

Comment

Reporting Religion A Response to Greg Bailey

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We are in Greg Bailey's debt for having put his finger on a basic problem in the study of religion as evidenced in the feature on the WCC Assembly in the *REVIEW* (4,1 Autumn 1991). His argumentation is as sophisticated as his plea for a return to scholarly rectitude is eloquent, but I would like to argue in response that his honourable intention of preserving the professional integrity of religious studies is calculated rather to strangle the discipline unless complemented by a more dynamic approach. Let what has happened to philosophy be a warning to us of the consequences of a too rigorous purism.

A fundamental difficulty with Bailey's article is his fundamental assumption that what has come to be known as the 'inclusivist' paradigm of Christianity's relationship with other traditions is the standard one. He ably expounds the difficulties of that position, as I try to do with my students. It does indeed introduce distortion when the 'others' are described in the terms of what Bailey usefully calls 'Christianist discourse', thus depriving them of their irreducible 'otherness'. But one of the main thrusts in present theological

writing in 'interfaith dialogue' (a term to whose inadequacies I will return below) is to get away from this biased perspective.

Here, however, we must face up to the factual asymmetry in the relations between religious traditions. Ans van der Bent, the former WCC librarian, once remarked that the resources available to world Christianity - libraries, universities, institutes, seminaries, publishers - far outstrip those of, say communism at its apogee, let alone those of any other faith tradition, though this imbalance is slowly being redressed. Behind the benign face of 'dialogue' lurk the realities of power, the overwhelming preponderance of which still lies with Christianity (meaning not just the churches but the Western financial and technical facilities to which they have privileged access). This asymmetry is inevitably reflected in the 'pigmy status' often assigned by Christians to the participants in 'dialogue' with them, to which Bailey rightly points.

But from the tenor of Bailey's article one gains the impression that he would like to ban the very mention of 'dialogue'

from the *REVIEW* and to prohibit the AASR from studying 'religions in the singular' (assuming that this is only conceivable on a 'Christianist' definition?); I was beginning to wonder whether there may soon be a purge of membership! But surely it must always be admissible for all our members to use the religious language of their particular traditions without being confined to mentioning it as the object of neutral study, as long as this is done without proselytising intent (presumably what Bailey means by 'evangelical'; he should take a closer look at the real thing). If, for example, the World Fellowship of Buddhists were to hold an important assembly in Australia, would it not be appropriate for the *REVIEW* to invite suitably qualified Buddhists to explain its significance -for them, but to a wider public - just as Christians, ecumenically committed to the aims of WCC, were invited to do in the Canberra feature?

Alongside and complementing the interpretation of classical texts (oral or literary), the study of communication between religious traditions is an area of research in its own right, though with quite distinct methodological presuppositions. For this reason I have come to prefer the term 'interreligious communication' to the more usual 'inter-faith dialogue'. By no means can every tradition be termed a 'faith', and 'dialogue' too readily suggests the set piece encounter between designated representatives, whereas 'communication' is an open concept covering explicit and implicit levels of interaction. An ever more fruitful term may be 'transformation', because it takes account of change in religious traditions both from within, as a result of interaction with evolving social contexts, and from without, when they interact with other traditions. Virtually all

traditions are now faced with the problem of being able to define the 'others' only in terms drawn from their own inherited religious and philosophical discourse. We are all having to learn to 'commute', as Ninian Smart once put it, between 'doing theology' (ie practising the hermeneutic immanent within any tradition) and 'studying religion'. The question to be put to Greg Bailey is whether the latter is ultimately possible if one abstains completely from the former, especially when we are now in a position to engage in each as a collaborative enterprise.

The irony at the root of Bailey's article is that the WCC is one of the main agents of interaction between religious traditions even though a large part of its constituency are opposed to dialogue, fearing it will lead to syncretism. The WCC is a focal point at which both the process and its attendant problems become explicit; it is a sometimes unwilling and unwitting agent of the synthesis of traditions towards which we may be developing. That is why I took care to say at the beginning of my own contribution to the impugned feature that 'the WCC is a fascinating religious phenomenon in its own right'. The fact that much of its energy is expended on formulating religiously based positions on ethical, political, social and ecological problems, only makes it more interesting as an example of engaged religious language at work.

I am grateful to Greg for having forced us all to think again about these important issues, but I remain convinced that the AASR will best retain both its integrity and its viability by encouraging its members to participate in both engaged and detached discourse about religion. Learning to live with the tensions thus engendered can only be healthy for us.