Reports

It is with great delight we bring to you two responses to reports published in the last issue. Emeritus Professor Eric Sharpe responds to Vic Hayes' 1975 article with reflections on how Religion Studies has developed. In an open letter which reflects on his experience of religion in the European context, John May shares his response to Richard Hutch's thoughts on religious tolerance.

Twenty Years On: Some Reflections on the Study of Religion Then and Now

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> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very heaven! — Oh! times,
> In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
> Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
> The attraction of a country in romance!
> (William Wordsworth, 1805)

It is one of the privileges of advancing age, to indulge from time to time in a little gentle reminiscence. It was Sir Walter Scott who spoke of "the oft-repeated tales of narrative old age", and having retired from active academic service, one begins to feel n.o.a. coming on. One should not leave it too long, however. Sooner or later, memory crosses the narrow dividing line that separates it from fantasy — a process well-known to all who have ever tried to teach religion — and then fades away altogether. But before that happens, there are a few tales worth the telling.

It was interesting to read the 1975 Victor Hayes article reprinted in the Autumn 1998 issue of this Review, which began with an attractive picture of a Buddhist Bhikkhu addressing a Sturt CAE class, and being (as one would expect) given the class's full attention. I too have a Bhikkhu memory, from 1970. I had come to the new University of Lancaster only a few weeks previously, and was on the point of taking my first class in Indian Religions. My specialisation, such as it was, was in Hinduism; but we thought it as well to run the Hinduism and Buddhist streams together for the first few weeks, so that the Buddhists would know what it was Gautama the Buddha was intent on reforming. I marched into the classroom — and almost marched straight out again. The front row was occupied entirely by saffron-robed Bhikkhus — at least a dozen of them! Afterward I came to suspect that these

charming young men from Sri Lanka, postgraduates who had come to Lancaster to study under Ninian Smart, had come to my lecture partly out of politeness, and partly to practise listening to English. Certainly they were not there for profound spiritual reasons.

Curiously though, I was able to fill in a few historical details in their picture of Buddhist origins. A similar situation arose just before Birgitta and I left the UK for Australia, when I was called in by a tiny community of Sufi Muslims in Lancaster as an expert witness in a case involving the immigration authorities and the community's Pir (spiritual adviser, more or less the equivalent of "family guru") We won our case, partly because I was able to help them explain to the authorities the role and importance of the Pir in their lives. Again, all that was necessary was straightforward information, presented - this time to the lawyers, not to journalists or politicians - in an uncomplicated fashion, and backed up by the testimony of those most involved.

I have always felt it to be of the utmost importance that the study of religion, at whatever level, should begin prosaically, on the level of straightforward information, most of which is purely factual. Over the years there has been a good deal of discussion of the relative merits of what used to be called "the two cultures" (the arts and the sciences) in education. No doubt both approaches have much to recommend them. What tends to be lost in the process is however the absolutely fundamental recognition that before anyone can practise either an art or a science, there has to be something more prosaic, namely *the mastery of a craft.*

By this I mean nothing more complicated than the process whereby we learn to use tools and deal with materials; the experience which teaches us what techniques to use, when; and — most important of all, perhaps — respect for the business in which we are involved. I say "nothing more complicated", but the process itself can be of extreme complexity, and may take many years to learn. Analogies are endless. We take for granted that to be a heart surgeon or an airline pilot requires a long apprenticeship, and I fancy that none of us would place our lives in the hands of either, unless we knew that they had been adequately trained. Similarly in the performing arts. As a hobby musician of many years' standing, I know only too well the sheer hard work that goes into the professional's training, and how easy it is for a moment's lapse in concentration to ruin any performance. But it all has to start at the most elementary level, with the playing of scales, or for the singer, vocal exercises of the most excruciating dullness. Mistakes can be made, of course, and in the following of any craft, are going to be made. But assuming that they are not, the final outcome is almost like an act of sub-creation.

The apprentice either learns or does not learn how to recognise material and its qualities, and how to make use the tools of whatever trade it happens to be. Interestingly enough, the medieval craft guilds were styled "mysteries": the apprentice stonemason, goldsmith, carpenter or whoever was taught something more than the simple properties of raw material and the elementary use of crude tools — though that is where it started. Beyond that there was the possibility of creativity — in due

time, and not before time.

It would be tempting to elaborate further — but I must not trespass on the Editor's patience. Let me instead suggest that by these standards, despite all the good intentions that there have undoubtedly been, the religious studies business since the 1960s (the 1970s for Australia's part) has hardly been an unqualified success.[1] That it has generated a fair amount of interest at the undergraduate level, we all know. We are grateful for it. Teaching undergraduates has seldom or never been difficult, and one positive outcome has certainly been that an increasing number of young people have gone out into the world equipped with at least some knowledge of the history and ethos of some of the world's religions. I have no wish to complain about that. Nor is there much point in my complaining about the state of academic politics in general: they affect everyone, though religious studies departments, being mostly cottage industries, have proved more vulnerable than the academic fat cats in departments which discretion prevents me from naming. But has the outcome after twenty years not been, for our part, measurable more in terms of popularity than professionalism?

In the early months of the Sydney department, a little over twenty-one years ago (on July 6, 1977, to be precise), I had the privilege of delivering an Inaugural Lecture in the Great Hall of the University. I would still be prepared to stand by some of what I said on that occasion, though in retrospect, I was being far too optimistic on a number of fronts. At the end of it I said that the new department (which at that stage consisted of one professor, one secretary and one cat), though it might have to start with the simple transmission of bread-and-butter knowledge, could not be content to stop there:

> Should it stop there (I said), then I am not sure that it will have achieved very much. That is why elementary undergraduate teaching cannot be the be-all and end-all of our department. By their graduate schools shall ye know them! For it is out of the graduate schools that future teachers come — teachers in schools, colleges and universities — and unless we are able to continue that succession, nothing we can do will have lasting value. Mules are useful animals in the short term; but their pedigree is not anything to be proud of, and they do not establish dynasties.

I fancy that these words came as something of a shock to some of those who heard them. How could we possibly create a graduate school without adequate resources? The frank answer, of course, was that we couldn't, and didn't. That a number of outstanding PhD students passed through the department nevertheless (I won't embarrass anyone by naming names) is something for which I personally have always been grateful. These were the ones who learned the craft more by practising it than in seminars. Others meanwhile did not.

In retrospect, I am still easily depressed when I think of a brainwave of mine that in the end came to nothing. I have always felt that after three or four years of

religious studies, a student ought to be possessed of an all-round competence, and a more than average level of interest, in the world of religion in general, and should be capable of discussing religious questions rather better than the average journalist. Therefore a decree went out that as part of the fourth-year honours examination, there was to be a "general paper" (a notion familiar enough to anyone who has ever sat for an Oxbridge scholarship examination), the content of which could be anything and everything classifiable as "religion", anywhere in the world, at any time. But I had failed to take account of the modern student mentality. Dubbed "the horror exam", this simple general knowledge exercise evidently struck terror into the hearts of successive honours generations. Once I was safely out of the way, it was quietly abandoned, *zum allgemeinen Gaudium*, and by popular demand.

One of the greatest drawbacks attending the academic study of religion in Australia is of course what we have learned to call "the tyranny of distance". Geographical distance most of us can cope with, after a fashion, and as circumstances permit. Mental distance (I hesitate to say intellectual distance, because intellect has little or nothing to do with it) is more problematical. Merely to keep in touch with ongoing discussions — the tone rather than the substance — I personally have found hard, though there may be more than one reason for that. Let me offer an illustration.

Many of the problems connected with the study of religion we share with other sections of the humanities. The crass utilitarianism which has come to serve as a substitute for an educational philosophy, is something in face of which we are all equally powerless. So too is the secularisation process behind it. There is on the other hand one chronic source of disquiet in the international religious studies community — one not without parallel in other fields, but which religious studies has seemingly been unable either to avoid or to resolve. It is of course the age-old conflict between "faith" and "reason", between "theology" and "science", and ultimately between two ways of thinking and acting. The "faith" side is the way of submission to properly constituted authority, the "reason" side the way of control (or at least attempted control) and domination. The one exists in large measure to maintain tradition, the other in many cases to disrupt tradition (which is not to say that it may not shape traditions of its own). Theology/divinity therefore sustains a relationship with a religious community and serves its needs. (I ought perhaps to add that although theology and divinity are Christian words, the principle I have in mind is applicable across the board.) Religious studies — or whatever else one may choose to call it — does not have any such relationship; indeed, one of the major reasons why the religious studies experiment was launched was to provide the study of religion with a secular frame of reference, and to free it from confessional control, real or imagined. Generally speaking, this modest goal was achieved without too much difficulty, not least because Christian theology in the 1960s was in disarray, and (on the liberal side at least) prepared to innovate.

This being so, it may seem a little odd to have to record that the "theology

versus religious studies" debate remains unresolved. Readers of the (North American) *CSSR Bulletin* (26/3, September 1997) will find a whole issue on the theme. Other North Atlantic professional journals, too, return to it regularly. For my own part, a long-standing interest in the *history* of method in the study of religion (in which the debate aforementioned has been a hardy perennial) has meant that I have been unable to avoid getting involved in the ongoing debate, though increasingly in the spirit of Omar Khayyám:

> Myself when young did eagerly frequent
> Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
> About it and about: but evermore
> Came out by the same Door as in I went.

"About it and about" — but about *what*, precisely? One possible answer might be "transcendence" — a slippery word, but one which might be useful if we are prepared to indicate what it is we are trying to transcend, and by what means. In the infancy of religious studies, most of what we were doing was novel (which gave it a transcendence of a kind) but otherwise was fairly prosaic. For the reasons I have already stated, students (and not a few teachers) needed to be supplied with some basic equipment and some elementary maps before proceeding further. In 1972 John Hinnells and I produced a book about Hinduism, with this in mind (Newcastle upon Tyne, Oriel Press), for which we were severely taken to task by the late R. C. Zaehner in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. The burden of his complaint was that we had simply missed Hinduism's central feature, "the felt omnipresence of the divine", and that this rendered the rest of the book's 200 pages worthless. What was chiefly irritating about this was its unfairness. We had been judged, it seemed, by the standards of the ashram instead of the classroom, and eventually I was able to say so in print. Quite possibly the occasional student will be impelled to undertake a voyage of spiritual, and not just intellectual discovery, under the aegis of the religious studies enterprise, but that is not anything we can or should try to control.

Victor Hayes' 1975 article makes a special point of the importance in the educational context of having each great tradition interpreted by one of its representatives. I don't mind admitting to a certain feeling of ambivalence on this issue. Inevitably it puts one in mind of the time-honoured practice of getting the local priest or minister to come in to the local school and perform this service on a once-a-week basis — sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't — although by now widened out beyond the Christian frontiers. At its best, the principle has to be a positive one: it goes without saying that only an insider can know what it feels like to be a follower of a way of faith on a daily basis. The words, "I know how you feel," are therefore seldom justified, and may be met with deep resentment, no matter how well-intentioned they are. These days it is generally taken for granted that in matters of human relations, the claim to have "understood" another's feelings, motives, hopes and frustrations is best kept to oneself. In religion, more and more

"TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED" signs are going up. Examples are legion. Only women can understand women, only gays can understand gays, only African Americans can understand African Americans — and so on. A recent book review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (January 2, 1998) ended with the words: "One is led to the unsatisfactory conclusion that to write a book about Christians in India one probably has to be Christian from India."

I have, as it happens, written a fair amount about Christians in India, and hope to write a little more before I finally hang up my ancient typewriter. I accept the reviewer's point — with one important reservation. I would not for one moment presume to tell anyone what it *feels* like to be a Christian in India, though I can (I trust) observe and listen. Even that, incidentally, is not going to proceed very far without considerable skill in languages — and who can guarantee that in these days? If this applies (as it undoubtedly does) to India's Christians, what of the Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains and the rest? Are they waiting out there to be "understood"? Or have we perchance been just a little carried away by our good intentions?

My reservation is that although we should show restraint in what we expect religious studies to achieve by way of inter-religious "understanding", we have no reason to limit the enterprise in that way.

In the religious studies dawn, when we were all reformers, no words were more bandied about than "understand" and "understanding", mainly because we genuinely believed the study of religion in the past to have been deficient in that regard. I think now that we underestimated the difficulties of the exercise. Much might be said, but I will limit myself to two points, both of which Victor Hayes mentions (p. 67): first, that if we fail to tackle the ways in which religions speak to "persistent and elemental human problems", we are doing only half a job; and second, that the student has to "bracket" his or her commitments and preconceptions and "enter imaginatively" into the other religion's *Weltanschauung*. So there were to be no more "false religions": the believer, we said sagely to one another, is always "right" — even when to the world at large the believer might appear to have been (or to be) disastrously wrong. Cultural vandalism was out; dialogue was in.

Twenty years on, I am convinced that like all the other believers, we were right — as things then were. But we were altogether too optimistic when we assumed that our students would be able easily to suspend judgment on what we were trying to teach them, and adopt a value-free, non-judgmental, "phenomenological" stance on everything we offered them. For one thing, it was not even-handed: gurus and lamas and bhikkhus were listened to; archdeacons by and large were not. For another — and this was more important — once the study of religion at the undergraduate level had become mainly a matter of contemporary concern, behavioural analysis and investigative journalism, superficiality tended to set in sooner rather than later.

Ever since the late 1960s I have been a warm supporter of the principle of interreligious dialogue, and have written far more about it than has been good for me. The practice, on the other hand, has often left me in a state of bewilderment.

Often the Christian (no one else, so far as I am aware) is urged to enter into the religious experience of the followers of some other way of faith "imaginatively", to see things as they see them, value things as they value them, and so on. The literature of inter-religious dialogue since Vatican II is full of exhortations along these lines. Paul Knitter's *No Other Name?* (1985) will serve as an example: on p. 210 Knitter writes that

> The theology of all involved must also admit to the possibility and necessity of *entering into the religious experience of another tradition* [emphasis in original]. In fact, only when this is attempted does the conversation really get off the ground.

From dialogue conferences, sentiments of this general kind have drifted over into undergraduate religious studies classes, to the point where there has come to be little appreciable difference between the phenomenology of religion (as a branch of secular existentialism) and the world-wide dialogue of religions (as a branch of theological existentialism).

But is it possible to exercise one's imagination in this way? If it is possible, is it desirable? And is that what we have been trying to do all these years?

Certainly it is possible. Without the exercise of the imagination, the study of religion (or anything else for that matter) is going to remain a barren exercise. Old-style comparative religion tended sometimes to convey the impression that "dead religions" had somehow always been dead. At least there was no real danger of the ghost of a long-dead Pharaoh rising up to complain that we were bearing false witness against him and his people! But at least we tried to be aware of the problem. The trouble was, and is, that the imagination is apt sometimes to get things totally and disastrously wrong: to be paranoid, for instance, is to have an imagination that is hyperactive and diseased at the same time. To speak enthusiastically about "entering into the religious experience of another tradition" is easy enough; but how precisely do you do it? Merely to be dissatisfied with your own (assuming you have one) will not do. Sometimes, though, we appear to have conveyed the impression that religious studies has in fact been pointing in this direction all along. Personally I doubt it.

Nor is interreligious dialogue as trouble-free an exercise as some seem to imagine. Mostly these days we manage to approach one another in a spirit of friendliness, and that is something for which we can be grateful. But friendliness is not quite the same thing as friendship, which needs to be developed over a long period of time, and to be mutual. We may not care to be reminded of this too forcefully, but interreligious relations in the past have been hostile more often than friendly (here and there they still are). Communities look at one another and hear the politicians talk about "the peace process"; but then they remember a few of the less accommodating things that have been said in the past, and a few of the less than charitable things that have been done. I happen to know that this has been the actual reaction in some quarters to what the liberal wing of Christianity has been saying

about dialogue since the 1960s: that the new velvet glove may in fact conceal the old iron fist.

Memory is of the essence. "Culture" is very much a matter of collective memory: of times and places and persons, of victories and defeats, of suffering and exile, and of old enemies. No one enjoys free and unlimited access to another person's memories, and even limited access is granted only by special invitation. Incidentally, should you wish to obliterate a culture, what you must do is to erase its memories — and substitute new ones, manufactured for the occasion. The phenomenon is a common one, and becoming commoner.

Religion is dangerous. It is also difficult. One has to work for a lifetime to find out how little there is that can be known, and the forces that it can release upon the unsuspecting. Here in Australia I tend to feel that we have hardly even begun to scratch the surface of what might be done. All honour to those who have tried, and are trying, in an intellectual atmosphere which has seldom been supportive, has sometimes been hostile, and has almost always been indifferent. Incidentally, if there should be an Ultimate Reality involved, then what we have been doing is a kind of theology; if not, a kind of behavioural science. Let us not waste any more time on that particular subject, which will probably still be around in another hundred years.

Let me end, not with a peroration, but with King Arthur's riddle:

> "The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
> And God fulfils himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world...."

Note

1. In this paper I use the words "religious studies" instead of what others may prefer to call "religion studies" or "studies in religion", simply because they enjoy international, and not just local, currency.

The Heavy Hand of the German State An Open Letter to Richard Hutch on Attitudes to Scientology

Dear Richard,

It's a long time since we last met and I'd rather have a chat with you over a beer about this, but there are some aspects of your report on the Berlin conference on "The Dangers of Intolerance" (*Review*, 11/1 [1998] 54-62) that I'd like to see discussed among AASR members. My first contact with New Religious Movements (or *Jugendreligionen*, 'Youth Religions', as they were inappropriately called) came when I was teaching in Germany in the seventies; in fact, the first seminar I ever offered was on this topic. Some of the groups, notably the Unification Church and the Children of God, were going about their business quite aggressively, and there were also some Indian gurus operating in a highly manipulative way. Meanwhile, the Red Army Faction was embarking on its career of terror and the Federal Republic, over-anxious to establish its credentials as a liberal democracy, faced the classical dilemma of using illiberal means - such as the infamous *Berufsverbot* or exclusion of putative terrorist 'sympathisers' from all state services - to protect liberal ideals.

You are right to mention the spectre of Nazism (61, n. 5) as part of the explanation of Germany's heavy-handed reaction to Scientology. German politicians' fear of extremism is like German economists' fear of inflation: both are fed by experiences of collapse and chaos in the recent past. But the historical roots of the current hostility to Scientology go even deeper, right back to the Treaty of Westfalia (signed in Münster in 1648) which created the first tentative framework for acknowledging pluralism, both of religious beliefs and political ideologies, in continental Europe. The experience of the English-speaking countries has been very different, particularly the United States, which over a century later received these freedoms as already formulated principles. The result, as you rightly point out, is that the Germans still tend to think of religious freedom in terms of the state-approved co-existence of 'the two confessions', as they habitually refer to the Catholic Church and its Protestant (not just Lutheran) counterpart. But even in the decade and a half since I lived there Germany has made great strides in coming to grips with burgeoning religious diversity, particularly in learning to live with a substantial Muslim minority.

A Jewish educationalist from Britain, addressing our Council of Christians and Jews recently, estimated that 10 million Europeans now regularly vote for fascist parties. While this is in no way a re-run of the political instability of the Weimar Republic, it does give democrats pause, and the recent election result in Queensland suggests that Australia might have to give serious thought to the same phenomenon.

So there are many historical reasons for Germany's extreme sensitivity towards any groups whose secretiveness makes them appear to be states-within-the-state, from the Catholic Church at the time of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* to the right-wing extremists of today. There's another factor, too: the Germans can't abide fakes and charlatans.

Which brings us to Scientology. In the context I have sketched, it is little wonder that Scientology, of all the minority religious movements, arouses the special ire of German officialdom. To me it seems irrelevant whether courts find that Scientology is or is not a religion; the only rule of thumb a pluralist democracy can go by is something like 'it's a religion if it says it is'. What I missed in your report was any substantive assessment of just what Scientology is and does. What comes across is your almost crusading concern for the abstract principle of religious liberty ("Let us continue to be vigilant!") whilst prescinding entirely from any consideration of what the democratic consensus may be expected to tolerate.

Your account of the Berlin conference and the events surrounding it, it seems to me, is informed by two principles which are undoubtedly among the greatest achievements of Enlightenment thought: the strict value neutrality of the scientist, in this case the student of religion; and the individual's absolute right to freedom of choice, particularly in the sphere of religion. Their fruit is that tolerance without which democratic societies cannot function. Admirable as they are, however, they are also one-sided unless complemented by two further principles: that scientific enquiry springs from particular interests and engages commitments, including moral ones; and that the individual's right to freedom is balanced by duties to the community which sustains that freedom. Taken together, and viewed in the light of history, these make your case against German intolerance of Scientology less clear-cut.

Put with less prissiness: if I, **as a student of religion**, arrive at the conclusion that L. Ron Hubbard, alleged author of the notorious remark "I'd like to start a religion. That's where the money is", was a despotic charlatan and that his brainchild Scientology is a cynical rip-off, then saying so in appropriate psycho-social language does not make me illiberal. I may be wrong, which is why I submit my judgement to the criticism of my peers, but if I believe that Scientology is a public danger I not only have a right but a duty to say so. Furthermore, **as a theologian** I cannot avoid the incomparably more difficult question of truth and falsity; 'it's true if they say it is' will not serve as a criterion at this level. Having heard Johannes Aagaard of Aarhus thunder against 'sects and cults' like an Old Testament prophet, and with memories of some highly dogmatic reactions to the new movements from Lutheran sources, I nevertheless believe that a dialogical response is possible and should be attempted **for the sake of religious truth.**

I have no doubt that the experiences you detail in your report were harrowing and gave you a rather jaundiced view of a legalistic and intolerant German establishment. But Scientology is no slouch, either, when it comes to intimidating critics and infiltrating hostile organisations. In this respect the opportunism of

Scientology in leading the crusade for religious tolerance is little short of grotesque. As one who endured the rigours of a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic novitiate and has seen my church discredit itself by its authoritarian response to dissent and scandal, I do not want to be the one to cast the first stone. But neither do I see refusal to tolerate Scientology's excesses as a stick to beat the mainline churches with.

If ever you're passing through Dublin - one of the liveliest European capitals these days, not least in its growing religious diversity - I'd like to introduce you to Mike Garde, a Mennonite with a very interesting mixed background who monitors the religious groups scene with some half-hearted support from the churches and who helped me write this letter. Mentioning him reminds me of the last time we met: in the bus on the way to visit a Hutterite community outside Winnipeg during the 1980 IAHR conference. I don't think either of us will ever forget the honesty with which our Hutterite host fielded all our questions and patiently explained every aspect of a way of life which, on the face of it, is the ultimate sectarianism, yet he betrayed no trace of intolerance. Perhaps that's the compass bearing that all of us, students and practitioners of religion alike, are going to have to rely on more and more: integrity with openness.

Thanks again for your report, which certainly got this reader thinking, and best wishes to you and your colleagues.

John May,
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