UNDERSTANDING INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

EDITED BY David Cheetham | Douglas Pratt | David Thomas

UNDERSTANDING INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

This page intentionally left blank

UNDERSTANDING INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

EDITED BY

David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt,
and David Thomas

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

CONTENTS

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Nicholas Adams is a lecturer in the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, UK

Mario I. Aguilar is Professor of Divinity and Director, Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics, University of St Andrews, UK

David Cheetham is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham, UK

Catherine Cornille is Professor of Comparative Theology at Boston College, Massachusetts, USA

Anna Halafoff is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia

Elizabeth J. Harris is an Associate Professor in the Department of Theology, Philosophy and Religious Studies, Liverpool Hope University, UK

Ed Kessler MBE is the Founder Director, Woolf Institute, Cambridge and Fellow of St Edmunds College, Cambridge University, UK

Jeffery D. Long is Professor of Religion and Asian Studies, Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania, USA

Marianne Moyaert is Professor of Comparative Theology and Interreligious Dialogue at the Free University of Amsterdam, and is concurrently a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Theology, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

Peter C. Phan holds the Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought, Theology Department, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

Douglas Pratt is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and is Adjunct Professor of Theology and Interreligious Studies at the University of Bern, Switzerland

Perry Schmidt-Leukel is Professor of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at the University of Münster, Germany

Jonathan Y. Tan is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Theology, Australian Catholic University, Sydney NSW, Australia

David Thomas is Professor of Christianity and Islam and Nadir Dinshaw Professor of Inter Religious Relations, University of Birmingham, UK

David R. Vishanoff is an Associate Professor in the Religious Studies Program of the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma, USA

Paul Weller is Professor of Inter-Religious Relations, University of Derby, and Visiting Fellow in the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, UK

Andrew Wingate OBE is a consultant, teacher, and theologian in interfaith relations, and was the founding Director of the St Philip's Centre, Leicester, UK

CHAPTER 1

....

Introduction

DAVID CHEETHAM, DOUGLAS PRATT,
AND DAVID THOMAS

The ways in which religious communities interact with one another, both historically and in the contemporary world, is now a major focus of scholarly research and teaching. Issues of interfaith engagement, inclusive of interreligious dialogue more specifically, and interreligious (or interfaith) relations more generally, together with issues pertaining to intra-religious engagement, attract widespread interest and concern among scholars and other specialists in religion, as well as also many others who have regard for the role of religion in today's world.[1] The focus of this book is very much on understanding the relations that obtain between religions. Within this field, dialogue is one area of relational engagement, so too conversion, the dynamics obtaining between majority and minority religious groups, the issue of belonging to more than one religion or faith tradition, cooperation, religion in the public domain, and the task of peace-building, to name but a few. And underlying all such issues is the question of how religions perceive, and so relate to, their 'others'. In a religiously plural world, how different religious communities get along with one another is not just an academic question; it is very much a focus of socio-political and wider community attention. The study of religions and religion in the twenty-first-century world must necessarily take account of relations *within* and *between* religions, whether this is approached from a theological, historical, political, or any other disciplinary perspective. Indeed, the increasing popularity of religious and

---

[1] Very often 'dialogue' and 'relations' terminologies are used interchangeably as if they are synonymous. So, too, variations on the 'between religions' (inter) terminology—as in compound (interreligious; interfaith), or hyphenated (inter-religious; inter-faith), or in some case paired (inter religious; inter faith). In this book we will mostly incline to the compound variants on the grounds that the sense of 'between' mostly refers to a general and wide range of conjunction. This orientation notwithstanding, for emphasis or where there is a focus on the point at which two or more religions meet, then hyphenated variants of the core terminology may be used. We discline to the use of paired terms. Furthermore, the terms 'religion' and 'faith' name a multifaceted category of phenomena in each case and are not quite the same thing—on the one hand 'religion' is more a formal structure of ideas, behaviour, and texts; on the other 'faith' suggests a relatively amorphous sense of orientation, or broad system of ideas, identities, and values. This distinction is open to argument and finesse; for the most part we assume it is at least valid.

theological studies is symptomatic of this new awareness. And increasingly through the media the wider public is being exposed to issues and events that involve the interaction of one religion or religious community with another.

Interest in interreligious relations is undoubtedly growing, and so the aim of this volume is to provide a reference work of relevance to students and scholars, as well as to a wider public. It comprises two main parts. The first provides an introduction to, and expositions and critical discussions of, the ways in which 'the other' has been construed, addressed, and related to, in the major religious traditions. The second provides analyses of select key issues and debates in which interreligious relations are seen to be an integral constituent. It has thus been the intention of the editors to assemble an authoritative and scholarly work that discusses perspectives on the religious 'other', and on interreligious relations, that are typical of the different religious traditions; and to elicit substantial original chapters from a cross-section of emerging and established scholars on main debates and issues in the wider field of interreligious relations.

As has been often said, ours is an age of increased global religious diversity. Of course, in some parts of the world religious plurality has been the order of the day since time immemorial; in such situations, people have long been used to relating positively and pragmatically to their neighbours of other faiths. Interfaith harmony has had a long-standing pedigree. But equally clashes between religions, or religious groups, have also ebbed and flowed throughout human history, and in our day religion presents as a very pressing issue globally as well as regionally and locally—as seen in evidence of rising mutual anxieties if not outright antipathies between communities of Christians and Muslims. Contemporary flash-points of communal conflict with significant interreligious components are many and include such diverse settings as Thailand, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar. And religions other than Islam and Christianity are also involved. In respect to many socio-political and cultural situations today, religion has a tendency to make things worse even as it can be a force to make things better. Ameliorating what makes things worse, and promoting whatever makes things better, is a challenge and task that not only confronts the religions and their leaders but also impacts upon, and is increasingly taken up by, governments that previously, from a secularist position, had resiled from even admitting religion within the body politic.

Interreligious dialogue and relations are not just warm fuzzy liberal sentiments; they constitute critical dimensions of inter-communal and international social realities and are increasingly—despite much obstinate avoidance by some religious folk, especially within Western secular societies—a necessary response to the widespread presence of diverse religions. More and more, local communities are religiously heterogeneous. And where this is a comparatively new phenomenon, a shift in perception and attitude must inevitably occur—either in the direction of openness towards, even empathetic interest in, the religious other; or else a withdrawal into an increasingly closed-off religious identity, often equated with fundamentalism and exclusivism, which at best politely tolerates, in practice simply ignores, and at worst actively abhors the religious other. In our day the extremists of one religion may—and at times very obviously

do—reject outright the presence and validity of another religion, even variants of their own, as is amply demonstrated by some Islamic extremist groups in Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Religious communities and scholars of religion engage with contemporary issues of inter-religious relations on many fronts and at many levels. Broadly speaking, the shift from regarding religions as objectively other, either the focus of scholarly investigation or the target of religious proselytization, was seeded in the late nineteenth century and came to flower during the twentieth. If the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago gives a definite date to the commencement of contemporary development in interreligious relations that contrasts with anything preceding, it was the shift within Christianity—which was then the world's predominant missionary religion—during the course of the twentieth century which gave rise not only to the phenomenon of interreligious dialogue but also to a radical rethink of that religion's stance towards the religious other that effectively brought interreligious relations out from the shadows. And those religions to which Christianity reached out a hand of dialogical détente, whilst varyingly cautious, and for good reason, for the most part responded in kind. The now virtually normalized situation of religious leaders, as well as interreligious enthusiasts, engaging in polite and friendly communications, sharing events, and even making common cause, is quite widespread.

At the same time, two consequential phenomena are now clearly present. On the one hand the situation of interreligious engagement of various sorts implies, requires, and can sometimes directly stimulate intra-religious dialogue. People within a religious tradition or family need to—and must—talk and relate among themselves about many things, but especially about what it means to be who they are within a religiously plural context. And it is happening. It is not only the Christian religion that has formalized this process in and through its ecumenical movement. Most world religions have today some form of world wide representative organization and gathering opportunity. And within many societies the emergence of awareness of the world religions as distinct spiritual and cultural traditions, and the consequent realization of the problems of relationship between them, have come to the fore. Arguably the pressing issue to arise out of a context of religious plurality is that of acknowledging 'the other' and the emergence of dialogue as a modality of relating to the other, both among internal variants (intra-religious dialogue) and between religions (interreligious dialogue). A number of scholars have identified and discussed allied issues and problems and have analysed and discussed prevailing current paradigms of understanding, commenting on their usefulness and limitations. This present volume reflects and dips into this heritage.

Our authors have brought to bear their unique and varied scholarly acumen to address the central question of 'otherness' in Part I, and the range of issues included in Part II. A multi-authored work inevitably reflects the different styles, expertise, and approaches of the authors involved. The editors have aimed for a measure of consistency and compatibility, but have not insisted that chapters, especially in Part I, are so blended that they are mirror images of each other. Indeed, such an approach would have resulted in an artificial imposition of

similarity and sameness. The religions addressed in Part I have clearly different histories, approaches, and ways of thinking, doing, and being, and this is appropriately reflected by the different authorial treatment of them. Of course, not all religions are mentioned or attract the focus that some readers might have expected. In part this is simply a reflection of the limitations of space, as is the matter of the selection of issues in Part II. And their treatment reflects both the uniqueness of the respective subject matter and the rich diversity of academic perspective, expertise, and style of the authors. Indeed, it is these different authorial styles that provide the reader with varying examples of how the subject matter may be legitimately dealt with. Whilst attempting to be comprehensive and relevant, as well as focused on the key problematic of religions and their religious others, one book cannot hope to cover everything in this burgeoning field—each of our chapters could itself expand into a book! Rather it is the hope of the editors that this volume provides a substantial introduction and orientation to critical issues and perspectives pertaining to the quest to understand interreligious relations in the modern world.

Part I, following the introductory essay that provides a detailed rationale and introduction to the theme of religion and the religious other (Chapter 2), addresses this theme through the lenses of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam which comprise the four major contemporary world religions, or religious 'sets' each with its own internal diversities; to which is added Judaism because of its significance in relation to Christianity and Islam and its place within current geo-political and interreligious contexts. All five religions register as having global impact, and feature prominently within contexts of interreligious engagement and allied discourse. Jeffery Long's broad survey of the vast spectrum of Hindu attitudes towards otherness (Chapter 3) reveals the luxuriant result of centuries of engagement and cross-fertilization of different traditions. He asks if Hinduism is identical with Brahmanism but suggests that this would be an unwarranted restriction of what is really 'a progressive universalism that aspires to include all otherness in a boundless unity'. When seeking to articulate Hindu identity, Long quotes an evocative image of an upside-down fig tree found in the fifteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He gives an account of a range of attitudes towards religious otherness that have occurred historically or exist simultaneously in the contemporary period: hatred and fear, philosophical engagement, generous inclusion, and an overarching homogeneity. He also contrasts the broad philosophical hospitality in Hindu thought (towards the wideness of religious expression and belief) with the cultural exclusivity that characterizes Indian society. These two 'trajectories'—exclusivist nationalism (for example, contemporary Hindutva) and inclusivist universalism—are held in tension. Despite the seeming contradiction between these two, Long proposes a causal relationship between them. Such is the ancient and enormous complexity of the Hindu traditions that the problem becomes one of identifying what constitutes otherness *per se*—what is *outside* of Hinduism in Indian culture? This is brought out by Long's telling quote from Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who claimed that Hinduism 'is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance'. Whilst Long eschews hasty assimilations between this universal

perspective and modern liberal views in the West, we might observe that a perennial paradox of 'open' faith positions is that, while advocating a broad inclusiveness which seeks to embrace the varieties of religious expression, they also smother those same varieties.

Edward Kessler's review of Jewish approaches in Chapter 4 reminds us that the discourse of interreligious encounter is not just a philosophical or systematic concern. Kessler's starting point is geography and covenant. Religious others are understood in terms of their relationship to the land and by divine accommodation. Thus, there is a 'Jewish covenantal pluralism', where all people are described as being in relationship with God in different forms. When surveying the key aspects of Jewish relations with others, many of Kessler's items look like a familiar itinerary of notorious twentieth-century moments: the Holocaust; the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; tensions between Jew and Muslim. He also draws attention to the profound influence of Jewish thinkers such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas on twentieth-century thinking about 'the other'. Buber's influence extends far beyond the Jewish context, his 'I–Thou' construct becoming virtually a staple in the discussion about the meeting of people and faiths. Most distinctive have been his insights into the personal dimension of encounter, apart from the impersonal exchanges between 'religions' as institutions or bodies of systematic thought and practice (the *I–It*). That is, the meeting of *I–Thou* is a meeting of religious *people*, and this basic insight has had an important impact on subsequent thinking about how religions meet—less as institutions or doctrines; rather more as individual believers. Additionally, in terms of acute self-consciousness about the presence of otherness, the influence of Levinas cannot be underestimated: in the wake of the Holocaust the power of his voice is a forceful presence that has articulated an intense and uncompromising view of 'the other'. For Kessler, the other needs to be heard, and in a perceptive observation on Jewish thinking he makes the significant claim that a sympathetic relationship with the other should be seen as an indicator concerning a *legitimate* relationship with God.

In Chapter 5 Elizabeth Harris highlights the different aspects of Buddhist encounters with the religious other. Historically, much of this involved polemical engagement and contestation with Brahmanical philosophers following the Buddha's death. In some cases, Harris documents the ridiculing of the fallacies in other faiths (such as the belief in God or the soul). There is also an inclusivist stream in Buddhism that, typically, seeks to bring those others into the schema of the Buddhist tradition and/or appropriate the practices of those others. Because Buddhism emphasizes non-attachment to doctrine or the craving after absolutes, this allows attentiveness to efficacies in other practices which could be affirmed as provisional aids for spiritual progress, in accordance with the assumption that the Buddha's teaching is the key to ultimate liberation. Harris sums up her study of Buddhist attitudes towards the religious other by discerning a tension between the openness to effective practice in other religions and the desire to promote Buddhist teachings as superior. Indeed, both exclusivist and inclusivist teaching may be found in Buddhist texts. This is a vitally important observation that characterizes many inclusivist approaches that are illustrated in different contexts in the chapters of Part I.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's extensive documentation of the relations between Christians and the religious other (Chapter 6) shows very clearly the sheer wealth of critical theological reflection that has been undertaken within a variety of Christian traditions about the religious other. Certainly, the great majority of the literature that addresses the issue of the religious other comes from Christian writers. This may suggest that concern about the presence of the religious other is something that is understood to have crucial implications for the claims of Christianity. Perhaps the stakes may not be so high in traditions that do not place such a great emphasis on the essential importance of particular revelation. In his comprehensive engagement with Christian postures towards otherness, Schmidt-Leukel considers the options presented by the classic typology in the theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. In this and in other writings he is sceptical about the ability to be able to break free from this typology because he argues that the question it raises (what is the truth-relationship between the religions?) is unavoidable. Schmidt-Leukel advocates a pluralist model and argues that it is most able to promote a 'mutual fertilization' between religions. The future of Christianity is therefore caught up into a vision for the future of religion in general: an 'overarching human community' where the different religions are complementary.

Finally in Part I, David Thomas's account of Muslim approaches to the religious other (Chapter 7) tackles the canonical question about legitimate sources of authority. The canon is clear: the Qur'an and the Prophet are at the heart of Islam and steer the attitude of Muslims towards the religious other. He observes that no 'innovations' that are not directly connected to them can hope to achieve widespread acceptance. Nevertheless, as Thomas presents the Qur'anic and other material it becomes clear that there are both positive and negative attitudes in evidence. Early engagement with other faiths either evinces an ambivalent attitude towards them, or else other faiths are viewed as in some way simply 'deficient'. But this latter perspective is not a superior posture in any simplistic sense. This is clarified by a unique feature of Islam: it does not present itself as a faith that has been instituted *ex nihilo*. In this sense it enjoys a real, ontological continuity with the earlier Abrahamic traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Thus Thomas shows that, for al-Faruqi for instance, Islam is a 'reaffirmation' of the revelations contained in those two faiths. He also alerts us to the more open approaches evidenced in some Islamic thinking. For example, there is Mohammad Arkoun's idea of the complementary nature of religions, and also the recognition of an 'innate *religio naturalis*'. Nevertheless, notwithstanding such openness, Thomas points out that for Islam other faiths are measured according to their resemblance to, and affirmation of, the principle of *tawhid*. And this is a typically inclusivist strategy of recognizing one's own theology in the other.

The focus of Part I is thus very much on the main religious traditions which have not only a history of interreligious engagement of one sort or another, but also a substantial body of reflective and critical intellectual work addressing this very engagement. Other and more recent religions may give evidence of having joined the interfaith arena in recent times, perhaps even earlier, but have not yet produced a body of their own particular literature which

can be referenced and quarried in respect of the aims of this book. This largely accounts for the exclusion of other religions or religious sects—such as Sikhism, Mormonism, and Baha'ism on the one hand, and Chinese religions on the other. However, such religions will not be ignored entirely; rather, their place may be found within the context of topics discussed in Part II.

The chapters of Part II comprise a series of substantial essays concerned with broad themes connected to interreligious relations. Focusing on examples from India and modern-day multi-religious England, and illustrated with anecdote and personal reminiscences, Chapter 8, by Andrew Wingate, traverses issues and examples pertaining to the vexed issue of conversion from one religion to another. Wingate delves into the twists and turns of conversion as a complex phenomenon that applies not just to individuals—as in the contemporary uncritical notion that religious identity is simply, and at best, a matter of individual 'choice'—but also families and whole communities, either in contexts of wholesale transfer or reorientation of religious identity and allegiance, or more widely in the problematic, even negative, response when an individual's new choice impacts upon the social group to which he or she belongs or, in some cases, formerly belonged. It is a commonplace that converts are most often highly enthusiastic about their new-found faith, or their changed identity, and are at times hostile to any relationship between their new religion and the one they have left; indeed they can embody a reactionary rejection of it, a stance that lends support to those hostile to interreligious détente of any sort. Alternatively, persons who have taken on a new or reoriented religious identity can at times be well placed as mediators between their new and their former religious communities. Conversion can have either a negative or a positive impact upon interreligious relations; as the saying goes, it all depends.

Marianne Moyaert's Chapter 9 gives an overview of the historical development of the contemporary phenomenon of interreligious dialogue. The significance of dialogue in the field of interreligious encounter is highlighted; it is very much a 'new' thing we are here dealing with. And this dialogue is no simple or unitary matter. Moyaert takes us into the meaning and dynamics of dialogue, discussing it from various perspectives and tackling a range of critical questions. Interreligious dialogue is engaged for a variety of reasons and within a multitude of contexts. Curiosity about an unknown 'other', a desire to learn about the other, to engage experientially as well as intellectually, and contexts of seeking collaboration for pragmatic purposes are among the rationales driving interreligious encounters and relations and so sparking various forms of intentional 'dialogue'. Critically, interreligious dialogue seeks at best to go beyond mere tolerance of a religious other and furthermore to challenge the appearance that negative perspectives and allied behaviours of intolerance, exclusion, and even religious violence are naturally predominant.

Chapter 10, by Peter Phan and Jonathan Tan, examines interreligious dynamics pertaining to relations between majority and minority groups. Beginning with a lively example of a Christian–Muslim encounter in the United States and opening up into an exploration of power relations, the authors traverse a number of key issues and problems, concluding

with a ten-point proposal for shaping and promoting positive interreligious encounters between majority and minority communities beyond toleration *simpliciter*. They argue that toleration merely accentuates the domination of a majority group over minority groups; that is to say, the majority group has the power to control minority groups by either extending toleration or withholding toleration without any recourse by the minority groups. Of course, moving from reluctant tolerance to mutual trust is often easier said than done. Interreligious dialogue in the context of majority–minority relations is a uniquely delicate affair.

Douglas Pratt's Chapter 11 takes up the problematic and interconnected set of fundamentalism, exclusivism, and religious extremism on the basis that interreligious understanding needs to deal with the dark side of religion and *inter alia* the negative dimensions of interreligious encounters. Together and independently, fundamentalism, exclusivism, and extremism impact either directly or indirectly upon interreligious engagement. Whilst the term 'fundamentalism' arose in a uniquely Christian context, and even though the term does not always sit well in the various religious contexts to which it is often applied, its widespread use in contemporary discourse makes both it and the phenomenon to which it refers of great import and interest. Exclusivism names a predominant attitude and set of values descriptive of the history of much interreligious encounter. Religions, for the most part, have been mutually exclusive. Some still are; and many contain an exclusive element or tendency despite at the same time advocating positive interfaith relations. And both fundamentalism and exclusivism are at times directly linked to religious extremism. The nature of that link is explored by way of a typological paradigm that demonstrates a sequential and cumulative ideological development which highlights the nature of the link between religious fundamentalism and extremism.

The prospect of interfaith peace-building as the response to contexts of conflict in interreligious encounter is the subject of Chapter 12 by Anna Halafoff. Although many encounters between faiths can be constructive and dialogical, a large proportion is dissonant. Conflict comes in many forms: theological, political, cultural, militant, and so on. Grounded in empirical research, this chapter examines commitment of the interfaith movement to peace-building activities in order to illustrate that religions have long played, and continue to play, a role in conflict transformation. Acknowledging the challenge religion has posed to Enlightenment predictions of the decline of religious allegiance and influence in favour of the rise of a fully secular society, the chapter shows how the interfaith movement and its conflict-resolution and peace-building initiatives have expanded in Western societies as diverse cultural and religious groups have strengthened their social participation. The author concludes that despite, *and* ironically at times as a result of, the capacity of religions to incite both structural and direct violence, in fact religions have often played a peace-building role, and this is evidenced today by the increase in interfaith encounters and activities.

Chapter 13, by Nicholas Adams, explores interreligious engagement in the public sphere. One of the most pressing issues for multicultural societies is the negotiation of relations between religions in terms of their influence on, and interaction with, the state. What is the

public voice of multiple religions in such societies? What kinds of dialogue or conflict between religions emerge in the context of the 'public square' and do such issues have an influence on the organization of societies and their governance? The author addresses eight challenges that face interreligious engagement in the public sphere. These include the interaction of religion, ethics, and politics, the matter of agenda appropriateness and of framing procedural and substantive issues, the relation between learning about religious life and the practical action that is required in the public sphere, whether in fact the goal of public engagement is to maximize agreement between parties, and the tension between a conception of service by a particular religious tradition to wider society as it stands and a conception of transforming that wider society and conforming it to the vision of a particular religious tradition.

Mario Aguilar's Chapter 14 examines the interconnections of dialogue, liberation, and justice. Liberation is an important theme within interreligious relations. However, it has many different dimensions and contexts. Religion can be utilized as an instrument of oppression as well as a source of freedom and tool of justice where liberation yields a common cause for interreligious cooperation. The author suggests that, for the twenty-first century, interreligious dialogue needs to focus on motifs of common humanity, including non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism, humanism, and atheism; common liberation of human beings from that which prevents full personal and communal dignity; and justice as a central component of all world religions which also connects religions with secular states that foster justice for all their members. The creation of just or unjust structures within a society is the responsibility of both the religious traditions and the non-religious communities. Aguilar engages, in effect, two case studies to address interreligious dialogue, liberation and justice. The first involves paying close attention to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council (1962–5) pertinent to dialogue, and with a focus on issues of conscience and human dignity. Attention then turns to dialogue for liberation, and the quest for justice, through the lens of Christian (Catholic) engagement with Buddhism. Thus through a twofold case study—developments in Roman Catholic Christian thought on the one hand, and Christian–Buddhist dialogical relationships on the other—the author argues that religions for the most part display a preference for justice, and this provides both a basis for fruitful dialogical interaction and a mandate for collaborative acts of liberation.

Chapter 15, by Catherine Cornille, explores the comparatively recent phenomenon of multiple religious belonging as both a by-product and a unique extension of interreligious dialogue. Indeed, multiple belonging has at times been regarded as a condition for interreligious dialogue truly to take place. And not all religious identities are clearly definable or distinct. Especially in the East, the notion of 'belonging' to more than one tradition is common place. Moreover, some key figures such as Aloysius Pieris (Christian-Buddhist) or Bede Griffiths (Christian-Hindu) have defined themselves in such terms. Profound dialogue with other religious traditions often leads to identification with some of their teachings and/or practices, and thus to some form of multiple belonging on the part of the dialogically engaged individual. The author offers a typology of multiple religious belonging and reflects on the

relative import of such belonging for interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue has been an area in which the boundaries of belonging have at times been challenged and stretched. Dialogue raises the question of the extent to which one may legitimately identify with elements from another religion and integrate those elements in to one's own tradition while still fully belonging to it.

Chapter 16 addresses the issue of boundaries and encounters. David Vishanoff asks if religious traditions should be considered as separate entities, each with clear doctrinal, communal, historical, and textual boundaries. Or might examples from the history of religions reveal more porous boundaries and mutual exchange in terms of cross-fertilization of beliefs, traditions, and even scriptures? The notion of interreligious encounter presupposes the existence of a boundary across which interaction takes place. Vishanoff explores why religions are so distinct from each other that interactions between their adherents constitute encounters, with all the sense of strangeness, adventure, and even danger that this evokes. Where there are boundaries, interactions become encounters. The chapter sets out to draw together various insights and case studies into a systematic account of this widespread though frequently elusive religious phenomenon, and raises salient questions pertaining to scholarly engagement with the topic.
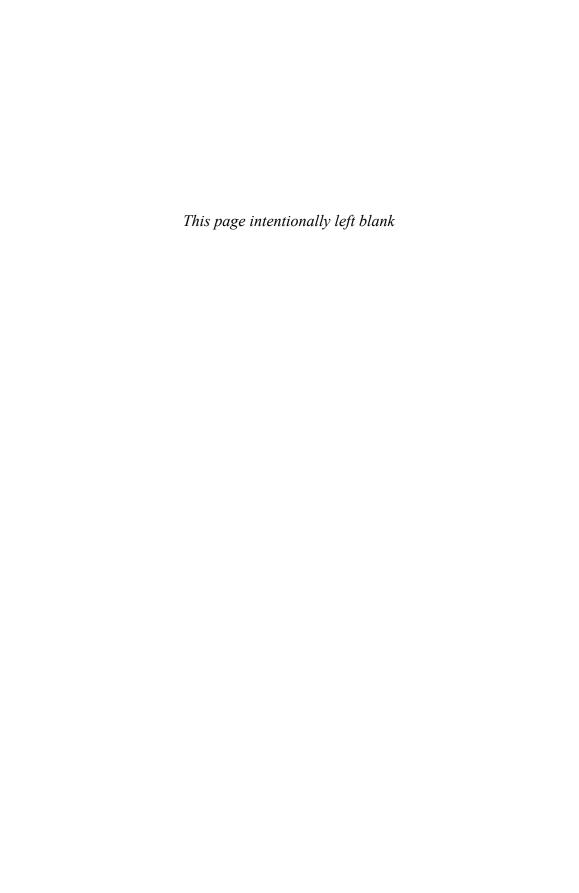
The penultimate chapter, by Paul Weller, engages the subject of interreligious cooperation. In the context of a historical background and a discussion of select case studies, the author explores a range of questions and issues including the role and place of confidence-building; the question of who cooperates with whom and on what basis; and the possibilities and limitations connected with different organizational and structural forms for cooperation. The question of who initiates interreligious cooperation from within, across or beyond particular religions is also discussed, along with the range of aims and goals of such cooperation and the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of cooperation, together with the differences between interreligious cooperation organizations as such and initiatives set up for particular temporary purposes.

At the conclusion of a five-year 'Religion and Society' project undertaken in the UK, the director, Professor Linda Woodhead, offered an astute observation on the variable receptivity in academia to religion and its study: some hostilely reject it; others evince openness and appreciation.[2] And where a profound secular attitude predominates, 'it is not just that religion gets caricatured and demonised. It's that it gets left out of the picture altogether.' Of this dismissive secularism Woodhead comments: 'It's a crazily narrow-minded approach, which has to turn a blind eye to the luxuriantly variegated religiosity of most of the world, and ignore the past, including our own.' Yet secularity primarily means the allowance for, and affirmation of, diversity, including the presence of religion and, indeed, of religious diversity. A secular society as such need not be opposed to, or dismissive of, the presence of religion and religions. Religion today is richly diverse, ubiquitous, and persistent. The religious 'other' is also

---

[2]   'Restoring religion to the public square', *The Tablet*, 28 January 2012, 6–7.

today the religious neighbour. Yet fear of the 'other', of difference and diversity, is arguably the root problem besetting the contemporary context of religious plurality. A healthily secular society is accommodatingly pluralist; difference is not just 'tolerated' but embraced and valued. A healthy religious identity is likewise accommodating of diversity—not treating religious and other alterities as implicit threats or invalid irruptions.

The final chapter draws to a conclusion the undergirding theme of otherness and the overarching range of issues addressed, identifies some of the significant and emerging trends and issues, and reflects on the future of interreligious engagement and the continuing challenge to understand, as well as to act. It is the hope of the editors that the combination of a focus on the theme of the religious 'other' together with the selection of issues and concerns thrown up by the lived reality of interreligious relations will prove a stimulating and insightful entrée for the reader new to the field, and a useful contribution to wider scholarly discourse. Religion, and so relations between religions, is unavoidably part of our contemporary social landscape. Whether or not we are actively engaged, the quest to understand what is happening, and why, when religions and their communities intersect, is of wide import and relevance. And for today's religions and their peoples, it is arguably vital that the context and reality of interreligious engagements are deeply understood.

This page intentionally left blank

Religions and the Religious Other

This page intentionally left blank

Religion and the Religious Other

DAVID CHEETHAM

If the chapters that follow largely concern the particular historical backgrounds and contexts that characterize specific religions, one of the tasks of this chapter must be to critically assess the validity of a more general viewpoint. Whilst the close accounts of the historical and religious contexts of the different religions, and the 'canonical' authorities (textual or otherwise) that govern their attitudes towards religious others, might be fairly straightforward to articulate, the possibility of *generalizations* and the meaningfulness of categories (such as 'religion') apart from such contexts and canons are perhaps harder to justify. From the perspective of the academic study of religion, the discussion about religions and the religious other is embedded in a broader debate about methodologies in theology and the study of religion and the dispute between modernist and post modernist accounts of the nature of religion(s) and how it is to be interpreted and compared. This is the question concerning the possibility of *theory*. More postmodern commentators would have been content with this section of the book to merely present the five religions and their relations with the religious other without any attempt to provide an overarching narrative or further comment. To go beyond this is to risk defining religion and otherness in universal or abstract terms. Given this, the suspicion is that the very idea of 'religion and the religious other' already betrays an assumption of universalizing principles behind the differences.

Yet, I shall attempt to argue that an account of the aspiration of religions to offer a universal or public rendering of their worldview means that talking about 'religion and the religious other' in a general sense itself owes just as much to religious desire to transcend finitude and temporality as it does to modern Western constructions of religion. I would also suggest that the possibility of being 'above' or 'outside' the historical-cultural expressions of religion is aligned to a basic commitment to a realist interpretation of religious language. In which case, a discussion of religions and the religious other is a concern that is an epiphenomenon of a

perspective that seeks to point beyond language and offer a total interpretation of the human condition and the universe. However, in tension with this, even if the 'view from above' is a perspective that individual religions actually aspire to, there is another sense that the concrete meeting between religions and their religious others is more complex and rich than can be summed up by a single focal point or, in the evocative words of Richard Kearney, by an 'ada-mantine logos of pure correspondences'.[1]

Although this chapter seeks to accomplish a wide-ranging and comprehensive discussion, it is nevertheless constructed around two basic aspects and offers a critical engagement with each of them. The first concerns the possibility, or the 'very idea', of what might be called a 'de-contextualized perspective' on religion and there is an engagement with a number of authors, disciplines, and viewpoints: the academic study of religion as well as philosophical and religious viewpoints. The second aspect considers the question of 'the other' and, more specifically, the kinds of challenges that meeting 'the other' might present. In so doing, this section reviews some key thinkers in the debate, including Emmanuel Levinas. The chapter is concerned with both the general vision that underpins the very idea of 'religion and the religious other' and with the contextual and ethical complexities of meeting the other.

Context and Theory

One of the choices made by the editors of this volume was to offer accounts in Part I of interreligious engagement that could be properly exemplified in major religions. That is, rather than have an extensive range of chapters that deal with many more religious traditions—minor and major—it was decided to exhibit those major ones that had a long and complex history of engagement with religious others. The countervailing view would be to insist that one must be totally comprehensive, but although this undoubtedly would have produced an impressive breadth of coverage, it is possible that the themes of 'comparison' or 'dialogue' would have been imposed on some traditions artificially. This raises the question of the enforced agendas that demand that some exemplification be found of engagements and concerns—interfaith dialogue and exchange—that may never have taken place in any significant way in some traditions. In this connection, the Jewish philosopher, Peter Ochs, argues that comparison or dialogue should only be undertaken if the traditions have contexts that make it apposite. Failing that, he proposes the following: 'If no dialogue has in fact taken place, then two options are either to provide an environment for such a dialogue or to desist from comparison (without a dialogue, what is the reason for comparison?)'[2] Ochs's

[1] Richard Kearney, 'Introduction: Ricoeur's Philosophy of Translation', in Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, tr. Eileen Brennan (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. xvii.

[2] Peter Ochs, 'Comparative Religious Traditions', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74/1 (2006), 126.

argument is directed towards pedagogic contexts, but an interfaith movement with which he is most associated, Scriptural Reasoning, is a good example of deliberately generating an environment of encounter where a group of scholars from Abrahamic traditions meet and discover commonalities and differences through their open discussions of Abrahamic texts.[3] What is significant is that such encounters are not programmatic in that they do not presuppose agreement or commonality; rather, they may actually seek to improve the quality of disagreement. However, in the absence of this, Ochs believes that comparison should not be attempted. As such, he is prioritizing contextual actualities and experiences over the possibility of theoretical comparison.

The alternative to this view has been well articulated by the thoroughgoing modernist, Robert Segal, who thinks that Ochs's embargo ends up denying the role of the academic student of religion who wishes to gain a deeper understanding of religion through comparison. He complains: 'If I want to fathom Ghanian Methodists, why can I not compare them with any other group I choose? As long as I can identify similarities between Ghanian Methodists and adherents of religions of whom the Ghanians have never heard, why dare I not compare them?'[4] Segal's point is that the activity of trying to compare traditions which do not necessarily have a demonstrable history of engagement may help to discover something about those traditions; more specifically, it goes beyond a purely descriptive treatment of 'how' religions have engaged but addresses a broader question of 'why?'[5] It prompts a theoretical question about similarity and difference that may admittedly reflect what Segal calls an 'old comparativism' but which cannot be ruled out of a theoretical study of religions. Segal's point is academic—it is from the perspective of religious studies—but is it indicative of wider issues concerning how religions relate to each other outside of academic interests? So, does not the 'why' question resemble a *religious* interest also? Are not the comparisons undertaken by religious people an integral aspect of the quest for truth and inquisitiveness about other possible interpretations? This concerns the epistemological anxieties that are stirred by the presence of alternative (and potentially incompatible) truth-claims—something that Paul Griffiths characterizes as the *problem* of religious diversity, a problem for the believer.[6] In which case, for the believer to ignore the religious other, or to lack a comparative awareness, is to betray a lack of interest in bigger questions and the validity of one's own confession. This chapter is partly concerned with such broader enquiries, while the chapters that follow in this section present contextually rich instances of particular religions in interaction with religious others.

---

[3] See David Ford and C. C. Pecknold (eds), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); also <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org>.

[4] Robert Segal, 'Response to Peter Ochs' "Comparative Religious Traditions"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74/1 (2006), 131.

[5] Ochs, 'Comparative Religious Traditions', 130.

[6] See Paul Griffiths, *The Problem of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

On the Very Idea[7]

The pluralistic vision of authors like Schmidt-Leukel in this volume would seem to be the most natural home for a topic like 'religion and the religious other'. Nevertheless, can the very idea be defended as a legitimate notion *apart* from the pluralistic agenda of liberal moderns? Much depends on what we are trying to achieve, what limits we set to the debate, and the usage of the term 'religion' in the academy and the world. In her chapter on Interreligious Dialogue within this volume, Marianne Moyaert supplies a skilful historical account of the rise of the concern for dialogue between faiths as something that reflected the modern ideals of equality, respect, and tolerance. Unlike some other writers who make much of the connection between the concept of religion and the intellectual politics of modernity, Moyaert's lucid account does not engage in the critique of modernity as an originating factor and her survey does not explicitly offer a critique of modern pluralistic theories either. She draws attention to the variety of influences that came together to bring about comparative religion and the dialogue between faith traditions. In addition to the impact of modern thinking, she highlights the influences of ecumenical dialogue, the experience and scholarship of Christian missionaries (many of whom were distinguished scholars of religion in universities), and the subsequent desire to reverse the colonial imperialism of the past.

These factors combined to compel critical reflection on the nature of religion and its multiple phenomena and how they might constructively relate. In an influential article which offers an analysis of the terms 'religion', 'religions', and 'religious',[8] the American scholar Jonathan Z. Smith argues that the sheer amount of new information and learning that occurred over the last century forced scholars to enquire about the meaning of religion: '[t]he question of religion arose in response to the explosion of data'.[9] Rather than be satisfied with the mere description or exhibition of the varieties of religious phenomena, Smith says that '[t]he urgent agendum was to bring order to this variety of species. Only an adequate taxonomy would convert a "natural history" of religion into a science.'[10]

Critics may well be suspicious of the search for an organizing principle that defines a single field and focus. The historical development of such an idea is not without interpretation or a hermeneutic of suspicion. In *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (2000) and the more recent *Christianity and the World Religions* (2009), the Roman Catholic theologian, Gavin D'Costa, has remained steadfastly focused on advancing his criticism of the modernist tradition that he sees at the heart of liberal pluralism and in the drive to find universals in religion.

---

[7] The heading here is influenced by Donald Davidson's 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 47 (1973–4), 5–20. In this piece Davidson is concerned with the problems of translation and incommensurability.

[8] See 'Religion, Religions, Religious', in J. Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179–96.

[9] Smith, *Relating Religion*, 18; see Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6.

[10] Smith, *Relating Religion*, 187.

He undertakes historical detective work regarding the origins of the modern version of religion and argues that the category of religion has been invented and/or tamed by 'modernity's story':

> 'Religion' was an invention of the sixteenth century and deeply rooted in the work of the Cambridge Platonists, by the eighteenth century it was more a product of the European imagination than an encounter with an alternative form of power and discipline; and by the twentieth century 'religion' became a shadow of its pre-modern self precisely because it was allocated a private, not public, role in the political sphere; a role policed by modernity.[11]

D'Costa is not alone in this reading and he owes much of his thinking about modernity as a tradition to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre.[12] Further, talk of the 'policing' of religion by modernity shares affinities with the views of the British theologian and champion of Radical Orthodoxy, John Milbank.[13] Thus, Milbank argues that the very idea of dialogue between religions is predicated on an assumption of the natural reasonable religion that is a product of the secular modernist 'whose only possible outcome must be . . . a new hybridisation, yielding a new, and of course just as *particular*, elite religion for the votaries of dialogue themselves.'[14] Both D'Costa and Milbank claim that the move towards 'reasonable religion' comes with its own programme towards homogeneity; it is not a neutral concept but is a modernist tradition that privileges a Kantian notion of religion.

Paul Knitter defends liberal pluralism against the claim that it is a pawn of modernity or a Western imposition.[15] He contests the idea that pluralism is a Western construct and appeals to a common religious testimony that he argues is present in all religious traditions. Such testimony speaks about religious truth as 'universal truth', and most major religions advocate the idea that what is believed ought to be thought of as *publicly* rather than privately true.[16] Knitter is defending pluralism specifically, but it seems entirely possible to suggest that his defence could be used simply to acknowledge that the practice of generalization, and the appeal to universals, is something that characterizes religious *transcendent* vision. Milbank, who has expressed his opposition to liberalism, argues that the alleged need for a pluralist solution wrongly assumes that the encounter with the religious other is a new situation. On the contrary, 'every major religion is *already* the result of a confronting of the fact of religious differences and an attempt to subsume such differences . . . although the ways and degrees of

[11] Gavin D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions. An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 58.

[12] e.g. see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1996).

[13] For Milbank's fullest development of this, see his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[14] John Milbank, 'The End of Dialogue', in Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 180.

[15] See Paul Knitter, 'Is the Pluralist Model a Western Imposition? A Response in Five Voices', in Paul Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multi-Faith Exploration* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 28–42.

[16] Knitter, 'Pluralist Model', 31–3.

constructing "universality" themselves vary enormously'.[17] Milbank's use of inverted commas around 'universality' indicates that he does not understand universality to be a neutral normativity, but a tradition-specific vision.

However, I would suggest that this still demonstrates that a universal vision, however traditionally framed, is an authentic aspect of religious epistemological ambitions or what might be described as a religious *stretching* that seeks to transcend the world and reach into eternity. Knitter's point is that if there is a desire to transcend contextual or historical concerns then this is not just something that is explainable in terms of a suspicious genealogical uncovering of universals in the Western intellectual tradition—but this is surely a valid observation apart from his pluralistic conclusion. Secondly, Knitter claims that theistic religions speak of the 'absolute mystery' about reality or God, and the mystics within different religions remind believers that there is an ultimate mystery about reality that can never be fully comprehended or encapsulated by their own traditions.[18] Whilst recognizing the importance of acknowledging differences as well as similarities, Knitter calls attention to 'shared aims' and 'common concerns'—such as fighting injustice, poverty, and oppression. His argument is that, despite the claims that pluralism is a product of Western modernism, the idea of universals and common purposes is something present in the religions themselves. In fact, the intuition that there is something deep to be shared and understood universally is an integral and fundamental part of *religious* truth.

Another pluralist, John Hick, argues in a similar fashion that many of the perceived commonalities and universals that pluralists are accused of forging from specifically Western liberal ideals are present in religious and philosophical traditions around the globe.[19] Whilst some critics of pluralism (e.g. D'Costa) will seek to engage in a genealogical investigation of its origins within Western modernism, Hick introduces his *An Interpretation of Religion* with a seemingly de-politicized agenda—his is 'a religious interpretation of religion' as opposed to a cultural, sociological, psychological, or anthropological interpretation.[20] In so doing, he seeks to engage with religion in its plurality from a non-reductionist perspective, one which takes the *object* of religious faith and practice seriously. Ironically, rather than Hick's pluralistic theory undermining the vitality of specific confessions, his pluralism is in fact intended to defend the *reality* of religious beliefs and experience despite the seeming contradictory truth-claims evident in different traditions. In this sense, his hypothesis is a response to the classic Humean claim that different religious experiences cancel each other out if they are used for their evidential value. So, against the conclusion that religious language cannot be fact-asserting due to the clashing plurality of many different claims, Hick's hypothesis is a defence of realism against anti-realist interpretations of religious beliefs.[21]

---

[17] Milbank, 'End of Dialogue', 180.

[18] Knitter, 'Pluralist Model', 33–6.

[19] e.g. see John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* 2nd edn (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. xxxix–xli.

[20] Hick, *Interpretation,* 1.

[21] See also the discussion of realism and pluralism in Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

Nevertheless, in similar fashion to my observations on Knitter's defence of pluralism, I suggest that, although Hick closely connects his defence of a realist religious epistemology to his pluralistic hypothesis, his 'religious interpretation of religion' in its most basic form seems to be simply a matter of claiming that realism (as opposed to anti-realism) is a *proper* religious outlook. At its most fundamental level, then, advocating realism is simply to argue that religious language has a 'referent' outside of and independent of language and culture. Religious beliefs are not solely linguistic or cultural creations. Thus, if we return to the question expressed at the beginning of this section about the possibility of a general interest in 'religion and the religious other' apart from liberal pluralism, I would claim that this is possible if we consider the outward-look of religion, its aspirations to look beyond. However, this would be more consistent with a realist as opposed to an anti-realist interpretation of religious language. That is, whereas anti-realist conceptions of religious language are content to inhabit the narrative, humanly generated and culturally relative aspects of religious talk, the realist view looks for the validity of such talk *outside* of itself. If such reasoning is sound, then it suggests that the matter of 'religion and the religious other' as a general concern is something that can be categorized less as a species of modernity, and more as something deeply ingrained in the aspiration for objectivity or 'public' truth within religion itself and which has close affinities with a realist interpretation of religious language—*apart from a specifically pluralist vision.*

Hick's own account of 'world religion' emerges from an influential historical account of the evolution of religion in the work of Karl Jaspers that differentiates between pre-axial and post-axial orientations.[22] Pre-axial religions are primitive or localized religions that do not offer comprehensive accounts of the world and are therefore not unsettled by the presence of other religions. Pre-axial religion is concerned 'with the preservation of cosmic and social order'.[23] It is about sustaining vital patterns or seasons of nature and about upholding or underpinning the traditions of a particular community and region. Post-axial religion is concerned 'with the quest for salvation or liberation'.[24] Hick marks out the axial age as being from 800 to 200 BCE, a time when there is an enlargement of vision: 'man is no longer defined chiefly in terms of what tribe or clan he comes from or what particular god he serves but rather as a being capable of salvation'.[25] This particular account suits Hick's personal hypothesis about religion very much because his own common focal point within the diversity of religions is soteriological—all true religions share a purpose towards human transformation moving

---

[22] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, tr. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953). Hick also cites several other sources, see in Hick, *Interpretation*, 35 n. 9.

[23] *Interpretation*, 22; John Milbank argues similarly: 'genuinely local religions (and of course relative isolation does not betoken primitiveness) may scarcely have had to confront the question of whether their beliefs and practices are relevant beyond the confines of their own society; this is presumably why they are so liable to conversion by or accommodating within the terms of a major religion, which is in part the result of such a confrontation.' Milbank, 'End of Dialogue', 180.

[24] Hick, *Interpretation*, 22.

[25] Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (London and New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 33; cited in Hick, *Interpretation*, 30.

from self-centredness to reality-centredness. During the axial age, he suggests that 'all the major religious options, constituting the major possible ways of conceiving the ultimate were identified and established'.[26] If there is a weakness in this account it may not be located in the prima facie historical observation about a significant period of development of religions of 'global' scope, instead it is perhaps to be found in the underlying assumption that such scope is indicative of a common soteriological purpose—an alleged *axial* soteriology.[27] Scholars such as John Cobb[28] and S. Mark Heim[29] have challenged this assumption, arguing that religions have different goals and ends that are not necessarily reducible to a single purpose.

Advancing a more politically attentive account of 'world religion' from the perspective of the social sciences, Jonathan Z. Smith presents a distinction that resembles what Hick calls the axial and pre-axial religions, but for him it is a matter of proximity and power:

> It is impossible to escape the suspicion that a world religion is simply a religion like ours, and that it is, above all, a tradition that has achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history to form it, interact with it, or thwart it. We recognise both the unity within and the diversity among the world religions because they correspond to important geopolitical entities with which we must deal. All 'primitives' by way of contrast, may be lumped together, as may the 'minor religions,' because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. From the point of view of power, they are invisible.[30]

Smith's suspicions follow investigations into the historical development of the study of religion in the academy and the use of classifications and distinctions made by scholars since the eighteenth century.[31] Nevertheless, even if the construct 'world religion' can be explained as a product of geo-political proximity, the comparative theologian Hugh Nicholson claims that it is above all a liberal *ideal*—an attempt to transcend particular politics and conflicts. In this sense, it does not so much represent a recognition of power with which one has to deal, rather it embodies a 'normative liberal ideal of a form of religion transcending the principle of political division and strife'.[32]

Tracing the origins of theological hegemonism, Nicholson also suggests that the oft-used typology (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism) in the theology of religions is part of a liberal narrative that seeks to 'project a universal theological vision'. It does so by presenting

---

[26] Hick, *Interpretation*, 31.

[27] I would maintain that the force of this criticism is not dissipated by simply arguing that the axial religions contain genuine diversity and have phenomenologically different goals, because the very 'axial' *identification* is itself predicated on an alleged common intuition of cosmic optimism.

[28] See John Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, ed. Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

[29] See S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

[30] Smith, *Relating Religion*, 191–2.

[31] See also the account offered in Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History,* 2nd edn (London: Duckworth, 1986).

[32] Hugh Nicholson, 'The New Comparative Theology and the Problem of Theological Hegemonism', in Francis Clooney (ed.), *The New Comparative Theology: Thinking Interreligiously in the 21st Century* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 50.

the options in the typology as 'successive moments in a dialectic' towards overcoming exclusivism.[33] For Nicholson, part of the liberal strategy has been to address the issue of interreligious relations as a systematic problem rather than an historical or contextual one. Or rather, the options in the typology appear to be more concerned with overall meta-explanations of the presence of the religious other and how they fit into the universal landscape. Indeed, for Schmidt-Leukel, in this volume, the metaphysical and soteriological questions that the typology prioritizes are inescapable if one is engaged in theology of religions rather than merely comparative religion. In Nicholson's view, categories like 'world religion' are presented as distinct from other religious groups by virtue of the fact that they have 'transcended a particular cultural milieu'.[34] His dissection of the typology follows a now familiar line when it presents a genealogy of suspicion concerning the 'universal vision' of the liberal modern narrative. However, consistent with what has been suggested in the last few pages, it is not clear that projecting a universal theological vision should be identified solely with a liberal modern narrative.

Nevertheless, if we adopt Nicholson's view of 'world religion' as a de-politicized ideal, then we can see how this works in the context of the liberal state. 'World religion' becomes a close relative of the liberal values of equality, tolerance, and the reasonable society. Not only is 'world religion' a concept that functions as a universal category but it obtains its licence by legitimating the core values of the modern state.[35] The most obvious example of this is the powerfully influential political philosophy of John Rawls who envisages a liberal democratic state that only permits religious discourses to be part of the public square if they can be 'expressed in terms of political values'.[36] Although Rawls was not trying to impose a secular normativity, and in fact argued for an 'over-lapping consensus' of narratives, it is quite clear that secular liberal assumptions were seen as a guide for what can be included and what must be excluded from the public sphere. What is significant is that Rawls was keen to exclude the 'zeal to embody the whole truth'[37] that characterizes strong religious postures. Passionate commitment to a religious worldview could be permitted in the private sphere, but the public expression of these commitments had to be filtered by the expedient pragmatics of public reason. Thus, the success of Rawls's liberal society was based on the establishment of a democratic citizenship that did not claim to be a *comprehensive* system like a religious worldview and therefore allowed differences to exist together peacefully. The acceptable face of religion, and therefore its public voice, is accomplished by subjecting beliefs and narratives to a *reasonable distillation*.

---

[33] Nicholson, 'New Comparative Theology', 48.

[34] Nicholson, 'New Comparative Theology', 50.

[35] This is a point that underpins many of the complaints by critics of liberal pluralism like D'Costa, Milbank, and Kenneth Surin. See the latter's highly readable 'A "Politics of Speech": Religious Pluralism in the Age of McDonald's Hamburger', in D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, 192–212.

[36] John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited'* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 142. See Christopher Insole's lucid defence of liberal politics (with reference to Rawls) in his *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

[37] Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 132.

Notwithstanding the historical and geo-political dynamics that have influenced the taxonomies of 'world religion' as a category, Jonathan Z. Smith clearly perceives a value in defining religion but the use of definition for him seems to be chiefly an *academic* tool. That is, he argues that 'religion' is not a 'native term'.[38] Rather, '[i]t is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology'.[39] Reinforcing this viewpoint, Robert Segal argues that generic theories of religion are not about finding an essence—on the contrary, the question of essence is a metaphysical issue—instead they are 'merely an empirical enterprise'.[40] Segal pours scorn on postmodern claims that theories of religion are merely Western hegemonies which peddle rationalist universals. He argues that theories make no claim to offer *sufficient* explanations of religion, rather, they are merely probabilistic. The presence of evidence that seems contrary to a theory is not an indication of the failure of the theory itself or, worse, that ignoring such material means that the 'master' theory has suppressed differences. It would be a facile criticism indeed that proposed that theories are useless simply because it was alleged that they depend on the denial of difference and complexity in favour of sameness *without exception*.[41] Segal argues that inconsistencies merely underline the 'provisional' nature of theories rather than undermining the usefulness of them altogether[42] and, furthermore, we might add that the acknowledgement of provisionality hardly seems to be an ingredient one would expect if theories were genuinely vehicles of conceptual oppression.

Nevertheless, matters become more complex when the theoretical activity of religious students and theologians of religions is employed to propose *solutions* to religious diversity. That is, the hope for peace between religions may have been presumptuously predicated on the discovery of comparative parities between religions by theologians and scholars of religion. This has recently been noted by Martin Kavka who suggests that religious studies, with its comparative method, seems to support the myth that one of its chief roles is to harmonize differences between religions with a view to the pedagogic effect such work has on students of religion: 'The rise of religious studies as a discipline is intertwined with the belief that this discipline itself could bring about peace through its acts of translation.'[43] It does not seem difficult to find examples of this in the academic history of the subject. Friedrich Heiler, in a visionary opening address to conference of historians of religion in 1958, claimed:

---

[38]   Smith, *Relating Religion*, 193.
[39]   Smith, *Relating Religion*, 194.
[40]   Robert Segal, 'All Generalisations are Bad: Postmodernism on Theories', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74/1 (2006), 159.
[41]   Critics of this can maintain that the theories impose their assumptions on the data and, in so doing, skew the interpretation. However, it seems impossible to avoid *conceptualization* altogether and the construction of models or frameworks of understanding is, arguably, unavoidable in order to advance beyond mere description.
[42]   Smith, *Relating Religion*, 164.
[43]   Martin Kavka, 'Translation', in Robert Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 187.

> One of the most important tasks of the science of religion is to bring to light this unity of all religions . . . A new era will dawn upon mankind when the religions will rise to true tolerance and co-operation on behalf of mankind. To assist in preparing the way for this era is one of the finest hopes of the scientific study of religion.[44]

However, it is not clear that uncovering a unity between religions is the essential key to achieving tolerance and cooperation between religions. Thinking about relations between religions has become more complex and rich since Heiler uttered these words. Indeed, much of the literature in the past few decades that has explored approaches to interreligious dialogue has spoken just as vocally about the virtues of difference as it has about sameness in the meeting of religions. An indicative testimony to this is Catherine Cornille's recent influential text, *The Im-possibility of Inter religious Dialogue* (2008); the various sections contained within it provide a survey of the many approaches that have been explored—not just unity, but 'humility', 'commitment', 'interconnection', 'empathy', and 'hospitality'. However, this is not to suggest that the discovery of unity and comparative likenesses ceases to be a profitable task for religious studies or that theory does not have a place in its methodologies, rather it is to express doubt about any direct links between the academic practice of such a project in religious studies and promoting peace between religions. At least, since Heiler's speech, the study of religions and theology has become more complex and the relationship between the two disciplines a matter of intense debate.[45]

Returning to the very idea of 'religion and the religious other', if one is going to undertake the task of engaging with the general vision and scope then perhaps such an enterprise needs to inhabit the disciplines that reflect a more philosophical disposition? This is because the philosophical outlook seems to involve a kind of *de-contextualization*. Furthermore, the difference between the philosopher John Hick and the social scientist Jonathan Z. Smith is that the former prioritizes the *religious* problem of the presence of the 'same' rather than concentrating on the political or social problem. This is a feature that Smith is in fact fully aware of, as is clear from his treatment of the problem of otherness that we will see in a moment, though he understands it more as a contextual challenge. For Hick, a world (axial) religion is one that presents a comprehensive answer to universal questions of existence and meaning. In this sense, regardless of historical or geo-political proximity, there is a theological or *conceptual* proximity that causes difficulty and disrupts the universal claims of a particular faith tradition.

Speaking as a philosopher of religion, Christopher Insole highlights the importance in analytical philosophy of considering ideas in themselves apart from history and cultivating

---

[44] *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress for the History of Religions* (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1960), 19, 21; cited in Sharpe, *Comparative Religion,* 272.

[45] Some good anthologies include Maya Warrier and Simon Oliver (eds), *Theology and Religious Studies: An Exploration of Disciplinary Boundaries* (London: T&T Clark, 2008) and David Ford *et al.* (eds), *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

a 'studied and deliberate lack of interest in the complex discourses which constitute our various roles and identities in the world'.[46] That is, the practice of philosophy is to consider the merits of ideas and concepts apart from any historical or cultural recommendation or pedigree. This might suggest that considering 'religion and the religious other' as a generic decontextualized problem is something that concerns less the God of faith and more the 'god of the philosophers'. In which case, one of the more acute dilemmas from the perspective of religious faith is that a broader concern with the problem of the religious other leads to abstractions that move outside of specific traditions. In his critique of Hick's pluralism, Gavin D'Costa claims that the object of Hick's hypothesis, the Real, is such a transcategorial entity that it results in a 'transcendental agnosticism'.[47] Alternatively, George Pattison suggests that philosophy's 'intellectual eros' is 'analogous to the aspiration of religion' because the concept of God 'coincides with what fundamental philosophy seeks to uncover as the ever-intended but ever-unthought presupposition of thought'.[48] Thus, there emerges a peculiar dialectic between a sceptical questioning approach that forever engages in the critique of established ideas on the one hand, and a deep sense of the ultimate ('ever-intended but ever-unthought presupposition of thought') that drives the quest, on the other.

In summary, the very idea of 'religion and the religious other' can be addressed as an academic and a religious concern. It emerges from the comparative study of religion and the construction of theory, however for this reason it has been critiqued by scholars who draw attention to its liberal modern heritage—both political and philosophical—and the way it appears to favour a pluralistic perspective. Nevertheless, I have suggested that the discourse is more basically consistent with a realist interpretation of religious language and beliefs which, at least in the context of theistic traditions, imply that there are *external* reference points for religious claims. Thinking abstractly about 'religion and the religious other' is also wedded to the concept of 'world religion'. Alongside the more religious or philosophical readings of this that are possible, it might also be understood as a socio-political construct that reflects the power and proximity of certain traditions in relation to each other and their 'global' claims.

However, there is a limitation to the usefulness of a programme of abstracting ideas from contexts. Although it might resonate with both the academic interests of theorists of religion and, as we have said, a *realist* reading of religious beliefs, the actual practice may be richer and more complex. Indeed, the danger is that the pursuit of *focal* points may limit the range of engagements with otherness. That is, the face of the religious other may be more multifaceted than single conceptual or abstract focal points allow us to perceive.

[46]   Christopher Insole, 'Political Liberalism, Analytical Philosophy of Religion and the Forgetting of History', in Christopher Insole and Harriet Harris (eds), *Faith and Philosophical Analysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), 163.

[47]   Gavin D'Costa, 'John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution', in Harold Hewitt (ed.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 7.

[48]   George Pattison, *A Short Course in Philosophy of Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 119.

THE OTHER

In the opening sentences of a seminal work of the twentieth-century on the topic of 'the Other', the German philosopher Michael Theunissen wrote that '[f]ew questions have exerted so powerful a grip on the thought of this century than that of the "Other".'[49] One of the most influential interpretations of the meaning of otherness has come from a Jewish scholar who is mentioned in Edward Kessler's chapter in this section, Emmanuel Levinas. Although he fiercely articulates an intense sense of responsibility towards otherness, or its infinite demand, such an uncompromising attitude has not been the only dominant motif in Western thinking about the other. Following the gradual demise of a Cartesian emphasis on the rational subject—that which gains knowledge through thinking as an *individual-that-craves-certainty*—there is a post-Cartesian narrative that maintains that self-knowledge goes beyond the isolated individual and is achieved through a relationship with and interrogation by others. Moreover, although the presence of the other might create profound anxiety, this is by no means a negative experience. For example, Fred Dallmayr, tracing a genealogy through Hegel and Schelling, comments on the complexity of relations between 'I and Other' in Western thought, which he notes was 'not the relation of exclusivity, but one of mutual dependence', and that 'self-discovery presupposes the passage through otherness'.[50] That is, the presence of the other has been seen in much Western thinking as a constructive one—an aid to personal development through engagement—as well as something more unsettling and ethically demanding. In which case, Dallmayr thinks that otherness is not to be solely described in terms of alienation and he quotes Theodor Adorno's comment that fear of alienation 'would mostly cease if strangeness were no longer vilified'.

Dissatisfied with Heidegger's ontology of Being, Levinas insisted that ethics should be 'first philosophy', and that this is given the highest priority in philosophy. Such a priority is 'otherwise than being'[51]—the question of being is replaced by the infinite demand of the other. Constructing his own perspective on the dialogue between faiths in *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (2002), the Jesuit scholar Michael Barnes is deeply influenced by Levinas and, as a consequence, one of his primary questions in connection to the dialogue of religions is: 'How is the responsible subject to negotiate with the other without resorting to acts of subtle manipulation or more-or-less blatant violence?'[52] Here Barnes locates one of the primary anxieties in the theology of religions. This has also been well articulated by the Buddhist scholar Kristen Kiblinger in her critical reflections on inclusivism in the Buddhist tradition. She advocates an 'engaged inclusivism' which is

---

[49] Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 1.

[50] Fred Dallmayr, 'Introduction', in Theunissen, *The Other*, p. x.

[51] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence,* tr. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1981).

[52] Barnes, *Theology and Dialogue*, 27.

'less about acceptance than it is about sincere open consideration and the pursuit of accurate understanding'.[53] Put another way, properly ethical meetings with the religious other are about *giving way* to the auto-interpretation[54] offered by those others before any attempt is made to find continuities and affinities. For Barnes's Levinasian-inspired conscience, the theology of religions needs an 'adequate account of the vulnerability of the self in the face of the other'.[55]

'Vulnerability of self in the face of the other' is *one* distinctive attitude in the meeting of religions and it clearly resonates with ethical imperatives that are found at the heart of many religious traditions such as 'the Golden Rule'. However, if Levinas inspires a deep responsibility towards the other, especially in the post-Holocaust West, is his thinking appropriate for *active* (rather than passive) relationships between religions? In addressing this question, I want to be selective and focus the discussion on the ethics of meeting and the metaphysics of religious belief. The priority of Levinas is ethics rather than metaphysics or ontology, but it is possible that such a priority may obscure the religious vision that compels action towards the other. Because of the desire in his thought to avoid doing violence to the other, he appears to have produced a space of such *sacrality* that it is difficult to move. Additionally, it seems that there is a kind of pragmatic 'atheism' that occupies the centre of his ethical thought. Thus, Levinas thinks that the *Deus Absconditus* is a vital aspect of ethical life: 'The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, that our relation with the metaphysical is an ethical behaviour and not theology'.[56] For Levinas, ethics is the true 'spiritual optics' and this means that '[e]verything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion'.[57] Perhaps most significant for our considerations is Levinas's suggestion of a divine withdrawal or hiddenness in order to allow the ethical to be formed and to flourish. Levinas uses language that implies that humanity achieves a form of *independent* authority: 'To hide one's face so as to demand the superhuman of man, to create a man who can approach God and speak of Him without always being in His debt—that is truly the mark of divine greatness!'[58]

In an excoriating critique of Levinas, the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart characterizes Levinas's contribution to twentieth-century ethics as one of 'absolutely unalloyed and hyperbolic intensity'.[59] In saying this, Hart is identifying Levinas's ethics with a type of agonistic nihilism. A similar characterization is offered by Gillian Rose, to whom Hart refers. For example, she notes that becoming 'the ethical [Levinas's] self is to be devastated,

[53] Kristin Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism: Attitudes towards Religious Others* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 28.

[54] This is a term employed by Gavin D'Costa. See *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 100.

[55] Barnes, *Theology and Dialogue*, 23.

[56] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1979), 78. See the discussion in Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 60–4.

[57] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78, 79.

[58] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. S. Hand (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 145.

[59] David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 75.

traumatised . . . by the commandment to substitute *the other* for itself'.[60] Of specific interest to our concerns, Hart speculates that Levinas enjoys a position of influence in contemporary ethical thinking 'because [his work] appears apt to satisfy some commendable appetite in certain thinkers in this post-metaphysical age for *some* language of moral responsibility'.[61] This is a highly significant observation and it has important implications concerning the nature of encounter with otherness in a religious context and the particular *mood* that thinkers like Levinas promote. As we have seen, Levinas's prioritization of the ethical over a Heideggerian ontology means that his ethics seems to stem less from notions of divine command and more from an intense inter-human ethical commitment and infinite responsibility towards 'the Other' which, for Levinas, represents the deepest *sublime*.[62] Moreover, if Levinas's ethics is indeed a distinctively *post-metaphysical* offering, then does this make it oddly unsuited to the ethics set within the metaphysical frameworks that underpin the moral vision of many faiths? Not necessarily. For example, the advantage of Levinas's account is that it clears a space of opportunity for the human, and if the relationships between religious people of different traditions are removed from strongly held religious imperatives and metaphysics, then Levinas may actually be describing a mode of profound inter-human engagement that can be embraced more universally.[63] However, this also means that the explicitly religious or transcendent subject matter of religious faith (unless this is couched entirely in ethical terms) is not a crucial part of the meeting between religions. Arguably, meeting the religious other in a Levinasian sense appears to be an action which exists in parallel to overtly religious metaphysics and doctrinal confessions—it exists in our 'inter-human relations'. Although Levinas's autonomous ethic, with its masochistic self-renunciation, may indeed resonate with the self-emptying aspects found deep within many religious ethical practices, it is by no means certain that the meeting with the other can or should be determined by such austerity.

Such is the imperative in Levinas's thought to avoid reducing the other to the same and to affirm difference that critics, such as Paul Ricoeur, have asked if the face of the other can even be recognized. Levinas creates a sacred ground between same and the other, a pristine, sterilized no-man's land in which even any recognition of the other becomes an act of 'violence'. Thus, Barnes worries that the severity of Levinas's ethical politics ends up replacing the violence of imposing sameness with a 'violence which would paralyse the self'.[64] Furthermore, Rose suggests that to advocate such 'passivity beyond passivity'[65] as a response

[60] Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37.

[61] Rose, *Mourning*, 37.

[62] This is Hart's terminology and particular interpretation. See Hart's discussion of the ethical sublime, *The Beauty*, 75–93.

[63] I have a great deal of sympathy with the idea of 'human' spaces and I explore these in *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religio*ns (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), esp. ch. 3.

[64] Barnes, *Theology and Dialogue*, 70.

[65] See Rose, *Mourning*, 37.

to the other is in fact to have created a deceptive (because unreal) 'holy middle' between self and other. Rose's preference amounts to an appeal for the recognition of the 'broken middle'—that which is the untidy and often incongruent reality where ideas, persons, and communities are juxtaposed without any clear telos. She notes that some postmodern theologians, and she chooses Mark C. Taylor and John Milbank as examples, have sought to repair or 'mend' the middle and possess it in order to do so. In Taylor's case it is the advocacy of a 'nomadic' mode of being that is a denial of domination in public politics;[66] in Milbank's it is the creation of a 'holy sociology' that entails liberation from the secular. Critiquing such things, Rose claims that '[t]his rediscovery of the holy city, pagan, nomadic, Judaic, these mended middles over broken middle, at the end of the end of philosophy, may be witnessed as the postmodern convergent aspiration which, in effect, disqualifies the third, the middle, on which they would converge'.[67]

Rose's criticisms here provoke a question about the politics of the in-between. Do religions contain the narratives of space that permit the middle to be genuinely broken? Or is even this space to be invaded by their certainties? This raises a crucial issue for the meeting of religions—the *nature of the middle* and its significance. If there is to be a genuine relational sense of 'religion and the religious other' then there needs to be difference, perhaps an in-between, or at least a willingness to withdraw and allow the third space to exist—though by no means an uncluttered space. In addition, it is not obvious that such a space need be straightforwardly designated as the 'public sphere' in a Rawlsian sense—a sphere which is possibly laden more with political contingencies and pragmatism than with questions of truth. Philosophers of religious pluralism may see their chief task as defining a focal point—be it soteriological, ethical, mystical, and so on—around which religions can converge. However, there also needs to be the recognition of *private liminalities*. That is, apart from the dense articulations and demarcations by theologians or religious authorities, religious people meet religious others in day-to-day occurrences, moments, and events, some significant, others mundane. In the midst of the ambiguity of ordinariness, perhaps each finds a broken middle that they can inhabit.

Might we also say that disinterest or a 'passivity beyond passivity' is a dispiriting attitude for encountering the religious other? That is, if the meeting of religions is one of mutual self-renunciation or a 'holy middle' then there ceases to be a meeting at all. Moreover, encounters between religions and the religious other can involve a plethora of sights, sounds, rituals, practices, architectures, and cultural oddities. Finding an effective focal point or mode of connectivity with the religious other may be something that can involve the mutual recognition of the anodyne temporal phenomena of religions as much as dwelling on their ultimate concerns. Further, if engagement between religions and the religious other are to be *active* rather than passive then, rather than seeking a greater 'purity', there might be

---

[66] This is Rose's account of Taylor in *The Broken Middle*: Rose, *Mourning*, 284.
[67] Rose, *Mourning*, 284.

something more contingent and occasional. In his chapter, Jeffery Long's reference to the *Gita* and the overgrown fig tree creates a vivid image that evokes a *natural* sense of relation and development; meeting the other involves a complex negotiation that need not be predetermined.

The relationship between religions and their religious others is also something to be negotiated within a specific tradition. That is, there is the importance of *intra*-religious conversation in the meeting of religions. Ostensibly, this refers to conversations internal to a specific religious community or, perhaps, a kind of intra-textuality, but we might go further by claiming that this is a matter for the individual as well. In another important essay, Jonathan Z. Smith argues that 'otherness' is not a descriptive category but rather 'a political and linguistic project'.[68] Moreover, rather than thinking of the other as an ontological category, or an 'absolute state of being', Smith wants to accentuate the situational context that gives meaning to otherness: 'Something is other only in respect to something else.'[69] It is important to think of the 'proximate other'—both in the situational sense but also in terms of similarity. The real problem of the other, then, is not that he is something wholly alien, mysterious, or 'not like us', quite the contrary, it is when 'he is TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US, or when he claims to BE-US'. In which case, the urgency is not a matter of finding an appropriate location for the other but to 'situate ourselves'[70] in relation to that otherness. Again, Barnes seeks to move away from what he sees as rather monolithic debates in the theology of religions and reflect on the attitude and posture of the Christian self towards otherness. He writes: 'The crucial questions . . . are about what happens to Christian identity when the self encounters the other by crossing the threshold into another world.'[71] This is both a narrative that concerns the effect of the other on self-identity and, perhaps more profoundly, it betrays an inner dialogue of the *self with itself*—an internalized narrative. Such ideas are articulated by writers like Paul Ricoeur in his monumental *Oneself as Another*, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *The Prose of the World*. The experience of the other is actually something that is found within my own self. For Ricoeur, the identity of the self is inextricably bound up in the presence of the other, selfhood and otherness are inseparable, and one may also be able to see the other as being like oneself. In a series of provocative insights, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> As I have said, we shall never understand how it is that another can appear to us; what is before us is an object. We must understand that the problem does not lie there but is to understand how I can make myself into two, how I can decenter myself. *The experience of the other is always that of a replica of myself, of a response to myself* . . . It is in the very depths of myself that this strange articulation with the other is fashioned. The mystery of the other is nothing but the mystery of myself . . . For the miracle of perception of another lies first of all

---

[68] Jonathan Z. Smith, 'What a Difference a Difference Makes', in Smith, *Relating Religion*, 275.
[69] Smith, 'What a Difference', 275.
[70] Smith, 'What a Difference', 275.
[71] Barnes, *Theology and Dialogue*, 23.

in that everything which qualifies as a being to my eyes does so only by coming, whether directly or not, within my range, by reckoning in my experience, entering my world.[72]

Even though Merleau-Ponty also stresses the other as external to the self, in the passage above he perceives that the encounter with the other is not merely a disruption that we apprehend outside of ourselves: it is not about exteriority *in toto*. Instead, having brought the other 'within my range', I manage to decentre myself and construct an experience of the other within myself. So, connecting this to our focus on 'religion and the religious other', the meeting with the religious other ought to be a profoundly *intra*-religious discussion; or even a matter for individual religious believers and their personal internalization of meetings with others. This does not involve reading the other as stranger or alien, or that which is somewhere distant geographically; but rather it involves self-recognition, empathy, sympathy, and perhaps a new sense of psychological proximity that makes the other 'understood' or, at least, brings the other more fully into view. However, here we have to balance, or at least acknowledge, two different imperatives: the need for an authentic reading of the other, *and* the need to cultivate positive attitudes of encounter with otherness. It is not clear that these two imperatives are complementary. If 'empathy' is about attempting to step inside or appropriate the experience of the other, then this may be difficult to reconcile with an equal imperative to uphold the autonomy or mystery of the other—to avoid hermeneutical violence by leaving the other pristine and *unread*.

Universal Visions and Finite Encounters

Elizabeth Harris's chapter on Buddhism in this section highlights a tension that seems to be held in common by many religions and their encounters with the religious other; this is a tension that is also indicated in other chapters—such as David Thomas's on Islam and Schmidt-Leukel's on Christianity. It relates to the possibility that the efficacy of the other's spiritual practices and observances might be acknowledged, admired, or even incorporated into their own religious tradition, but at the same time those practices are not understood on their own terms but are *subsumed* into the host narratives. Moreover, even if there is some form of mutual admiration or borrowing that occurs between traditions, we might ask how deep are such engagements with the religious other? Or, how influential are the teachings of one tradition when it comes to causing profound shifts in belief or even wholehearted adoption by the religious other? The British theologian, John Milbank, explains this with reference to the universality already present in *world* religions: 'The major religions are notoriously not

---

[72] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World,* ed. Claude Lefort, tr. John O'Neill (London: Heinemann, 1984), 135 (emphasis mine).

so susceptible to conversion, or accommodation, precisely because they already embody a more abstract, universal, and deterritorialized cultural framework…'[73] In the context of Buddhism, another scholar, Karl Schmeid, is sceptical concerning the influence of Christian belief on Buddhist teaching:

> They [Buddhists] tend to assume that even though Christianity may pose radical challenges to Buddhism in certain practical areas, it is quite inadequate when it comes to a philosophical understanding of reality. They expect to learn from Christian ethics and social involvement, from its active spirit and its methods of propagation, but such elements have nothing to do with the essence of religion as they see it, and there, at the core, Buddhism is unsurpassed.[74]

In the case of Buddhist–Christian relations the differences are perhaps even more acute when we consider the significant ontological differences (e.g. 'becoming' rather than 'being'). However, looking more broadly, this point highlights the *non-negotiable* aspects that are found in religions. What is precisely non-negotiable in some traditions is often difficult to pin down, and may actually be more culturally or historically determined and contingent than ontologically fixed.[75] Moreover, this is not allowed to be *rooted* in the other's own system in such a way that it would disrupt the core foundational beliefs of the host tradition—ultimately the core beliefs of a host tradition are not 'surpassed' by the other. Here there is simultaneously both a complementarity and competitiveness in the relationship. However, even this dilemma seems to assume some kind of parity between traditions in order for the other to be recognized and practices compared and absorbed. Thus a deeper question concerns *criteria*. How might the relationship between religions be classified? Whereas the authors of the subsequent chapters in this section might be able to cite authorities or canonical reference points for their pieces, the question is whether or not it is possible to do the same for what ostensibly looks like an abstract reflection on the essence of religion and the dynamics of relationships. Ellen Armour warns that '[t]he task of finding a conceptual vocabulary for religion that can cross cultures and contexts without falling prey to reductionism has proven an elusive task'.[76]

Reductionism may well be a consequence of trying to find commonality, but the practice of articulating an essence may actually be less offensive in this respect than *anodyne*. In this case, the danger is not so much the imposition of a homogeneity that irons out difference but

---

[73]   Milbank, 'End of Dialogue', 180. As a variant on this, it could be suggested that the sheer wealth of experience, throughout long histories, means that explanations for the presence of the other are already fully established in the narrative of a major tradition. That is, it might not just be because of 'de-territorialization' or abstraction, but because of a long acquaintance with religious others that have set many *precedents*.

[74]   Karl Schmied, 'Jesus in Recent Buddhist Writings Published in the West', in Perry Schmidt-Leukel *et al.* (eds), *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus* (St Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1999), 138.

[75]   Or rather, the non-negotiable aspects of a tradition may have assumed their status due to historical factors leading to *ingrained* ideas and practices just as much as fundamental creeds and belief statements.

[76]   Ellen Armour, 'Theology in Modernity's Wake', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74/1 (2006), 9.

more that such homogeneities turn out to be notoriously weak and content-less—they possess little power to iron out anything. This may be applicable to liberal theories of religion, but Jeffrey Long's discussion of Hinduism in this section of the book raises the question of a much more culturally ingrained form of homogeneity and essentialism. Radhakrishnan's view of Hinduism as 'religion itself' in its most basic and universal sense is hardly an anodyne feature in the political context of contemporary India. Moreover, it seems impossible to assess what religion is in its most *excellent* form. Whilst a more general enquiry might presume that it can draw on the range of examples evidenced in different faiths, the question remains as to *what* these examples illustrate.

In his discussion about the concept of a focal point, Frank Hoffman argues that the difficulty with finding a common focal point for religions is that it results in empty generalizations that have no real descriptive power. By using 'only *etic* categories…there will be "common ground" found in all religions but it will be so cliché ridden as to border on the vacuous'.[77] Nevertheless, such problems emerge when there is the search for a single focal point which is supposed to account for *all* the data. It is entirely possible to imagine that, just as the use of theory in the academic study of religion can serve to stake out provisional 'conceptual territories' in order to develop understanding, the actual encounter between religions may be facilitated by the acknowledgement of provisional or limited 'grounds' for meeting. Many of the most recent strategies in interreligious meeting have concentrated on distracting attention away from absolute concerns towards more limited contexts and objectives. So, for practitioners of comparative theology, the goal is to immerse oneself in an aspect of the other faith, perhaps a particular sacred text.[78] That is, concentrating on small localized areas and concerns rather than macro theological issues. Even less defined (deliberately so) are the surprising and improvised meetings between Abrahamic faiths created within the practice of Scriptural Reasoning which might indicate 'deep reasonings' that are not built upon fixed theological agreement or criteria but on friendships made from regular engagement and conversation.

Edward Kessler's chapter in this section reminds us of space and territory. In his case, geographical space denotes a covenantal relationship with different groups and the question of *territory* becomes another focal point for both encounter and conflict. Space is an opportunity for creative meeting. Spaces are important for the practice of Scriptural Reasoning where the idea of campus, house (with different places of worship in different religions: mosques, synagogues, temples), and tent (nomadic meeting ground) are differentiated. I have suggested elsewhere that the meanings that might be generated are created by the people that meet in these spaces whenever and wherever they happen. That is, through the frisson of encounter, engagement, friendship, commonality, or disagreement, *something*

---

[77] Frank Hoffman, 'The Concept of a Focal Point in Models for Inter-Religious Understanding', in James Kellenberger (ed.), *Inter-Religious Models and Criteria* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 174.

[78] See Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

emerges—apart from formal focal categories.[79] Additionally, what our discussion has suggested is that spaces are rarely pure. That is, they can be 'holy', 'broken', 'mended', or 'negotiated'.

I noted above Martin Kavka's observation that religious studies as an academic discipline was historically wedded to a sense of responsibility to *translate* religions for the sake of peace. Underpinning this was an assumption that uncovering a deeper unity between religious traditions was an important component in accomplishing mutual recognition. The work of French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, has been described as a philosophy of translation. Ricoeur does not understand translation to be a mere act of linguistic facility. In the first essay in his *On Translation* (2006), he describes translation as 'work' that is deeply connected to an experience of gain and loss. There is a contrast between the urge to gain a 'perfect translation'—a gain in the sense that there would be no loss or sacrifice of meaning involved in either language in the process—and the acceptance that loss is inevitable because of 'the impassable difference of the peculiar and the foreign'.[80] The search for what Ricoeur calls a 'recaptured universality' is an attempt to 'abolish the memory of the foreign and maybe the love of one's own language, hating the mother tongue's provincialism'.[81] The inability to find an absolute translation produces a 'mourning', however in this very mourning is also to be found happiness when there is an acknowledgement of 'the difference between adequacy and equivalence, equivalence without adequacy'.[82] Instead of trying to gain the 'adamantine logos of pure correspondences',[83] there is 'linguistic hospitality...where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's own welcoming house'.[84] Underlying this is a sense of what might be called an intimacy with regard to seeing the other. That is, Ricoeur's mention of our own welcoming house points to an inner hospitality both in terms of the intra-textuality of communities and the personal worlds of individuals. In trying to locate this in the classic typology, perhaps Ricoeur's thoughts above are, conceptually, a relative of 'inclusivist' strategies that seek to view the other from *within* the scheme of one's own faith. He recognizes the sense of loss in trying—without possibility of success—to find the space for 'pure correspondences', but nonetheless describes an adventure in hospitality that is happy to settle for 'equivalence without adequacy'. The virtue of this is that, rather than deferring personal responsibility to the middle, so to speak, or imagining that the *real* ground for meeting the religious other is to be found in a third space, it forces us to review the resources for hospitality, basic character, and authenticity in our own traditions. In similar fashion, the postmodern sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, suggested that a postmodern loss of ethical objectivity or certainty symbolized by rational ethical 'codes' ends up, ironically, compelling the need for moral responsibility and engagement.[85]

---

[79] See my *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions*.
[80] Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 9.
[81] Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 9.
[82] Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 10.
[83] Kearney, 'Introduction: Ricoeur's Philosophy of Translation', p. xvii.
[84] Ricoeur, *On Translation*, 10.
[85] Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 34–7.

Conclusion

This chapter has wrestled with two aspects. The first aspect concerned the validity of 'religion and the religious other' as a general topic. Whilst recognizing the critics who are suspicious of the modern heritage of *religio*, it seems possible to propose that a more general interest emerges out of both a religious desire to transcend finitude and point beyond the temporal and contingent, as well as reflecting a more academic intellectual interest in theory and the philosophical practice of de-contextualization. From a religious perspective, I argued that speaking in general terms about religions and the religious other may simply emerge from a 'realist' view of religious language and expectations—and this is what gives licence to a discourse outside of (or 'above') culture. If this first aspect concerned the general vision of 'religion and the religious other', the second aspect sought to reflect on the practice of meeting the other. Here, the concrete actualities of engagement are more complex, demanding, and 'rich'. In fact, attempting to set up a pristine, neutral, or abstracted meeting space is problematic and potentially undesirable. Reflecting on the practice of meeting the other, one becomes wary of dealing with abstract *intensities* or, as Gillian Rose put it, 'holy middles'. Further, I suggested that if the meetings with 'others' are to be active rather than *sterilized* then, rather than seeking a greater purity in such meetings, we might settle for something more contingent and occasional. Paradoxically, even if the very idea of 'religions and the religious other' is inspired by a universal vision and outward-look, in our meetings we don't look for what Ricoeur called the 'perfect translation'. Our engagement with the concrete other ends up being a discourse of finitude where universal ideas or doctrines are often suspended or bracketed out.

Further Reading

Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds), *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2011).

Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2008).

Patrik Fridlund, Lucie Kaennel, and Catherina Stenquist (eds), *Plural Voices: Intradisciplinary Perspectives on Interreligious Issues* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

Hendrick Vroom, Henry Jansen, and Jerald Gort (eds), *Religions View Religions: Explorations in Pursuit of Understanding* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

CHAPTER 3

···

Hinduism and the Religious Other

JEFFERY D. LONG

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

An historical review of Hindu relations with the religious other engages one with a variety of issues that have both theoretical and theological implications. What are the boundaries of Hinduism? Is it only the ideology of a localized, hereditary priesthood that has successfully suffused Indian civilization with its caste-based, fundamentally exclusionary social vision? Or is it a broader concept, with the word Hinduism being an unfortunate geographically and ethnically limiting term for a progressive universalism that aspires to include all otherness in a boundless unity, incorporating all religions and all philosophies—even modern science— into its vast vision of existence? Or is Hinduism something between these two opposite poles: a civilizational and cultural ethos that aspires to universality while it simultaneously affirms its deep rootedness in a specific geographic space and in a specific historical community? The aim of this chapter is not to resolve these questions. As phrased, they presuppose a singular essence of Hinduism whose nature can be definitively settled: that Hinduism *is* this or that. The reality is that the term Hinduism is used in many ways. The aim here is a sense of how those persons who are called Hindus have related to the religious other historically.

Hindu attitudes towards the religious other encompass a vast spectrum. On the one hand—and as with the members of other ancient, widespread religious communities—there are Hindus whose attitudes towards the religious other have been characterized primarily by fear and hatred, and who have sought to minimize their interactions with the other. There are also Hindus who have engaged with the other polemically, not out of hatred, but to advance ideas. On the other hand, there are Hindus who express an acceptance of the religious other so radical as to challenge the very notion of a singular tradition with set boundaries: who see