Comment

The Discourse of Christianity and The Other

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For the sake of simplicity let me begin with two alternative, possibly opposed, propositions about Christianity as a cultural discourse in which capacity it sets an epistemic agenda which actively guides the practices and beliefs of its adherents:

1) Christianity is culture in a totalistic sense. It is the defining element of that which is adjudged (implicitly or not) as culture and facilitates precisely the categorisation of everything as either familiar, and therefore inclusive, or as alien. Its totalising capacity forms a perception held by those within the discourse such that it assumes culture, itself understood as an implicit and explicit set of beliefs and practices, to be subsumed in its identity beneath the all embracing legitimising structure that is Christianity. A more provocative way to state this proposition is with the assertion that what is not culture is not Christianity, a tendency which has often asserted itself throughout history, especially during those periods where this belief is backed up by a conviction of the intrinsic rightness of the imperialistic expansion of one culture over another. This way of paraphrasing the condition of Christianity as a paradigm for culture is slightly different from the former in that it places evaluation above categorisation, although in the final analysis both will entail evaluation and categorisation.

Both of these perceptions permit the existence of non-culture or anti-culture, entities which may be identical or different depending on the specific case. The way in which the recognition of such entities is made entails an implicit definition of culture (as corresponding to the values and practices of Christianity) and the conceptual instruments whereby the definition can be imposed. A definition of culture which privileges Christianity over culture results in the confinement of the *Other* to the sewer of history, a procedure which allows the establishment of enterprises which will it up from this receptacle. A recent innovation, but one still in line with this judgement of culture, has been the classification of the *Other* into a set of intellectual issues - social justice, racism, poetical liberation, etc. - defined as such by the Christian discourse current at the time. When fragmented in this manner, the *Other* can be subjected to a subtle form of imperialism which

operates either by inclusivistic tendencies or an absolute alienation. The *Other* either becomes subject to a process of creolisation leading to complete acceptance or is tolerated in its rejection.

2) The second view of culture is one where Christianity constitutes one part of culture in a conglomeration with other elements which are also given acknowledgment as defining elements of the culture. The possibility of an empirical instance of this position might be nothing more than fiction as it implies an almost perfect pluralism, a phenomenon virtually existent only in the imagination. Even if such a cultural situation could be located, tendencies would arise fostering cultural exclusivity, especially where a particular group, assured of its conceptual uniqueness, is numerically inferior to others.

In this essay I will be making reference only to the first of these views and I will be focussing on the capacity to define religion and religions which is contingent upon this view. This narrows the intent of the essay down to an examination of the most difficult area of the *Other* for Christianity, the non-Christian religions, as ultimately they must be deemed its competitors or equals, even when they are not immediately recognised as competitive epistemologies. To contain such alternatives is to expel or tame them. Of these alternatives the latter is certainly the least insidious as it allows for the retention of the alien religion whereas the former attempts to redefine the *Other* *to be anything than what it is. In fact, it makes the Other* available for the imposition of all kinds of meanings. Paradoxical? But the fundamental characteristic of the *Other* has to be its constant capacity for re-definition. In Religious Studies, a regrettably vague expression for a body of knowledge still struggling to assume disciplinary status, this re-definition takes the form of the re-classification of something as an object of study within the particular terms of the Christianist discourse which engenders such classifications.

Hidden within this penchant for classification is a strategy to highlight Christianity as *the religion* and the others merely as *the religions*, which then assume a pigmy like status with respect to the former. An implicit part of this process is the active eschewal of evaluative positions, a position really veiling an evaluative stance which does gives shape to the entire procedure. This might just be because the attribution of something as the *Other* is certainly evaluative in itself. Distinguishing it as not being the *Other* is even more so, because the making of such a distinction takes away its potentiality for uniqueness, even if a cultural entity can never precisely be this. Evaluation is always present. What is not is a reflectiveness of this evaluative tendency.

The aim of the present commentarial note is to lay bare the strongly ideological position taken in the latest *Australian Religion Studies Review* and the pamphlet advertising the forthcoming AASR conference, both documents offering strong Christianist views and thereby allowing us a clear perspective as to how the *Other* is marginalised. In addition to the annual conference, the *REVIEW* is the external face of the AASR and reflects the manner in which the association conceives its role and more pointedly, but less easy to document, how it perceives the study of religion in a normative sense. Normative perhaps, but of easy practical application. Whether I can finally depict a convincing argument about the *REVIEW*'s utilisation of the tendency to categorise certain forms of knowledge as the *Other*, remains

for the reader to judge. That an essay such as this had to be written at all is indicative of the paradigmatic positioning of the academic study of religion in this country, a positioning which has always been discernible within an arc moving away from or towards a Christianist discourse. The latter is surely a discourse which has major implications for the study of religions other than Christianity as for the latter itself.

The configuration of material in the last issue of the *REVIEW* testifies vividly to the general strategies arising from the epistemological position of a Christianist discourse encompassed within the framework I have just advanced in the introduction to this essay. Most striking in this regard is the dominance accorded in the *REVIEW* to the treatment, a noun I will have cause to qualify later in this comment, of the World Council of Churches Seventh Assembly held in Canberra in February 1991. Though it is perhaps excessive to claim that the remainder of the *REVIEW* must be read in light of the precedent established by its initial section, the books reviewed in the final section of the *REVIEW* and the categories for the listing of the Publications in Religion 1990-91 confirm the shaping influence of the set of thematic categories anticipated in the initial section. This means that the entire content of the *REVIEW* is enframed by Christianist material, a fact which makes it difficult to resile from the impression that this issue of the *REVIEW* has become a medium of communication serving a purpose different from that which should be expected of an academic association devoted to the study of world religions as opposed to *religion* in the singular.

An analysis of the configuration of the *REVIEW*'s contents must focus on at least the two following areas:

1) The content of the material published in it.

2) The style of presentation of this material.

These elements of the text will be mutually influential. A slab of content with a strong theological flavour, especially where it is directed towards an audience of variable knowledge in the areas of Theology and Religious Studies, which readily adopts the use of a variety of rhetorical devices will facilitate a strong impression of conviction in the material which is being communicated. Homilies, emotive language, hidden language and formulaic expressions will come into play as part of this rhetorical assault. As a contrast, in an academic discourse an eschewal of stark rhetorical devices is necessary to confer upon the piece of writing the fiction of objectivity for which scholarship so desperately yearns. At its most obvious this produces a constant reliance upon the passive to drive away any lingering feelings of individual authorship, a rhetorical device, paradoxically, of very high currency.

The section of the *REVIEW* which sets the tone of the entire publication is enframed within two identical quotations:

'Come Holy Spirit - Renew the Whole Creation' (p.5 and p.31; cf.p24)

Here is the crux of the problem. On the one hand, this is a statement of absolute specificity for those who operate within the Christianist discourse, a consideration that causes a precise delimitation of one class of reader for which this *REVIEW* is intended. On the other hand, it is of such generality as to create an ambiguity as to whether it inscribes simply the intention of the WCC or is inclusive

of the *Review* as well, and through it of the AASR.

The first occurrence of this statement is at the end of the brief editorial (?) summary which introduces the entire feature on the WCC. In this summary the charter of the WCC is first described and then a representative list of the titles of groups, many of them obscure churches, which were represented at the assembly is given. This mode of presentation forms a perfect pretext for the principal themes - the present diversity of Christian churches and 'The Quest for Unity' - given in the subsequent discussions found in this section of the *REVIEW*, themes which confer a discernible coherence over the entire feature. At the end of this summary we find our first reference to the *Other*, and it occurs in a form which portrays an attempt to exert some control over the *Other*. This is a reference to a **multi-faith consultation.**

The second occurrence of the frame statement is given in commentarial guise in the reflective article of 'Tricia Blombery:

'If the reluctance to confront basic assumptions I witnessed at the assembly and the lack of fire for ecumenism referred to by Emilio Castro prevail it may come to little. Perhaps the WCC planners had a hidden agenda and a more personal prayer in selecting their theme "Come Holy Spirit - Renew the Whole Creation!"' (:31)

As it stands this judgement offers a clear, potentially polemical, evaluation on the success of the assembly in its achievement of its stated goals listed in the statement that begins this Feature on the WCC. Yet the point I wish to make is that the inclusion of the assembly theme here effects an enframement of the whole Feature within a call to action, or a theological assertion, that goes beyond the WCC itself to embrace the entire creation, where the word 'creation' is clearly loaded with very strong theological implications meaningful to those who share the assumptions of the WCC. In addition, because the theme reaches beyond the single event described in the Feature, it inscribes this Feature into some kind of open ended view of history conceptualised in a very general, nevertheless, specific theological sense which appeals to one particular group who share its implied assumptions rather than to another group who are excluded from it. That is, if the Feature on the WCC has its referential base in a specific event (although we must concede that it also functions as a metaphor of the church, a continuing event, as a whole), the framing statements universalise this event and what it represents in such a way as to subsume beneath it another set of categories contingent upon the existence of the AASR as a professional association.

The theological ambit of the framing statement is immediately obvious and is confirmed by all the articles included in the feature. Evangelising and emotive tones are intermingled with implied polemic to give the entire feature a resonance of what must have taken place in the disputes occurring at the assembly itself. Here are some instances of this:

'Few would have dared to hope for the whole hearted way in which the Roman Catholic Church has contributed to the ecumenical movement...Even the opponents of the WCC have been pushed to think and act ecumenically...' (Breward, p.14)

'But an assembly of the WCC in this country gives Australian Christians an opportunity, that otherwise most would not have, of recognising that the Church of Jesus Christ is more diverse, vital and exciting than we have cared to imagine, of realising that we are part of that global Church, and of identifying how that global dimension has an impact on our understanding of what it is to be faithful to God's mission' (Williamson, p.18).

'The World Council of Churches has a knack of being taken too seriously by those who disapprove of it - mainly conservative Christians, whether evangelical or catholic; of not being taken seriously at all by those - mainly in the media and academia - whose secularist predispositions blinker them to its true significance...' (May, p22)

'Neither is it possible, or appropriate here to express adequately the sensations and experiences of being part of a vast crowd of delegates, visitors, press and observers gathered from around the world to share in worship to invoke the intervention of the Holy Spirit to renew the abused and shattered creation' (Blombery, p.24)

The evangelising tone of these extracts, a random selection from many, speak for themselves. None of the articles in the Feature on the WCC are distanced reporting (although Blombery's might have some claim to be defined in this way) of the WCC assembly as an event, rather they all take an engaged, or faith, position which reflects their own theological grounding and confidence in the ecumenical process. In the appropriate place such statements are right and proper. However, the *REVIEW* is not an appropriate place. It represents the public face of a professional body, the brief of which is to promote the study of all religions, not simply of one religion or of **the** religion or of *Faiths*. I am not arguing that articles in the *Review* should not reflect engaged positions. All academic writing, even that which most strives for objectivity, takes an engaged position towards its subject matter and its putative audience. What I am concerned about is that the specific kind of engagement manifested in the Feature has been treated as normative in many of the circles in which Religious Studies is practised in this country. The implicit agenda for the study of other cultures and religions which arises out of this engaged position is one which continues to play a leading role in Religious Studies, a point I will elaborate upon in the next paragraph. For the moment it simply needs to be noted that this specific form of engagement is obvious from the sharpness with which the evaluation of the WCC is presented in the Feature, but also, and not surprisingly, in the kinds of books reviewed at the back of the *Review* and the list of publications of members of the AASR also given in this issue of the *Review*. Still, the point needs to be made because of the ever present tendency for the AASR in various of its modes to operate, with differing degrees of intensity, within a clear Christianist discourse.

As is so often the case the obvious conceals the subtle and possibly more ideologically marked elements of the discourse. These elements can be reduced to two:

1) The definition of the study of religions from a Christianist framework and the production of a concept of the *Other* contingent upon this.

2) The reduction of the study of religion as a generic category of culture to the study of, and engagement with, particular issues within contemporary culture defined as issues specifically by the Christianist discourse.

I have used the term 'Christianist' in the description of both of these elements, an adjective which encompasses in its meaning a paradigmatic perception of the way in which all other religions derive meaning (however this might be defined), plus the attendant attitude expressed towards non-Christian religions, an attitude best summarised with the words 'multi-faith dialogue'. A Christianist approach is one which cannot just be reduced to that of making available a scholarly agenda for the theological study of non-Christian religions. It is quintessentially an approach which propagates a tolerance towards other religions, but expels them to one side by placing them into a unitary category, except when it analyses some aspect of a non-Christian religion in order to provide evidence of this tolerance. In amplifying this definition of the word Christianist I am not saying that the intellectual discourse associated with this word necessarily promotes intolerance. Rather, my intent is to stress that the study of non-Christian religions is divorced from the fundamental concern of the Christianist discourse: indeed the study of the *Other* is something barely acceptable within the discourse. Where other religions are brought in it is where they are categorised as 'spiritualities' of equal standing with Christianity, the implied model for all 'spiritualities'. Consider Blombery's paraphrase of delegates' comments on a possible apostasy uttered by a Korean theologian,

'Others entering the debate... saying the WCC represents a plurality of cultures and experiences and should accept a plurality of theological methodologies;...;it is time to move away from rationalistic theology to recognise that people, communities and cultures and essentially spiritual; notions of paganism are relative;...'(:27 my editing).

The WCC, and therefore those who endorse the ecumenism associated with it, must purport openly to take non-Christian religions seriously as ecumenism should by its charter and its spirit extend beyond a concern with Christian pluralism to religious pluralism as a whole. But the latter becomes a highly ambiguous area for the Christianist discourse. Instances of the range of attitudes I am alluding to here are found in the following passages taken from the articles included in the Feature.

'There are at least two sources of diversity among Christians... the second, because God has created great diversity in nature and in human life, and Christ reveals his ubiquity as he relates to the wide variety of human personalities and cultures"(Black, p.12 my editing).

'Publications show a capacity to listen to the Christian experience of other cultures in a quite remarkable way'.(Breward, p.16)

'The visionary goal of the ecumenical movement also has been, is, and always will be focussed on the unity, peace, wholeness - the shalom/salaam - of the oikumene, the whole inhabited earth'.(Williamson, p.21)

'... of the WCC...and it is continually developing relationships with virtually

every other religious tradition on earth, especially through its Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths".(May, p.22)

'... a spirituality of the land shared by many other indigenous peoples (May p.23).

'... the dialogue with Judaism continually frustrated by the intransigence of Israeli politics; the dialogue with Islam, seemingly snuffed out by the desert wind of Arab passion...'(May p.24)

'".. a tendency towards syncretism with non-Christian religions".

The second of these threats was brought into living experience...'.(Blombery, p.26)

'...it is the task of every church to Christianise the culture: but not to accept and absorb it uncritically...'(Blombery, p.27)

The factor which gives coherence to each of these statements is the implicit assertion of difference and otherness, highlighted with the highest motivation by the barely articulated vision of the church moving through and across a diverse range of cultures, a task exemplified with concision in the title of the WCC sub-unit called *Dialogue with people of Other Living Faiths.* Nobody could object to dialogues of the type envisaged by the existence of this sub-unit. Inter-faith dialogue is a legitimate enterprise for any religion which manifests a strong missionary drive and which also recognises the integrity of a plurality of cultures. Where it does become problematic is when it unwittingly becomes the basis for a discourse determinative of the kinds of questions to be asked in the study of non-Christian religions.

What can be said about difference and otherness? This distinction and its epistemological implications are at the crux of the present article. The problem is best summed up by the words *Dialogue with people of Other Living Faiths.* These words immediately oppose Christianity, as the initiator of the dialogue, with the Living Faiths as the recipients of the dialogue, definitely considered here as a bloc because of their qualification in the title by the two adjectives - Other and Living. The function of this dialogue is to bring representatives of Christianity into contact with different faith positions current today insofar as they are embodied in their practitioners. Faith and spirituality, as living entities or living relativities, figure large in the articles contained in the Feature on the WCC. They are concepts which testify to the uniqueness of religion as a cultural phenomenon, a uniqueness which, for the authors, is a quality which renders the *Other* in non-Christian religions certainly less foreign than it might otherwise be. As applied concepts or even as epistemes from which explorations into the *Other* can be undertaken, they have the advantage of providing a common posturing point facilitating a controlled observation of the non-Christian religions and the plurality of Christian churches. The plurality and disunity that defines the contemporary situation of Christianity provides a familiar platform from the which the disunity in the *Other* can be addressed and brought under control. Both words - faith and spirituality - are most at home within a Christianist discourse and would be easily recognised as powerful concepts by most Christians. Above all they are strongly ideological

and bespeak a pre-judgement about the ontological reality of a cultural category called religion, irrespective of whether the entity which can be categorised as such has an ontological reality in terms of the assumptions raised by the words faith and spirituality. In a symbolic universe where one religion is accorded a privileged status as the bearer of the Truth, it is a necessary concomitant that there be found other religions which can attest to the reality of this Truth.

As an academic discipline, the History of Religions is only required to make the claim that religion as a phenomenon of culture is worthy of study, irrespective of whether this phenomenon can lay claim to an ontological base. The truth or falsity of the latter proposition is irrelevant as a pre-condition for the study of non-Christian religion, but it is not so for the very recognition of them as religions by those whose recognition of something as a religion is dependent upon their discovery of faith and spirituality in this thing. Nor does it matter whether it is a plurality or one. That it is a recognised category within (and without) a specific culture is a sufficient condition for its acceptance as an object of academic concern.

Besides the coherence to the Feature given by the implicit foregrounding of the articles in the Feature in the problems of difference and otherness, other factors must be taken into consideration in isolating the complete inventory of rhetorical effects found in the articles contained in the Feature and the referential base which such effects serve. Beyond this task, there is another which highlights what is a central point for this article, the Feature's putative audience and the expectations which that audience might be felt to hold. The discrepancy between the specific audience being targeted by the Feature and the implied audience - implied, that is, by the author's of the articles - goes right to the heart of my concern about the discourse operating in the *REVIEW* and, but at a more oblique and distant level, in Religious Studies in Australia. Briefly put, this concern is that the *REVIEW* and the underlying conception of Religious Studies in this country are both being dictated by a discourse which, whilst absolutely legitimate in its own sphere, is more attuned to the concerns of evangelistic theology than it is with either the study of the non-Christian religions or academic theology.

Where are these rhetorical devices which both complement and extend beyond the content of the respective articles in the Feature? The easiest such devices to isolate are those specimens of language which point to an exclusivist group as the source and the target of the respective articles. The precise, if general, identity of this audience is given away in a statement of enthusiasm in Breward's article, where commenting on the holding of the Assembly in Canberra, he writes,

'It will offer Australian Christians a once in a lifetime opportunity to host a variety of Christian visitors. They could bring badly needed insight into the task of proclaiming the Gospel in our multi-cultural society, even if such insights are expressed in rather tortuous language' (p.16 I have added the italics).

Given as this is in the third person, it might be taken as one observer's comment on possible opportunities for Christians attendant upon the publicity associated with and the spiritual significance of the WCC. Yet its partiality is immediately signalled by the occurrence of the first person pronoun in the genitive.

Whilst this particular usage of such a pronoun may be ambiguous here, given the confusion as to whether its sense should be taken as pertaining to 'Christians' or to 'multi-cultural society', similar types of usages in other of the articles allow of no such ambiguity. In the articles of Williamson, in particular, and of Blombery, to a much lesser extent, the first person pronoun in the plural is used in such a way as to delimit clearly and in a potentially exclusivistic manner the audience of the respective articles. It is a usage which unites the author with the participants in the assembly, with the larger body of Christians who might supposedly sustain an interest in the WCC and finally, if tangentially, with the readers of the *REVIEW*. This means that the authors' concerns become the concerns of the members of the AASR. The limited audience which they address becomes the wider (or narrower?) audience of the AASR.

Two further rhetorical devices are resorted to in the Feature to develop the potentialities for an exclusive audience and a privileged reading which is only available in a fragmentary sense to those not part of the exclusivity. The first of these is the occurrence of a concentrated vocabulary which derives from the technical vocabulary built around ecumenism during the last three decades. This is a vocabulary built around several fundamental referents, the most obvious ones being the interrelated themes of unity and disunity, and a third, one which is more subtle and potentially threatening than these two, namely, the nature of Christianity as a bounded cultural institution. The concentrated vocabulary is so much in evidence in all the articles in the Feature that examples need not be given. Might it not be objected, though, that a concentration of this kind is only to be expected given that the thematic context for the Feature portrays itself most successfully to its adherents in terms of this vocabulary. But surely this is the point. A rarefied vocabulary of ecumenism, evangelism, sectarian division and unity, is comprehensible, of course, to a wide audience, but its fullness of ampleur, its richness of discord and its call to activity, must only resonate amongst a specialised audience educated in the debates, the aspirations and the ethical concerns of the WCC.

The second rhetorical device, one which simultaneously heightens the distance of the Feature from the putative audience of the *REVIEW* and evokes the urgency of the debate for the privileged reader, is the evangelising tone of most of the Feature, a tone which occasionally lingers into polemic, but which even if it does not go this far, always inspires the feeling of deferred positions awaiting full disclosure at the appropriate time. In one sense this evangelising tone and the concentration of language it brings with it as its principal rhetorical weapon undergird the cohesive devices working to cohere the whole Feature. This cohesion only makes sense if the method of presenting the WCC is one which constantly evokes its search for unity amidst a consistent process of undermining by rejuvenated divisions. Thus the Feature comes across as receiving its thematic integration from the tight boundary which it sets up for a Christianity which is constantly measuring itself against the *Other* as an entirely alien entity, whilst within this boundary it presents a picture of a deeply fissured body. A method of writing laced with subtle polemic, evangelising persuasion and the language of difference is a perfect metaphor for the situation each article in-

dividually and in concert with all the others seeks to convey. But in creating this mirror of the empirical condition of the WCC through the highly evocative use of style and rhetorical device, the authors, reflecting the underlying discourse in which they find themselves, betray a concern that it is the very nature of Christianity as a religion which is being placed under surveillance. For the image of Christianity developed in the Feature is one conducive to a reception of the non-Christian religions only to the extent that they show a capability to act as a kind of buffer against which the changing profile of Christianity, the latter a condition brought about by the very activity of the WCC, can be explored. Yet here too the vulnerability of Christianity becomes most apparent and gives rise to a correlative tendency to assign that which is not included in it, but is seemingly like it, to the *Other*. Those divisions within Christianity which are brought into such high profile by the WCC assembly sustain a constant perception of the vulnerability of Christianity's perceived uniqueness to the influences coming from non-Christian religions. An extreme example is given in Blombery's article (pp.26-27), though the existence of a unit of the WCC dealing with inter-religious dialogue must itself be a more general reminder of this very perception as dialogue serves to control the approach to other cultural bodies as well as to open up access to them.

It is this perception at the edges, this half present fear of pollution by the *Other*, this simmering apprehension of unforeseen changes which could be engendered by the implicit questioning of Christianity as a cultural institution which underlies the possibility that the *Other* will be always envisaged as a threat, one which can be countered only if it is rendered into a commonality, a standardisation, a unity of concept, that it can be kept at a distance, dazzled by the amazing variety within Christianity.

Like the tightly concentrated vocabulary, the evangelising tone is a metaphor for the WCC itself, even if this is merely an evangelism applied principally to other Christians. This is an evangelism which rests on the dangerous principal of division and in extending itself it must be constantly self-reflexive of its own fissiparous tendency and of the potential fragmentation this could produce. In this view of religion the non-Christian religions must stand out like satellites which cannot really be brought closer. They can only be approached as fundamentally different entities, even if they share a similarity as generic cultural entities, and are, therefore, viewed at close quarters in their difference. Above all they cannot be penetrated because the epistemological gap and the constant vigilance against the compromising of the uniqueness of Christianity prevents anything more than a profound perception of their difference, a difference which is all the more profound and puzzling because other religions do have such family resemblances to Christianity.

Having laid out the rhetorical devices drawn upon by the articles in the Feature and the referential base these seek to disclose, it is time to draw some conclusions about the implications this referential base has for the AASR and the study of religion in Australia. The influence of the Christianist discourse as it is manifested in the Feature is not just restricted to the framing of material about the WCC. The very nature of the discursive principle is the facilitation of a total approach to the study of non-Christian religions. And as I have already suggested, this approach

brings with it, consciously or not, a unification of the non-Christian religions under the ambiguous category of the *Other*, a process which serves a number of purposes in the ecumenical pursuit In its most immediate manifestation it foreshadows a study of religion and the non-Christian religions by means of a charter of current issues, the currency of which is determined within the epistemological framework of the discourse in question.

The academic agenda this produces is very broadly paraphrased in Blombery's own paraphrase of some of the principal concerns of the assembly:

'Much of the discussion and debate was focussed on what I see as 'applied' interests, chiefly the Peace, Justice and Integrity of Creation issues... Besides these, other applied issues such as the environment, the role of women, the place of youth, the opening of Eastern Europe, the situation in the Baltic, political changes in South Africa, the 'differently-abled', which in the planning had looked like fruitful areas to develop, were given little consideration' (p.25; Cf May Col.1.p.23; Breward, Col.1. p.15).

These are issues located at the centre of the political agenda of most first world countries. Whether they are adjudged as secular issues or not is irrelevant here, so too is the question of whether they should always be promoted by a certain brand of Christianity as lying in the main stream of Christian ethics. What is important is the extent to which the discourse which facilitates the ecumenical tendencies of the WCC also locates ethical and political issues at the centre of its understanding of Christianity. Thus a concern for Christian unity goes hand in hand with a particular normative view of culture, the principal thematic elements of which are determined by a particular view of social Christianity.

A concern with the kinds of issues defined by this discourse requires no defence in itself. What does require defence is the transferral of these issues - conceptualised as clusters around which religiously sanctioned action might be performed - into a charter for the study of religion and religions. This transferral is not an explicit thing, but recent issues of the *REVIEW* have, I think, shown with considerable clarity that the *REVIEW* has been treated as a forum where contemporary issues, whether political or social, can be canvassed within the brand of social Christianity established by the discourse I have been describing. This too, incidentally, characterises the kind of approach that has been championed for many years by the Religious Affairs unit of the ABC. What results is a kind of 'applied Christianity' which is inclusive of pastoral concerns, yet goes considerably beyond this to embrace many social justice and gender based issues which are at the centre of the liberal left political agenda of the day. This applied Christianity is especially prevalent in the categories used to classify the Publications in Religion 1989-90, where many of the articles included under the categories of Australian Religion, Ethics and Religion, Migration and Religion, Religion and Education, Sociology of Religion and Women and Religion, have more to do with social justice issues than with either academic theology or the study of non-Christian religions. It also figures in many of the articles in the Feature on the WCC.

It would be an exaggeration to assert that Religious Studies programmes at universities have explicitly taken up the

options established by such a discourse. Nonetheless, the overwhelming importance given to Christianity, an obvious consequence of Australia's heritage as a Christian country, in most departments of Religious Studies in this country, and its treatment in the academic curriculum (and that of recently established secondary curricula) reflects the influence of the Christianist discourse. Its influence is most pronounced in the way the offerings in the curriculum dealing with Christianity are juxtaposed with those relating to the non-Christian religions. In virtually all Religious Studies departments in this country the balance of subjects encompassed by Christianity is at least fifty percent of the whole. Moreover, these subjects are offered as detailed components such as individual subjects on Old Testament or New testament, the totality of which make up the vision of Christianity offered in such departments. In comparison, the treatment of the non-Christian religions is highly fragmented as they are virtually always offered as discrete religious traditions possessing a fictional unity in the face of the variety of the offerings concerning Christianity. Whilst there are possibly justifiable cultural reasons for this, and whilst I am not asking for this part of the curriculum necessarily to be watered down, it does produce an impoverishment in an understanding of the *Other*, where the latter designates the non-Christian religions.

A Brief Response to Greg Bailey

Greg Bailey raises in his paper a perennial problem in the study of religions. Does the study of religions have its own epistemological base? Must it be limited by the epistemologies that may be specific to the various religions? Or is there a meta-religious epistemology?

This debate has had a long history. In terms of Christian history, it has its roots partly in the Christianity and culture debate which has continued since the days of the early church. Tertullian, of course, would have been horrified at the linkage between Christianity and culture which Bailey assumes in his article, and there is no way in which the variety of Christian positions on Christianity and culture can be reduced to the two Bailey presents. One is never sure what Bailey means by 'evangelical' in the paper, but those who would use the term to describe themselves would be least likely to make the links between Christianity and culture that Bailey describes.

Bailey has assumed in his paper that there is a meta-religious epistemology which is usable for the study of religions, although he does not expound the nature of this epistemology. Certainly a phenomenological approach is one example of such an epistemology. I personally believe, however, that the debate on this matter is far from over. Meanwhile, as one of the editors, I do not feel bound to limit the *Review* to those articles which assume a meta-religious epistemology, and am happy to accept articles which make other assumptions.

As a consequence, it does not seem necessary that all articles necessarily exemplify 'the striving for objectivity'. There are occasions when it is desirable that people express aspects of their faith, as they see it. On the other hand, it is im-

portant that the various religions are represented and that different perspective are presented. I would certainly welcome articles from Buddhist, Hindu and other perspective which did so.

We make no apology for featuring the World Council of Churches Assembly in the last *AASR Review*. We believe that it was a significant religious event by any measure of the term, of significance especially to Australia, and to those engaged in religious studies in Australia. We do not agree that a reference at the beginning and end of the feature to the Assembly theme makes the feature a 'call to action' or 'theological assertion'. The references to the theme are descriptive and certainly not proclamatory. The same may be said of each of the articles themselves. The authors do speak personally, and identify themselves clearly with bodies associated with the church. What they write must be understood, and would be understood by most people, within that context. There may be some occasions when authors have unwittingly slid into assuming readers might take a pro-Christian and pro-W.C.C. stance. However, that should not be used to over-ride the fact that the articles are, in general, descriptive in nature, informative in value, and are not, in any sense evangelistic.

I personally do not believe that the World Council of Churches should make any apology for its *Dialogue with Other Living Faiths*. Ecumenism does not necessarily extent to religious pluralism either by its charter or by its spirit, even though it does mean that in concern for the peace and well-being of all people, it seeks to develop relationships with people of non-Christian religions. The WCC is unashamedly Christian in its foundation, and must enter into dialogue from that perspective.

On the other hand, it is important that the editors and contributors to the *Review* come from many traditions. Some have commitments to one particular tradition, while others have commitments to none. Some are committed only to a meta-religious stance. It is important to me that the *Review* contributes to the understanding of the diversity of religious traditions. We hope that Bailey's article is a stimulus to debate, which we, as editors, wish to encourage, and an encouragement to those who can write about traditions other than Christianity to do so.

Philip Hughes.