, to construct syllabuses in terms of these three parameters of learning.[19]

For this study to be critical in its proper sense, it must be not only an exercise to achieve true understanding, but also an evaluative discipline steadfastly seeking transformation into genuine human reciprocity. Anything less is an inquiry seriously deficient in some way. 'Evaluative' here implies not only *formal* cognitive and moral evaluation, viz. assessing the logical coherence of an argument or the consistency of a set of beliefs, and judging the moral worth of the data scrutinised, but also the readiness to transform one's *personal* cognitive and moral categories in the course of an open- ended dialectic with the other.[20] This is what genuine reciprocity entails, and this is why such study is anything but ideological, i.e. subservient to some *a priori* programme or set of beliefs.[21] It is only against the horizon of reciprocity, I submit, that the formal study

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of religion is, and will be seen to be, a discipline of integrity and a means of contributing richly to rendering tractable one of the major issues confronting life on this planet today.

1   Such statements express the paradigm here; invocations, commands,threats etc. do not qualify.
2   In the Preface to the first edition, Ayer notes that in his thinking he is in tune with 'those who compose the 'Viennese Circle'. . . commonly known as logical positivists' (p.42).
3   A classic example: R B Braithwaite's 'An Empiricist's view of the nature of religious belief' as in, e.g., *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by John Hick, Prentice-Hall, London etc., 1964.
4   'The term, of course, is Bakhtin's, and it riotously embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, irony, hybridization. . . But the term also conveys the comic or absurdist ethos of postmodernism. . . , 'polyphony', the centrifugal power of language, the 'gay relativity' of things, perspectivism and performance, participation in the wild disorder of life. . . .'; 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective' in *Critical Inquiry*, vol.12, Spring 1986.
5   Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p.316.
6   Thus my comments pertain directly to human persons. A comprehensive treatment would include non-human animate and inanimate beings.
7   To avert which has been the overriding concern of the French Jewish thinker, Emmanuel Levinas. Yet in his endeavour to preserve the other 'with an alterity constitutive of the very content of the other', he so radicalises alterity, it seems to me, as to make it impenetrable. This impales us then on the other horn of the dilemma; see further. The quotation is taken from *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1969, p.39.
8   Note, e.g., S J Tambiah's mention of the requirement to enter "subjectively" into the minds of the actors [of the context under scrutiny] and understand their intentions and reactions in terms of the actors' meaning categories. . .', in *Magic, science, religion, and the scope of rationality*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.111. Tambiah then goes on to refer, quite unsatisfactorily (since we are seemingly required to exclude 'malformed individuals with birth or acquired defects'), to the 'psychic unity of mankind' or 'human universals' as the basis on which this might be attempted. It is hoped that the formulation in this article will be seen to encourage inclusivity rather than any kind of exclusivity in the quest for genuine human reciprocity.
9   The symbol and token of this generically shared open-endedness is the possibility of biological reproduction across racial barriers. This is why any ideology of sexual apartheid is both inhuman and dehumanising. When a way of life is systematically geared to divisiveness, isolation, discrimination, exploitation, etc., i.e. tends systematically towards a habit of non-reciprocity, it depersonalises and dehumanises.
10   For this reason, in its full and proper implementation, constructive empathy is a distinctively *human* capability.
11   The belief and/or its practice that a particular religion (usually one's own), by virtue of its inherent superiority, exists to, or is entitled to, instrumentalise or otherwise systematically disempower the publicly accredited religious tradition(s) of others.
12   The more numerous and/or apparently gaping such incipient divides, the more cultivated effort will be required to attempt their bridging. In this enterprise such experiences as joy, pleasure, grief, pain, hunger, thirst, deprivation, anger, frustration etc., especially in their 'foundational' forms, i.e. with minimal interpretive content, as shared reference-points for living, cannot be overestimated.

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13 Indeed, as a feature of its non-intrusiveness, its sensitive deployment will entail leaving the other alone, in non inter-active privacy, in the appropriate circumstances. Yet, paradoxically, this too is a facet of reciprocity.

14 Are there situations where constructive empathy is a non-starter? In the contexts of forms of insanity, say, or of what appears to be unspeakable suffering or evil? If a considered attempt is made to reach out in such contexts, it seems to me, the personal circumstances of the one reaching out assume a peculiar relevance. And any measure of successful reciprocity achieved in such unpromising contexts would stand as testimony to the astonishing extent of the range of human understanding and/or the heroic capacity for forgiveness.

15 See note 14.

16 Tambiah gives an account; op.cit., ch.6.

17 This implies readiness to 'distance' oneself, if this term is to be used (see Tambiah, op.cit., p.111), not only from the situation of the other, but synchronously from one's own cognitive-evaluative criteria as sacrosanct.

18 Yet in too many British institutions, including Universities, this mentality seems to prevail. In his commendable departure from this mould, viz. *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue*, (SCM Press, London, and Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, 1992) Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus in the University of Oxford, laments: 'I come to [the subject of inter-religious dialogue] as a Christian theologian who for the last twenty years has taught in a Theology Faculty which contains no positions directly committed to the study or teaching of any religious tradition other than the Christian'. (p.1.)

19 It may well be that such study across the barriers of the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths will be most rewarding, in that one can take least for granted, thematically and methodologically, the exploration of the cultural, linguistic, symbolic and other matrices.

20 In this process, constructive empathy evolves from a spontaneous and somewhat arbitrary function into a reflexive and attitudinal one.

21 There are, however, ideological approaches to the study of religion, some theological, which are pursued in such a manner as to make of a putative incommensurability the means to an ulterior end. One such approach is implied by theological exclusivism so-called, viz. the belief that there are no salvific points of contact between a particular religious faith (usually one's own) and that of others. This is generally argued *a priori* on grounds of incommensurability between the privileged faith and that of others (with attempts at an *a posteriori* demonstration of this, e.g. by an analysis of the structures of other faiths, being ideologically pre- determined). The ulterior end is not infrequently the implicit or explicit supremacising of the privileged faith, if not conversion and the more or less complete extirpation of the religion of the other. A good example of this approach is the still highly influential view of the Christian theologian, Hendrick Kraemer (taking his cue from Karl Barth). For a study of the history of the continuing influence of the Kraemerite stance in important Christian circles, see Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought*, Editions Rodopi, Amsterdam, & Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991). 'The more one penetrates different religions and tries to understand them in their total peculiar entity,' avers Kraemer, 'the more one sees that they are worlds in themselves, with their own centres, axes, and structures, not reducible to each other or to a common denominator which expresses their inner core and makes them all translucent' (*Religion and the Christian Faith*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1956, p.76). Note, Kraemer does not deny that we can understand other faiths (the use of 'artistic imagination', ibid. e.g. p.49, will enable us to do this). Indeed, he believes that he can understand ('penetrate') them only too well (so that he can go on to judge that 'in spite of all Hinduism's splendid piety and effusion of deep religious emotion and experience, the harsh word must be said that this is sheer religious utilitarianism or *hybris* [sic]'; ibid. p.112). But the 'understanding' or 'penetration' is undertaken on the basis of a pre-conceived notion of religion(s) as a 'total, peculiar entity' with their own centres' and 'inner core', viz. by implication, insuperably incommensurable. A scholarly study of religion will have to inquire more impartially, making use of historical, anthropological, philosophical and other means, whether religions are in fact uni-centric or poly-centric,

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impervious to one another or culturally porous, hard-edged or fuzzy (not only as to their boundaries but also intrasystematically), and so on. As I read it, various types of scholarly evidence are converging towards establishing the second of the preceding alternatives. Kraemer's 'penetrative' ideology also does not have true reciprocity in mind in that it is intended self-confessedly as destructive of religion: 'The object of this book has been to show that Biblical thinking, the whole world of attitudes and decisions and modes of being implied in the Biblical revelation, is a type wholly *sui generis*. . . In the furnace of Biblical thinking religion is at the same time abolished and radically revaluated', ibid. p.449. There are other stances bearing on the relationship between religions which seem to lend themselves to 'religionist' conclusions. One such may well be the view formulated by George Lindbeck in his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (SPCK, London, 1984). For Lindbeck, the Christian religion is a 'cultural-linguistic' matrix in which adherents are learning the skill of speaking in the sole idiom which can shape one according to 'the mind of Christ', viz. in saving grace. This implies that non-Christian modes of discourse are not salvific, and that their (even proficient) users are religiously illiterate if not barbaric. It is hard to form relationships of justice, love and peace in this context.

Reviews

MEISTER ECKHART: MYSTICAL THEOLOGIAN by Oliver Davies. *SPCK*, 1991. pp. 267. £12.99.

The scholar who expounds the thought of a medieval theologian or mystic must find and locate the work in its own historical context. Ideally, however, the work should not be left there, but rather, if possible, should be made relevant to the modern reader. The first step is essential if our perception of the author is not to be hopelessly distorted, but the second step is necessary if the study is to go beyond mere history (fascinating though mere history may be). Oliver Davies has succeeded in applying this twofold method to Meister Eckhart. In the brief survey of ways of reading Eckhart with which the book begins, Davies points out how some authors have recreated Eckhart in their own image. As if to emphasize the necessity of a proper regard for historical context and verisimilitude, he devotes the three following chapters to Eckhart's historical background: that is, to the man himself and to his thought vis-à-vis the religious women of his age and the German Dominican school. This is a risky procedure, for historical evidence is necessarily often complicated or indecisive. The reader seeking to be introduced to Eckhart may lose interest before the preamble is done. But this historical survey is judicious and useful.

Davies pieces together the regrettably fragmentary evidence regarding Eckhart's life and career and provides some convincing speculation regarding the circumstances of the Bull *In agro dominico* (1329), in which twenty-six articles deriving from Eckhart's works were found to be either heretical or suspect. Eckhart received part, at least, of

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