

- 1 See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 1989); Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 1986).
- 2 See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* trans. Robert M. Wallace (MIT, Cambridge Mass. 1986) 229–457.
- 3 On the contrast of mediaeval 'complex space' and modern 'simple space' see my essay, 'Against the Resignations of the Age' given at the conference for the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, St. Edmund's House, Cambridge, July 1991, and to be published in a volume of the conference proceedings.
- 4 Shapin and Schaffer, 283–332. See also, Michael Buckley *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Yale UP, New Haven, 1987).
- 5 see Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992).
- 6 See *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* ed. Charles Birch et al (Orbis, Maryknoll NY, 1990).
- 7 J-P Vernani, 'Rémarques sur les formes et limites de la pensée technique chez les Grecs', in *Mythe et Pensée chez les Grecs* Vol II (Maspero, Paris, 1978). And Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'Religion, Nature and Ethics' an unpublished essay which is the most comprehensive demolition of the Lynn White thesis (that Christianity is responsible for eco-catastrophe) ever written, and to which the present essay is much indebted.
- 8 See Lois K. Daly, 'Eco-Feminism, Reverence for Life, and Feminist Ecological Ethics in *Liberating Life*, 88–108 (on Schweitzer, 96–108).
- 9 See *Liberating Life*, and especially the essays by McFague, Birch, Berry, Daly.
- 10 Sallie Anne McFague, 'Imaging a Theology of Nature: the World as God's Body' in *Liberating Life*, 201–227; this quotation, 215.
- 11 See Funkenstein, 23–117.
- 12 Charles Birch, 'Chance, Purpose, and the Order of Nature' in *Liberating Life*, 182–200.
- 13 McFague, 218.
- 14 See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 1957) 32; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*.
- 15 The researches of Robin Grove-White, in particular, based on his long involvement in ecological campaigns, have demonstrated this point.

## Utility, Understanding and Creativity in the Study of Religions

Chris Arthur

### Thinking and Treachery

At one point in *Speculum Mentis*, R G Collingwood remarks that

If thought were the mere discovery of interesting facts, its indulgence, in a world full of desperate evils and among men crushed beneath the burden of daily tasks too hard for their solitary strength, would be the act of a traitor<sup>1</sup>.

Given the distance that can separate academic inquiry from any humane application of its results, the thinking that is fostered within the universities is often accused of being useless. With images of famine, war, and ecological disaster appearing daily on our screens, the pursuit of many avenues of learning can easily seem like the sort of treachery which Collingwood condemned. 'We try to understand ourselves and our world', Collingwood argued, 'only in order that we may learn how to live'<sup>2</sup>. Often the connection between learning and living is so tenuous that it seems to have been lost altogether. On any map of knowledge drawn today there must, from the point of view of the hungry, the homeless, the oppressed, be many desert areas, arid zones which seem intellectually barren and morally bankrupt. The quality of the intellectual flora which flourish in such impoverished regions is pointedly identified in *Lucky Jim* when the book's hero, honestly assessing the worth of an article he has written, talks about its 'niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it throws upon non-problems'<sup>3</sup>.

### **Justification By Diversity**

In a world so full of 'desperate evils', every academic must surely be faced with the question of whether there is any *point* in his or her work. Does this piece of research, or that article, serve any useful end beyond that of furthering our own particular specialist interest? Do our endeavours contribute anything of worth in a world where so many millions of our fellows are crushed beneath burdens out of all proportion to their solitary strength?

In an essay on commitment and imagination, the philosopher Stuart Hampshire argues against using some sort of measure of utility as a scale to assess a subject's value. 'Imaginative energy', he suggests, 'has largely incalculable sources and serves largely unconscious needs'<sup>4</sup>. Looking specifically at research in the humanities, Hampshire is adamant that we should not direct our course of study 'by rational calculation of directly useful and socially relevant results'<sup>5</sup>. Instead, 'the only safe criterion is the degree of intellectual excitement that a work or a problem provokes, and the degree of exactness and care which men are ready to bring to its exploration'<sup>6</sup>. Whilst interest, excitement and exactness are, undeniably, essential acid tests of quality, many academics today would feel uneasy if their work could only be justified by reference to this threefold measure of personal commitment to a subject, on which its claim to wider relevance is simply not marked.

If we assume as given considerable stores of imaginative energy

within the academic study of religion (an assumption easily substantiated by a scrutiny of its recent literature), can this particular subject area justify its work by reference to any more practical measurement of worth? Does it have any wider relevance beyond the criterion of pure interest? In what follows I want to suggest an answer in the affirmative which is based on the often unnoticed value of religious diversity.

### **Utility and Understanding**

Situations of religious diversity are not commonly accorded a high measure of worth in present day society. We are too accustomed to seeing the close relationship between violence and differing religious viewpoints to assume much positive value when it comes to variations in this particular area of human experience. Whether it is interdenominational conflict in Northern Ireland, inter-religious conflict in the Middle East or India, or religious-political conflict in South America or Tibet, diversity in human religiousness seems an almost inevitable catalyst for precisely those sorts of behaviour to which education is opposed.

The disciplinary area now commonly known as Religious Studies has many other aliases (Comparative Religion, Science of Religion(s), History of Religion(s), Phenomenology of Religion etc). The names carry slightly different nuances of method and meaning, but the work subsumed beneath each of them acts to increase our awareness of religious diversity. And it is in terms of furthering our awareness of such diversity that the subject may be accorded a value and relevance beyond the appeal to interest alone.

It would be hard to argue against the contention that in terms of understanding many aspects of human affairs—history, culture, society, politics—a knowledge of the religiousness of those involved is essential. Could we understand the Crusades without some knowledge of Christianity and Islam? Would we be able to appreciate the subtleties of Eastern art without an awareness of the aesthetic values voiced within Hinduism and Buddhism? Could the birth of the state of Israel be adequately mapped without touching on the contours of Judaism? And of more pressing import, in a religiously plural world such as we live in today, it is imperative as a propaedeutics for tolerance and peaceful coexistence to *understand* the values, beliefs and rituals of our neighbours.

Of course it would be hard to *prove* that learning about religions fosters tolerance towards (or between) its adherents. There is, however, sufficient commonsense plausibility in supposing that understanding has

a practical utility in defusing the many flashpoints in this emotive area of our experience, for us to proceed on that assumption. (It is interesting to note, incidentally, that there is almost no provision for Religious Studies in the universities in Northern Ireland.)

### **Newspeak in Reverse?**

But in addition to its assumed contribution towards tolerance in a religiously plural world (a world now found in microcosm in many of our cities), and in addition to facilitating our understanding of those areas of human endeavour, both past and present, at home and abroad, in which religious factors play a significant role, can we claim another value for the study of religions? Beyond social utility and intellectual insight might we justify this area of study in terms of a creative use of the elements of diversity unearthed by its researches?

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James suggested that 'at bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe'<sup>7</sup>. Religious Studies provides a colossal increase in our awareness of different religious modes of acceptance (and rejection). Can we use this range of response to express what we ourselves think and feel about our own place in the scheme of things? Is there a possibility, in other words, of seeing Religious Studies as enlarging our religious vocabulary, allowing us increased conceptual and expressive resources? I would suggest that the work of this discipline is like a kind of Orwellian Newspeak in reverse. Instead of subtracting from our vocabulary and systematically eroding our range of thought, it operates in the other direction, offering us the potential to think more widely and deeply about religious matters than has hitherto been possible.

### **Pure and Applied Religious Studies**

The relationship between Religious Studies and Theology is, according to one commonly voiced characterization, one between operating within a single faith tradition to which one belongs, and examining a range of viewpoints without offering evaluative comment about them. Such a view can act to emasculate the possibility of a creative use of religious diversity. For, according to the division of labour it proposes, Religious Studies has no business with the truth and Theology no business with that which falls outside its own tradition. This kind of view risks overlooking the enormous creative potential in the diversity of human religiousness to which we now have access.

It would, I think, be more appropriate to think of work in this area as having two aspects, 'pure' (a descriptive, analytical approach

principally concerned with ideas) and 'applied' (concerned with *using* those ideas to build something new). As Peter Berger has suggested, there is no point in spending years of one's life working out a theological position that may have been formulated already by a Syrian monk in the fifth century<sup>8</sup>. Analogously, there is little point theologizing in ignorance of the resources of other traditions. Likewise, the endless accumulation of descriptive data about religions would be of rather questionable value unless we planned to do something with it. In other words, the relationships between religious faiths and the disciplines which examine them are no longer as rigidly straightforward as was once imagined.

There have been some encouraging signs that the traditionally conceived boundary line between Religious Studies and Theology is being creatively blurred, with various thinkers widening their terms of reference to take account of what John Hick has called the 'Copernican Revolution' in theology<sup>9</sup>. Thus, to take one small example, Harvey Cox, describing St Paul's letter to the Corinthians, makes good use of the resources of Indian religiousness to elucidate the Christian context he is examining:

As a first century *kalyanamitra* once wrote to a confused little urban *sangha* that was trying to understand a *dharma* that had recently come from the East. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Cox is by no means alone in allowing a cross-fertilization of religious ideas between East and West. One could also find examples in the work of thinkers as diverse as Raimundo Panikkar, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Ninian Smart and John Dunne, to name but a few.

### **The Value of Diversity**

In a paper published in *Scientific American* in 1975, Bryan Clarke, Professor of Genetics at the University of Nottingham, suggested that the existence of biological diversity might prompt us to search 'not for the ideal social or political system but for the ideal *array* of social and political systems'<sup>11</sup>. The 'polymorphism in our institutions' should, he suggested, 'match the polymorphism in ourselves'<sup>12</sup>. Might the extension of diversity into the social and political realms which Clarke proposes be extended to include religion too? Rather than thinking in terms of finding any one true faith, might we not see religious diversity (the uncovering of which is, I would argue, the most significant upshot of work in Religious Studies) as something bearing similar value to the *biological* diversity on which we depend for our wellbeing?

The religions of the world could be seen as repositories of ideas as rich and varied as the life in a rainforest, but like the rainforests they are under threat. The conservation of religious thinking across a whole spectrum of possibilities—ancient, modern, Eastern, Western, polytheistic, atheistic, monotheistic, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and so on—is as important for the ecology of our spiritual landscapes as the maintenance of species diversity is for the biological environment. Just as the diversity of the natural world offers us enormous potential (aesthetic, technological, medical etc), is there any reason to suppose that the religious diversity revealed in all its startling detail by Religious Studies, will not offer a similarly fecund potential for enriching and vivifying our spirituality?

There are some signs that we have started to tap the riches of the religious gene-pool whose diverse threads are being collected in the reservoirs of Religious Studies' scholarship (the work of the scholars mentioned above provide various cases in point). These exceptions notwithstanding, there still seems to be much truth in Kathleen Raine's disturbing conviction that:

our materialist secular society, well though it may educate in the natural sciences, altogether fails to educate the human soul, the invisible humanity which is, in Plato's words as well as Blake's 'the true man'. We are simply not educated in these things which above all make us human.<sup>13</sup>

Religious Studies, it seems to me, offers a massive resource for the kind of education whose absence Raine laments, but as yet we seem strangely reluctant to make use of it.

Of course the *use* of a range of ideas from various points in the history and geography of human religiousness is not something which can be engaged in without encountering some profound and disturbing questions, both about ourselves and about the adequacy of our forms of religious discourse. But should such questions be allowed to abort the search for new ways of conceiving our ultimate nature and purpose, the ongoing attempt (in Collingwood's phrase) to 'learn how to live'?

Mircea Eliade, one of the fathers of modern Religious Studies, wrote in his journal for December 1960 that he was 'more and more convinced of the literary value'<sup>14</sup> of the information uncovered by the study of religions. Indeed he wondered if, in the future, his work might be considered as 'an attempt to relocate the forgotten sources of literary inspiration'<sup>15</sup>. Contained in the myths, symbols, rituals and ideas of human religiousness, Eliade saw a live and creative potential. Is enough

being done to harness this potential in the subject today?

Perhaps some indication of the creative dimension which Religious Studies may have can be gleaned from a reading of Karlheinz Stockhausen's fascinating essay on 'world music'<sup>16</sup>, which suggests so many parallels with the study of religion. Considering modern efforts to collect and preserve a diversity of musical forms from the different cultures of the world, Stockhausen asks if the only aim in such a process is the accumulation of information. He suggests that beyond this there is a realm of creative possibility in terms of the altogether new compositions and musical forms which such information makes possible. Religious Studies allows us access to a massive range of material. Perhaps, bearing Collingwood's remarks about learning and living in mind, the time has come to try out some of the religious compositions and instruments which it has catalogued and try to find some new threads of harmony in this world of apparent discord.

- 1 R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis, or the Map of Knowledge*, Oxford 1924, p.15.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, London 1954, p.14.
- 4 Stuart Hampshire, 'Commitment and Imagination', in Max Black (ed), *The Morality of Scholarship*, New York 1967, p.55.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, a Study in Human Nature*, (Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902), London 1928, p.41 [From Lecture 2].
- 8 Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative, Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, London 1980, p. 25.
- 9 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, London 1973, p. 120f.
- 10 Harvey Cox, *Turning East, the Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism*, London 1979, p. 175.
- 11 Bryan Clarke, 'The Causes of Biological Diversity', *Scientific American*, Vol 233 no 2 (August 1975), p. 60.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Kathleen Raine, *The Inner Journey of the Poet and Other Papers*, (ed Brian Keeble), London 1982, p.13.
- 14 Mircea Eliade, *No Souvenirs, Journal 1957-1969*, (tr Fred H Johnson), London 1978, p. 119.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Karlheinz Stockhausen, 'Weltmusik', in *Texte zur Musik: 1970-1977*, Köln 1978, pp. 468-476. An English translation by Bernhard Radloff appears in the *Dalhousie Review*, Vol 69 no 3 (1989), pp. 318-326.