

Cultural Heritages and Contemporary Change
Series IIA, Islam, Volume 19
General Editor
George F. McLean

Understanding Other Religions:

Al-Biruni and Gadamer's “Fusion of Horizons”

by
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The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy

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Cardinal Station
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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication

Ataman, Kemal.

Understanding other religions : al-Biruni's and Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" / by Kemal Ataman.

p. cm. -- (Cultural heritages and contemporary change. Series IIA, Islam ; 19)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Religions. 2. Biruni, Muhammad ibn Ahmad, 973?-1048. 3. Gadamer, Hans Georg, 1900-2002. 4. Hermeneutics. I. Title. II. Series.

BL85.A83 2008
201'.5--dc22

2008021993
CIP

ISBN 978-1-56518-252-3 (pbk.)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is made possible through a scholarship from Uludağ University, for which I am grateful. I would like to thank Professor İzzet Er, the Dean of the School of Divinity of the Uludag University, and Professors Hüseyin Aydın, former Dean of the school, as well as Professor Mustafa Yurtkuran, president of the Uludağ University, for their continued support.

It would be difficult to imagine the completion of this study without the intelligence and capable involvement of the late Professor Stephen Happel, then Dean of the School of Religious Studies of The Catholic University of America. I am deeply grateful not only for his generosity and patience from the day I arrived at the School, but also for providing an ideal ambience during the writing process. I also thank the late Professor William Cenkner and Professor Sidney Griffith for their valuable comments and insights on this study and to the members of the School of Religious Studies for their help and advice.

I have benefited significantly from the friendly editorial guidance of Dr. T. Lindsay Moore through our long conversations in front of Woven History where “history is in the weaving” in Washington, D.C.

Finally, my wife Nuray and my children Mehmet Sadık and Altay Aziz deserve my heartfelt gratitude for allowing me to be absent for such a long time to finish this study. And above all

**To my parents
Mehmet Sadık and Ayşe**

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of religion is one of the most significant aspects of culture. Religion is universal, yet has great variety in its expression and interpretation. As long as cultures are in relatively infrequent contact with one another, this pluralism of expression has little significance; but when contact increases, and when mobility and change create situations of religious diversity within societies, the claims for universality and the fact of variety are confronted. The realization of such diversity creates the problem of the "Other"¹ and more specifically, the problem of recognizing and co-existing with the Other. Three approaches have recently received considerable attention as responses to the problem: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.²

Exclusivism affirms that complete truth is found only in one religion, usually in one's own (the home religion). The believer perceives his or her religion to be true and only those who share the same belief can be saved since only their religion contains the entire truth. Therefore, there is no salvation, for instance, outside Christianity, or Islam, or Judaism and so on. This is the traditional and age-old self-understanding of the world's major religions.

Inclusivism, as a theoretical framework, expressed especially in Roman Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council, expands the hermeneutical circle and maintains that the saving and self-revealing God of Christians is present and at work in and through the world's religions. Whatever truth and saving power are found in the other religions, however, are already found in Christianity more fully and more certainly.

Pluralism, as formulated especially by John Hick, sees different religions as equally valid paths to the same goal. In its extreme version, all religions are considered to be formally true and basically equivalent. The advocates of this approach do not deny, for instance, that Jesus is unique. Rather, they believe he is unique to Christians, as Muhammad is unique to Muslims. In this regard, every religious figure is regarded as a contact point with the divine Reality or Ultimate Reality.³

Although these three approaches are responses to the problem of religious diversity in their unique ways, they, nonetheless, fall short in explaining the phenomenon of religious diversity in a religiously diverse

¹ The terms *other* and *horizon*, which are the two key concepts in this study, will be examined in the second chapter to determine the senses in which they are being used and understood throughout our exposition.

² A detailed examination and critique of these approaches will be presented in the first chapter.

³ John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy*, 1988,366-9; See also, J. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980)

world. The underlying cause for the insufficiency of these approaches is the lack of a genuine interest in understanding the Other. This lack of interest results in ignoring the radical diversity of various positions. The fact that each category may represent a broad spectrum of opinions from outright rejection through inclusivist accommodation to radical pluralism even within the same approach or theoretical framework is undeniable. Therefore, perhaps the best way to study these categories is to refer to the views of several of the leading thinkers, representing each category, such as K.Barth, K. Rahner, and J. Hick, to reduce the risk of presenting another reductionistic approach to a minimum level.

This study therefore aims to achieve two goals: first, to deconstruct the current stance, which categorizes *a priori* the diverse conceptual schemes (categories, approaches) as if they were impenetrable and clearly circumscribed totalities in themselves; second, to explore the possibility of presenting a hermeneutical framework that can lead the discussion to a more open dialogical understanding--an understanding that results in the recognition that the knower cannot know everything *a priori*, nor can one be certain in an absolutist sense about what one knows. Such an understanding implies an awareness of the contingency of even our most cherished beliefs whether religious or otherwise, which means a certain capacity for overcoming a blind investment of ego in them.

The two goals mentioned above will be achieved by examining the philosophies of two important thinkers of not only different cultures, but also of different epochs. The first, Abu Raihan Muhammad Al-Biruni (973-1048), from Khiva, then called Khawarism in Central Asia was one of the most influential thinkers of his time.⁴ Biruni's contribution to human civilization is immense. Having become well versed in Greek, Manichean, Babylonian, Zoroastrian, Hindu, and Arabic texts, he was able to produce treatises on a variety of subjects. For the purpose of the present study, however, his cross-religious interest and the comparative method he developed in the process of studying religious traditions is the most significant.

Al-Biruni's willingness to explore other religions is remarkable if one considers the time and the milieu in which he lived when the predominant interest of scholars was directed at heretical movements within

⁴ The pronunciation and transliteration of Al-Biruni's name is a disputed subject. While a majority of the scholars spelled his name "Al-Biruni," some prominent scholars such as E. C.Sachau, and Aydın Sayılı, however, spelled it "Al-Beruni" and "Beyruni" respectively. Since the primary objective of this study is to investigate the contribution of Al-Biruni to the study of religion in a comparative perspective, it will not go into the depths of this dispute. Instead, following the majority of the scholars, his name will be spelled "Al-Biruni" except in quotations. For a detailed discussion of the subject, see Aydın Sayılı, "Doğumunun 1000'inci Yılında Beyruni," in *Beyruni'ye Armağan* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1974), 1-40.

both the Islamic and non-Islamic traditions. Al-Biruni's study of Indian culture, which can serve as a test case to concretize Al-Biruni's contribution to the study of religion, reached its climax in his major work *Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind min maqbulatin fi'l-'aql aw mardulatin*, known in the West as *Al-Beruni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India*.⁵ It is also his sincere openness to the Hindu culture in particular and other cultures in general that led him eventually to accept at least some segments of this "new culture" into his moral world.⁶

The other thinker that will be subject of this work is Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) of Germany. To analyze Al-Biruni's contribution to intercultural understanding, the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*), outlined by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960)⁷ and in the subsequent literature will be used as a hermeneutical framework, for it explores the possibility of understanding the other by entering into the world of different cultures through textual and personal encounters. The project, fusion of horizons, also presupposes a dialectical play between one's own understanding and the culture one is trying to understand. Based on these conceptions, successful interpretation and, therefore, understanding is conceived as a dialogue between the interpreter and the text (history, culture, person, language, event, a piece of music, etc.), reaching a new understanding of the subject-matter (*Sache*) in a fusion of horizons. As a result, one not only comes to realize the possibilities of understanding the what-ness and who-ness of the Other in its genuine otherness; but also by this expansion of horizon, even better understands oneself, projecting his/her possibilities and recognizing his/her limitations

⁵ Al-Biruni, *Tahqiq ma li-l Hind min maqula maqbula fil-'aql aw mardhula.*, ed. E. Sachau (Hayderabad, 1958). English translation, *Al-Beruni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India*, E. Sachau (London, 1910). (Henceforth *India* and *Tahqiq*, respectively)

⁶ Although nowhere does Al-Biruni explicitly state that he considers the Hindus as *Ahl al-Kitab* or *Ahl al-dhimmi*, a careful examination of his insights into the differences between the educated and uneducated classes will reveal that he regards the educated class, "those who march on the path of liberation ... those who desire abstract truth which they call *sāra*, are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and would never dream of worshipping an image manufactured to represent him," as the worshippers of the God of Islam. See Al-Biruni, *India*, vol. II, 113. This subject will be dealt with in a more detailed manner in a later chapter.

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 5th ed. (Tübingen: J.B. Mohr, 1986). English translation, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995). (Henceforth *TM* and *WM*, respectively)

as a human being along with other fellow human beings irrespective of their religious, political, ideological, and ethnic background.

The first chapter will analyze the three typical responses to the problem of the coming of the Other, namely, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism with a view to showing why and how these categories fail to serve as valid paradigms that help us appreciate the religious diversity as creative rather than problematic.

As a response to the previous chapter, the second chapter will present an in-depth analysis of the concept of the fusion of horizons. This plays a central role in Gadamer's thought as a visual metaphor to support his argument, and ours, that understanding others in their genuine otherness is possible and intelligible although we are never sure that this understanding is ever complete, and therefore objective. In this context, the development and the use of the terms *horizon* and *other*, and the possibility of a fusion that would render understanding perceivable, will also be examined.

The next chapter will be an exploration of the unique contribution of Al-Biruni to interreligious understanding and cultural hermeneutics in the light of the insights gained from the previous chapters. The analysis will follow the study of Al-Biruni's thought within its historic context and analyze what questions he was trying to answer. To achieve this, the chapter will focus primarily on the key subjects in the Al-Biruni literature that promise to offer avenues leading to a better understanding among the world's leading religious traditions.

The final chapter will attempt to revisit the so called objectivism-relativism and exclusivism-pluralism debate to determine whether the notion of the fusion of horizons, as philosophized by Gadamer and exemplified by Al-Biruni in his treatment of other religious traditions, will lead the discussion beyond the current debate to a more open-ended dialogical understanding in the discourse on the cross-cultural study of religion.

CHAPTER ONE

WAYS OF ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

That we live in a world of racial, cultural, ideological, and religious differences is a fact of our human existence. This is not new since previous generations also lived in a religiously diverse world. In fact, if one takes a broad perspective, one realizes that no major religion has ever lived except in a religiously diverse world.¹ Although information about and contact with, other religions has a long history, in a great majority of the cases the contact was at best polemical and at worst confrontational. What is new, however, is the growing appreciation of differences among religions and cultures, and the realization that, in a significant sense, difference is creative and so must be celebrated.

Difference is also challenging, especially when that diversity of religions has plunged each religious tradition into a new conceptual crisis forcing each religion to question its identity in the face of "Other" religious traditions.² This context raises formidable questions of how to encounter the Other, and of what attitude to take towards the people of other religious traditions.

Over the last few decades a number of general surveys have appeared on the issue of how to confront the coming of the other in different fields of study including philosophy and theology. These surveys summarize a vast amount of material not only from all sides of the Christian tradition but also from different religious traditions of the world.

¹ Judaism was but one religion among a host of other religious traditions with their own territorial gods in the Ancient Near East. Christianity came into existence within the context of Judaism. Later, Christianity encountered many religious traditions, beliefs, and practices, including classical paganism. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 458; It was in the midst of the then Meccan admixture of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Manicheans and others that Islam came into existence. Again, Buddhism emerged as a major religion out of a Brahmanical/Jain/Materialistic/Agnostic atmosphere. Harold Coward, "Religious Pluralism and the Future of Religions," in *Religious Pluralism and Truth: Essays on Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Thomas Dean (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995): 45-46, 45-63; Lesslie Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism: A Missiological Approach," *Studia Missionalia* (Rome: Editrice Pontifica Universita Gregoriana, 1993): 227, 227-224

² Stephen J. Duffy, *Encountering the Stranger: Christianity in Dialogue With the World Religions* (Loyola: Loyola University, 1994), 1.

Literature on the coming of the Other seems to show a remarkable agreement about “the map of the area.”³ In this context, three approaches (attitudes) have received considerable attention as responses to the problem of the coming of the Other: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.⁴ This chapter will examine each of these approaches.⁵

Before entering into a full discussion of the subject, however, we must call attention to two difficulties involved in our investigation. The first one has to do with the task of definition because:

Definitions are only tools; they are to some degree arbitrary; they lay stress on similarities within a delimited area and on the differences outside it, thus giving emphasis to one aspect of reality.⁶

³ Michael Barnes, *Christian Identity & Religious Pluralism: Religions in Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 11.

⁴ A lengthy discussion of the subject can be found in the following surveys: Alan Race, *Christian and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in Christian Theology of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982); Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995). The most comprehensive treatment of the three approaches, however, has been Knitter’s book, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986)

⁵ Similar attitudes with different expressions can be found in almost every major religious tradition. As we have noted earlier, these paradigms and definitions are functional. They help us understand the subject under study by laying stress on similarities within a delimited area and on the differences outside it, thus giving emphasis to one aspect of reality. So, it is possible to see similar categories within, say, the Islamic or Jewish traditions. However, because these paradigms were created within the Christian tradition in the West, we are in a sense compelled to utilize them to find our way around in an unlimited ocean of ideas. Otherwise, neither Christianity nor any other religion is inclusivist, exclusivist or pluralist in principle. All the religious traditions show a great variety of attitudes not only towards an “alien” religion but also towards denominations or sects within their own cultural and religious environment.

Investigating the subject from a cross-cultural perspective, making two or more religions the subject of investigation, would be a great contribution to the discourse on contemporary study of religion, but it would go beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, we have to examine the issue only within the Christian tradition.

⁶ J. M. Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 4.

If what is being defined is a concept, or a pattern of thought, the task becomes even more difficult. Therefore, definitions used especially in this chapter are considered as working or functional definitions.

The second one is closely related to the first. Our attitudes towards the Other occupy a broad spectrum of opinions. These attitudes range from the exclusivist to inclusivist, and pluralist accommodation. Between the exclusivist and pluralist ends of the spectrum lie a variety of psychological, political, and religious attitudes. This is true also for theology since theology has become polarized between positions of radical exclusivism⁷ and various forms of relativism. Therefore, it is impossible to begin by assuming that there are “right” and “wrong” places on what is really a whole spectrum of opinions except, perhaps, at the extremes. Although it is impossible to avoid these difficulties altogether, I hope to minimize the risk of misrepresentation by giving a general description of each response (attitude) and focusing on one or more of its representatives.

Exclusivism: Karl Barth

Let us start by asking the question why there are different responses to the coming of the Other in the first place? As often is the case, the fundamental issue turns out to be philosophical rather than theological because what is involved here is the issue of knowledge. As human beings, and/or as believing human beings we need to know the ultimate answers to the ultimate questions to feel secure – questions like who gets saved? How? By whom? Simply put, we need to know the truth of the matter. Each approach, therefore, seems to give different answers to similar, if not the same set of questions.

Exclusivism affirms that truth is found in only one religion: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. Therefore, salvation and true revelation are found, say, only in Jesus. Under Christianity, therefore the Christ event is constitutive of any authentic encounter with God, always and everywhere. This has been expressed in the axiom of the Roman Catholic Church, “*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (Outside the Church no salvation).⁸ Until recently, this axiom has played a decisive role in shaping

⁷ For a fine discussion of the different shades of exclusivisms, see Alvin Plantinga, “Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 172-193; For a lengthy defense of the exclusivist paradigm see Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Michigan: Eerdmans, Company, 1991); Kenneth Kracknell, *Towards a New Relationship, Christians and Peoples of Other Faiths* (London: Epworth, 1986).

⁸ Scholars agree, however, that this notion (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*) has not been the only position the Church has taken towards other religions. In fact, the attitudes of the Church towards other religions is

the Church's attitude towards the adherents of other religious traditions.⁹ This attitude presupposes a marginalization of other religions as flawed human attempts at salvation and, therefore, to truth.¹⁰ Understandably, the purpose of encountering or dialoging with the adherents of other religious traditions is then to save their lost souls. So, any encounter with the Other is considered to be an occasion to convert others to one's own religion that contains whatever is called truth, which is the ultimate and only way for salvation.

Although there are different representatives of the exclusivist paradigm not only in Christianity in general, but in Protestantism in particular, we will limit our investigation to Karl Barth's theological approach to other religious traditions since there is tendency among scholars to see Barth's theology as the most extreme form of the exclusivist theory.¹¹ P. Knitter, among others, presents Barth as the prime representative of what he calls the "conservative evangelical model."¹²

In order to understand Barth's theology of religions we must first analyze briefly the context in which he developed his theology. Two significant developments, which threatened the traditional self-understanding of religion, shaped the times in which Karl Barth wrote.

The first was the increasing influence relativism had on every field of science including theology. The second one was the newly established field of religious studies or comparative religion and its attempt to treat religion like any other social and cultural element in society without giving one religion any priority over the others.

One of the representatives of relativism in theology was the prominent German liberal theologian and historian of religion, Ernst Troeltsch.¹³ In his later writings, Troeltsch, like Schleiermacher before

described, from the patristic age to the twentieth century, as, what Knitter calls, "a teeter-tottering between two fundamental beliefs: God's universal love and desire to save, and the necessity of the church for salvation.... It is with Augustine, however, that the balance begins to shift towards an exclusivity of revelation and grace within the Church." Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions* (Markynoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 121.

⁹ Race, *Christians*, 10; D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 52. Knitter, *One Earth*, 26.

¹⁰ Duffy, *Encountering the Stranger*, 2.

¹¹ Race, *Christians*, 11-17.

¹² P. F. Knitter, *No Other Name*, 80-87.

¹³ Troeltsch's theology of religions is particularly difficult to examine since there seem to be two differing stages in his writings. In his earlier writings he presents Christianity as the highest religion because it represents the highest point of human development. In *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion*, for instance, he states: "Christianity must be understood not only as the culmination point but also as the convergence point of all the developmental tendencies that can be discerned in religion. It may therefore be

him, finds in human subjectivity an innate orientation towards the Divine, which was the *religious a priori* that was common to all religions¹⁴ This led him to ask the question of how our finite humanity can come to know that which is Unlimited and Ultimate: the Divine. After all, are we not essentially historical beings who can exist and experience ourselves only within a particular history?¹⁵ Also, have not Christian mystics in general and theologians in particular argued that God is absolute Mystery?¹⁶ While at first Troeltsch seems content to see Christianity as the culmination of all religious endeavor, later he realized that this will not do. The only way of distinguishing between religions is in terms of cultural appropriateness and personal commitment. It follows then that truth can be truth for me, for my culture and for my religious tradition.¹⁷

If our understanding of the Divine is culturally, historically, and religiously conditioned, then no historical manifestation of the Absolute can be absolute. Thus, no religion is capable of comprehending the Absolute in itself (*an sich*),¹⁸ including Christianity. Thus Christianity is not, argues Troeltsch, a changeless, exhaustive, and unconditioned realization of that which is conceived as the universal principle of religion.¹⁹ He goes even further by placing Christianity on the same par with other religious traditions of the world in the following passage:

designated, in contrast to other religions, as the focal synthesis of all religious tendencies and the disclosure of what is in principle a new way of life.” See Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, trans. David Reid (Richmond: John Knox, 1971), 114.

One of the later examples of his writings is the following article: E. Troeltsch, “The Place of Christianity Among the World Religions,” in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 11-31. Here Troeltsch is clearly reflecting the traditional self-understanding of Christianity not only as one religion among others, but as the embodiment of true religion per se. In a similar way he argues that it is impossible that a new religious orientation will arise and nullify Christianity. See, Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 108. This meant that, for Troeltsch, Christianity is the final stage in the development of human religiosity.

¹⁴ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 25.

¹⁵ He makes his position clearer when he argues that “...absolute truth belongs to the future and will appear in the Judgment of God and the cessation of earthly history. Thus even on its premises, the absolute lies beyond history and is a truth that in many respects remains veiled. See, Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 114-115; Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 26

¹⁶ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 34.

¹⁷ Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 86-106.

¹⁸ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 26.

¹⁹ Troeltsch, *Absoluteness of Christianity*, 115.

The Christian religion is in every moment of its history a purely *historical phenomenon*, subject to all limitations to which any individual historical phenomenon is exposed, just [like] the other great religions.²⁰

In a similar vein Troelstch states that "...it cannot be proved with absolute certainty that Christianity will always remain the final culmination point that will never be surpassed."²¹ As this line of argument has made clear, Troelstch started with the absoluteness of Christianity and came to a point where he challenged the traditional self-understanding of Christianity as the only way of salvation. It is no wonder he is regarded as the father of relativism in theology.

The second groundbreaking event was the establishment of religious studies or comparative religion towards the end of the nineteenth century. Representatives of this new science, which in fact reflected the spirit of the Enlightenment, treated religion as a subject-matter to be investigated. This "new" interest in religion intended to study religion as a social phenomenon; "as a special, unique area of culture and experience, alongside art, politics, and other human symbols."²² This meant that religion itself was to become the subject of interpretation, losing its privileged position as the sole interpreter of the universe. It is against this background that Barth developed his massively articulate theology of the word of God. In other words, Barth's is a reactionary dialectical theology to the two tendencies that we have just explained.

In order to present Christianity as the sole way for salvation, Barth carefully differentiates revelation from religion. He does this to prove that religions are not necessarily ways that lead their adherents to salvation. On the contrary, Barth argues that religion, which is man's attempt to know God apart from revelation, is an act of unbelief. Therefore:

The genuine believer will not say that he [she] came to faith from faith, but from unbelief, even though the attitude and activity with which he[she] met revelation, and still meets it, is religion. For in faith, man's religion as such is shown by revelation to be resistance to it.²³

Here Barth seems to have in mind the definition given to religion by the scholars of comparative religion, according to which religion as a general category that can be examined as, say, an element of culture or as a social

²⁰ Ibid., 71, 81.

²¹ Ibid., 114.

²² William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 5.

²³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2 (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1956), 302.

phenomenon. This new understanding of religion did not see any difference among the religions of the world; they are all equally subject to interpretation. Barth clearly agrees with what the scholars of comparative religion had to say about religion in general. Therefore, he makes a clear distinction between religion that these scholars were referring to, and revelation, which he sees as the foundation of God's religion. For him, religion is "clearly seen to be a human attempt to anticipate what God in His revelation wills to do and does do. It is the attempted replacement of the divine work by a human manufacture."²⁴

With this interpretation Barth did not hesitate to put the animistic religions, Islam, Buddhism and any other religion in the same category as false religions.²⁵ Barth's criticism included institutionalized Christianity if it failed to obey the faith with which it was entrusted. In other words, even the Church, as an institution only, has no theological justification to view itself as superior to other faiths.²⁶ "In our discussion of 'religion as unbelief,'" Barth declares, "we did not consider the distinction between Christian and non-Christian religion. ...Whatever we said about the other religions affected the Christian similarly."²⁷

Why is religion "unbelief" is the basic question whose answer would shed light upon the discussion. The answer is that "the divine reality offered and manifested to us in revelation is replaced by a concept of God arbitrarily and willfully evolved by man."²⁸ As a result, theology has lost its object, revelation. This is shown by the fact that it could exchange it, and with its own birthright, for the concept of religion. Thus a "godless man," cannot know God by himself without the grace of God, without revelation; plain and simple.

We have established thus far that, for Barth, only revelation makes any difference among the religions of the world. In what sense, then, is Barth regarded as the extreme representative of exclusivism in Christianity? After all, every adherent of every religion sees revelation as the basis of his/her religion. Barth puts Christianity, as an institution in the same category with other religions as unbelief. However, according to Barth, Christianity is superior to all of the rest nonetheless, not as a *religion*, as defined by a scholar of comparative religion, but because it is the sole receiver of revelation--a revelation through which God made Himself known to us. Here, of course, by revelation is not meant a revelation as understood in Islam, for instance, as a divine message sent by God to God's people through prophets in a continuous chain at different times and places, reaching its culmination in the Prophet of Islam. Rather revelation has a "unique" meaning and place in Barth's theology. Revelation is God's self-

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 281.

²⁶ Race, *Religious Pluralism*, 13.

²⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 326-327.

²⁸ Ibid., 302.

offering and self-manifestation in Jesus Christ.²⁹ Thus, the Christ event is the basis of any attempt to understand God and God's purpose in creation:

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ maintains that our justification and sanctification, our conversion and salvation, have been brought about and achieved once and for all in Jesus Christ. And our faith in Jesus Christ consists in recognizing and admitting and affirming and accepting the fact that everything has actually been done for us once and for all in Jesus Christ...He alone is the word of God that is spoken to us.³⁰

This passage makes it abundantly clear that in Barth's theology revelation is synonymous with what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have unveiled of the Father's nature: Jesus is the Grace of God.³¹

One of the characteristics of Christian revelation, which makes it superior to all other religions, is the fact that while the human role is passive, God is the active part because through revelation "God reveals himself. He reveals himself *through* himself. He reveals *himself*."³² In other words, Christian revelation is unique because every step of it is conducted by God alone. It is an event from above, not below. It is this historical event that elevates Christianity from the status of a false religion to the true religion, abolishing the religion as unbelief, hence the "Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion."³³

It is safe to argue from Barth's perspective that what makes the Christian understanding of revelation, and therefore Christianity, different from other revelations is its indissoluble union with the person of Jesus. The name of Jesus Christ has created Christianity; eliminate the Christ-event and the religion is blunted and weakened. Eliminate the name Jesus, and Christianity is reduced to the status of the religion of the scholar of comparative religion like any other religion.³⁴ It is only because of the Christ-event that Christianity is unique and it is superior to any other world religion as the only way that leads to salvation both in this world and the

²⁹ Ibid., 301.

³⁰ Ibid., 308.

³¹ J.A. Veithch, "Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974), 13. pp: 1-22.

³² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 340; Veithch, "Revelation and Religion," 9.

³³ Under this title Barth examines three important issues in theology in general, and his dialectical theology in particular that are relevant to our discussion: 1) the problem of religion in theology, 2) religion as unbelief, and 3) the true religion. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2 (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1956), 280-361.

³⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 347.

hereafter. To be sure, Barth is not alone in his explanation of Christian revelation (the Christ-event) as the only way for salvation. William L. Craig, among others, echoes similar views.

Craig's exposition relies heavily on the Bible in his defense of the exclusivist approach. His is an answer to John Hick's universalistic question when Hick asks "is it credible that the loving God and Father of all men has decreed that only those born within one particular thread of human history shall be saved?"³⁵ In other words, is it fitting, a pluralist asks, that a loving Father discriminates among his children based on their place of birth? Whereas for Hick the answer is "No," Craig's answer is in the affirmative³⁶ and for two reasons.

The first reason emanates from the literal reading of the Bible. According to Craig, the Bible makes it clear that human sin is universal, and all persons stand morally guilty and condemned before God, utterly incapable of redeeming themselves through righteous acts.³⁷ But God, as a loving Father, provided the Christ-event as a necessary means for men to be saved. To reject Jesus as the sole savior is to reject God's grace and forgiveness, to refuse the means of salvation provided by God.³⁸ It is not up to us to decide which way leads to salvation and which one leads to damnation. It was made clear by Jesus when he said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14.6). Again, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4.12).

The second reason is both biblical and logical. Contrary to Hick's position, Craig does not see any problem with God's condemning persons who adhere to non-Christian religions.³⁹ True, argues Craig, God the loving father does not desire any of God's children to suffer. That is why God gave people two options to choose: (1) accept Jesus as the savior and be saved, (2) refuse Jesus and be condemned; plain, pure, and simple. Moreover, not only did God, the loving Father, gave God's children two options but also told them via the Gospels which option is right. So, if one desires to take the wrong path that is unfortunate, even tragic, because "those who make a well-informed and free decision to reject Christ are self-condemned since they repudiate God's unique sacrifice for sin."⁴⁰ In other words, it is the

³⁵ John Hick, "Jesus and the World Religions," in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (London: SCM Press, 1977), 180.

³⁶ We will examine Hick's views in detail as the major exponent of the pluralist paradigm later in this chapter.

³⁷ William L. Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39. 38-53.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

person who shuts out God's mercy and seals his/her own destiny. Therefore, it is the person, in the final analysis, who is responsible for one's own condemnation, since both salvation and damnation are in one's own hands.

Craig wishes that Hick's universalism and pluralist theories were true, but they are not. Craig summarizes the status of the non-Christians and his own objective in the face of the coming of the Other as follows: "My compassion towards those in other world religions is therefore expressed, not in pretending that they are not lost and dying without Christ, but by my supporting and making every effort to communicate to them the life-giving message of salvation through Christ."⁴¹

In sum, according to the exclusivist paradigm the non-Christians are lost and they need to be saved. It is incumbent upon every Christian believer, therefore, to communicate the life-giving, life-saving message of Christ to the adherents of other religious traditions. Thus, according to the exclusivist paradigm, it is only the Christians who are going to be saved; and they are going to be saved only through Jesus.

Inclusivism: Karl Rahner

Inclusivism,⁴² which has been the official position of Roman Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council, is a break from the exclusivist paradigm, and it is in a sense unique to Catholicism. This point led some scholars, like P. Knitter, to call it the "Catholic Model"⁴³ in their exposition of different attitudes of various Christian denominations towards non-Christian religions.

The position taken at the Second Vatican Council is considered to be a watershed in Christian relationships with other religions⁴⁴ because it breaks with the traditional exclusivist self-understanding of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis other religions. It also represents what Knitter calls "the end point" in confessional Christian efforts to come to a more positive theology of other religions,⁴⁵ since this seems to be the boundary no theologian has attempted, at least officially, to cross.

Those who adhere to the inclusivist paradigm maintain that the saving and self-revealing God of Christians, "who desires everyone to be

⁴¹ Ibid., 52.

⁴² For a detailed discussion of this approach the reader is referred to the following surveys: Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in Christian Theology of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 38-69; P. Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 120-144; For a well-founded defense of the inclusivist attitude see, Gavin D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 80-117.

⁴³ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 120-144.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 120.

saved and come to the knowledge of truth (Timothy 2:4), is present and at work in and through the world's religions.⁴⁶ If this is the case, the question arises in what sense an inclusivist is different from a universalist or a pluralist. The answer lies in the following formula: true, God's saving power and grace is operative in other religions, but whatever truth and saving power to be found in other religions is already included in Christianity and found there more fully and more certainly.⁴⁷ Other religions may have elements that are comparable to that of Christianity, but they are either superseded or fulfilled by those of Christianity.⁴⁸ This is so because Christ encompasses the others by being present in them anonymously or by fulfilling them. Therefore, this approach has been characterized as "one that affirms the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions while still maintaining that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God."⁴⁹

One of the most influential figures, if not the single most influential one, in the development of the Catholic Model before and after the Council was Karl Rahner with his much-discussed theory of "anonymous Christians." This portion of the chapter, therefore, will investigate specifically Rahner's contribution to the discussion of the coming of the Other.

What led Rahner to explore the possibility of extending the hermeneutical circle to include other religions was the need to come to terms with the diversity of religions. By diversity of religions Rahner does not mean the diversity of Christian denominations, but of religions other than Christianity.⁵⁰ He believes that Christians have an obligation to address the issue of religious pluralism because:

[I]t (diversity) is a greater threat and a reason for greater unrest for Christianity than for any other religion, for no other religion--not even Islam--maintains so absolutely that it is the religion, the one and only valid revelation of the one living God as does the Christian religion.⁵¹

⁴⁶ J. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 26-29, 161-162.

⁴⁷ Duffy, *Encountering the Stranger*, 3.

⁴⁸ DiNoia, *Diversity of Religions*, 14-19.

⁴⁹ D'Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism*, 80; Duffy, *Encountering the Stranger*, 3.

⁵⁰ Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 115-116.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

Things have changed so dramatically in every realm of life, including religion, that the West no longer can see itself as the center of the history of the world. Neither is it possible to argue that it (the West) represents the final stage in the development of human culture. The same can be said not only for matters of religion in general, but for Christianity in particular. With this in mind, Rahner asks the question of whether a Christian can believe that the overwhelming mass of his/her brothers/sisters are unquestionably and in principle excluded from the fulfillment of their lives and condemned to eternal meaninglessness?⁵² His answer is “No.”

Having analyzed the then current situation, Rahner sought to respond to the issue of religious diversity with a theory that would retain the unique status of Christianity on the one hand, and would appreciate the partial value of other religions on the other. In order to do that, he aimed to hold together two equally important premises.

The first is that salvation is universal. God’s grace is operative in all the great religions of the world because “God desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth (Timothy 2:4). Every human being has, what Rahner calls, a “supernatural existential” that makes it possible and necessary for even a non-Christian to receive God’s grace unless he or she says in his/her heart “there is no God.”⁵³ This means that there is a potential in every human being to receive the “transcendental revelation”⁵⁴ through which God intends to save God’s children.

There are two premises involved at this stage of our discussion that are in constant opposition to each other. The first one is that salvation is something specifically Christian, which had been the traditional self-understanding of Christianity. The second one is that God desires salvation for everyone. How can a Christian, living in a religiously plural world, juxtapose these two notions?

Rahner believes that these two premises cannot be reconciled.⁵⁵ If God really desires to save all mankind, then God fulfills what God intends. If God’s grace is extended to all humankind, then it is necessary that salvation must be offered to all humankind as well. So, Rahner concludes by suggesting that “Christians should be animated by a *Heilsoptimismus*; they should ‘think optimistically’ about the possibilities of salvation outside Christianity, no matter how much error and evil they seem to find in the

⁵² Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 391. Note that exclusivists asked the same question but gave it a different response. As we shall see later in this chapter, the same question is asked by the pluralists like Hick, which led them to see all religious traditions basically equally true and valid, which in their own unique ways lead their adherents to, what Hick calls, the Ultimate Reality.

⁵³ Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” 393, 395.

⁵⁴ Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 125.

⁵⁵ Rahner, “Christianity and Non Christian Religions,” 122-123.

world. To think ‘pessimistically of men’ is to underestimate God’s love, grace,⁵⁶ and therefore power and intent to save all humanity.

The second premise is that Christianity sees itself as the absolute religion. However, God’s universal grace, and therefore salvation willed by God is the salvation won only by Christ.⁵⁷ It is by virtue of the Christ-event that Christianity sees itself as the absolute religion, which has no equal, intended for all humankind at all times.⁵⁸ In other words, salvation is intended for all humankind because God, as the loving father, intended to save His children. However, this salvation is brought about only by the Christ-event, which is unique to Christianity, which also makes Christianity unique among other religious traditions of the world. Thus, Jesus’ crucifixion on the cross, in behalf of all humankind, and his triumphant resurrection, are the two indispensable elements of Christianity upon which the whole Christian theology depends.

Rahner’s theology of religions makes it clear that the adherents of any non-Christian religion will be saved in their own way. There is a socio-historical link at this point that makes this argument plausible. It is that because God desires all humankind to be saved and that no one should be lost unless he/she in his/her heart says, “there is no God,”⁵⁹ every human being is intended to find salvation within his/her socio-historical condition. Every human being lives and receives religion within his/her particular individual and social environment from which no one can escape.⁶⁰

Seen from this perspective, it is safe to argue, then, that if “man can live his/her proffered relationship to God only in society, man must have had the right, and indeed the duty, to live his relationship to God within the religious and social realities offered to him in his particular historical situation.”⁶¹ This interpretation leads the discussion to a point where it can be argued that a Hindu, for instance, will be saved within that particular religion through the sacraments of Hinduism by virtue of the spiritual and moral principles inherent in the Hindu way of life as a

⁵⁶ Ibid., 121; Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 125;

⁵⁷ Rahner, “Christianity and Non Christian Religions,” 122.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁹ Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” 395.

⁶⁰ The Second Vatican Council affirms the universality of salvation and grace to include not only Jews, Muslims and so on, but those “who sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them thorough the dictates of conscience.” “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” (*Lumen Gentium*), para.16. In *The Documents of Vatican II*. ed. Walter M. Abbott. Guild Press, 1966.

Some scholars argue that the last sentence refers to the express atheists who follow their conscience that are moved by grace and can partake in eternal life. See, Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 124.

⁶¹ Rahner, “Christianity and Non-Christian Religions,” 131.

whole.⁶² But this salvation, in the final analysis, is won by the Christ-event, which is both the normative and definitive revelation of God.

If God's grace is present in our very nature, and if salvation is universal how would Rahner explain the missionary activity of the Church? What is the meaning and end of dialogue among religions?

Rahner is in complete agreement with what the Second Vatican Council declared on these issues. As we have seen, the key issue that extends the possibility of salvation to all humanity is Christ's redeeming sacrifice for all as the Council declares:

[S]ince Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.⁶³

This understanding of non-Christian religions led Rahner to recognize "what is 'true' and 'holy' in the different religions and that the concrete forms and doctrines of these religions are to be regarded with straightforward seriousness."⁶⁴ This straightforward seriousness invites every Christian to take non-Christian religions seriously since The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.⁶⁵ However incomplete this truth be found in other religions, it is the presence of "that Truth," which leads the Church to respect, cherish and promote their spiritual and cultural values; the "fullness of religious life," however, is found only in Jesus Christ.⁶⁶

Seen from this perspective one can make the point that although God's salvation is universal, this universality does not diminish the Church's mission to preach the Gospel.⁶⁷ For according to Rahner a non-Christian who, through no fault of his/her own, has not received the Gospel, is considered to be an anonymous Christian⁶⁸ because of Christ's universal

⁶² Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), 54.

⁶³ "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," (*Gaudium Et Spes*), para. 22. In *The Documents of Vatican II*.

⁶⁴ Rahner, "Importance of the Non-Christians Religions," 289.

⁶⁵ "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," (*Nostra Aetate*), para. 2. In *The Documents of Vatican II*.

⁶⁶ Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 164.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," 131. Both Christian and non-Christian scholars have criticized Rahner's celebrated theory of the "anonymous Christian" for being condescending. This should not belittle Rahner's contribution to breaking through the age-old Christian exclusivism. First of all, the doctrine was meant to be used by Christians within Christian

sacrifice. But it is not possible to infer from this conception that “since man is already an anonymous Christian...the explicit preaching of Christianity is superfluous.”⁶⁹ In other words, explicit preaching of the Gospel (Missionary activity) is still necessary because:

[T]he individual who grasps Christianity in a *clearer* and *purser* and more *reflective way* has, other things being equal, a still *greater chance of salvation* than someone who is *merely an anonymous Christian*.⁷⁰

The paragraph makes it clear that, although God’s grace is operative in the heart of every human being, the “openly Christian” has a greater chance of salvation than an “anonymous Christian.” Both, however, are in need of the Church’s preaching.⁷¹

Inclusivism then, as represented by Rahner, does not argue that truth is unique to Christianity. Rather, truth is found in other religions also, however incomplete it might be. Therefore, all such truth is in some way or another inferior to the Church’s truth. The truths taught by other religions are preparatory and/or incomplete versions of the truths taught by the Christian Church. This is because the fullness of religious truth is found in

theology. This means that the doctrine was not promoted as a model for interreligious dialogue. Secondly, given the circumstances in which Rahner developed his theory, it should be considered as a giant step, however incomplete, towards promoting better relations among the religions of the world. It did in fact broaden and engender a more optimistic and tolerant attitude towards non-Christians. For an insightful defense of Rahner’s doctrine of anonymous Christians see, G.D’Costa, “Karl Rahner’s Anonymous Christian--A Reappraisal,” *Modern Theology* 1-2 (1985): 131-148.

⁶⁹ Ibid.132.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The necessity of missionary activity was detailed by the Council in the *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (Ad Gentes)*. It states clearly that “This missionary activity finds its reason in the will of God, ‘who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is no God, and no Mediator between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as ransom for all’ (1 Tim. 2:4-5), ‘neither is there salvation in any other’ (Acts 4: 12). Therefore, all must be converted to Him as He is made known by the Church’s preaching. All must be incorporated into Him by baptism, and into the Church which is His body. ...Therefore, though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:16), yet a necessity lies upon the Church... and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the Gospel. Hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity.” “Council in the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church,” *(Ad Gentes)*, para. 7. In *The Documents of Vatican II*.

Christ, and is, in the final analysis, always about the God who is fully present in Jesus of Nazareth.

Thus, according to the inclusivist paradigm, not only the Christians but also non-Christians will be saved within their own religion, which was made available to them by their socio-historical context. However, the Christ-event is the decisive and normative element in every salvation attained by both Christians and non-Christians.

Pluralism: John Hick

Scholars have interpreted pluralism as formulated especially by John Hick, to mean that different religions are equally valid salvific paths to the same goal.⁷² In its extreme version, all religions are considered to be formally true and basically equivalent. Therefore, belonging to one religion bears the same relation to the attainment of salvation as does belonging to any other religion.⁷³ The advocates of this approach do not deny, for instance, that Jesus is unique. Rather, they believe he is unique to Christians, as Muhammad is unique to Muslims and so on. In this regard, every religious figure is regarded as a contact point with the ultimate Reality or the ineffable Real.⁷⁴ Although there are a great variety of views within the pluralist camp, at this stage of our discussion we will limit our investigation to John Hick's writings who he is considered one of its major exponents.

Hick's pluralism is a clear reaction both to the exclusivist and inclusivist paradigms in the face of the coming of other religions. Careful reading of Hick's writing indicates a genuine struggle over what he perceived to be insurmountable problems with the traditional stands. Basic to his argument seems to be his conviction that *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* will not do.⁷⁵ If we accept this axiom, Hick argues, we will deny the salvation and eternal life in God to those who remain outside of Christianity.⁷⁶ This conviction led him to question the Christian notion that

⁷² D'Costa, *Theology and religious Pluralism*, 22.

⁷³ Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 142.

⁷⁴ John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy*, 1988, pp.366-9; See also, J. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980).

⁷⁵ Hick argues that the traditional self-understanding of religions will not do in a religiously diverse world. In order to move beyond it, Hick calls for a Copernican revolution in the theology of religions. See, John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faith: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993). Although the whole book is devoted to the problems of religious diversity, it is in the ninth chapter, "The Copernican Revolution in Theology," that Hick explains how and why a Copernican revolution must replace the traditional Ptolemaic theology in religions.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

Jesus of Nazareth was God⁷⁷ because, if Jesus was God, it follows that God founded Christianity and Christianity alone. If this is the case, then it is true that “Christianity has a unique status as the way of salvation provided and appointed by God himself.”⁷⁸ If God founded Christianity and Christianity only, “it follows that the salvation thus made possible within Christianity cannot also be possible outside it.”⁷⁹ Hick finds this notion unacceptable. Moreover, his constant exposure to other religious traditions has intensified his dissatisfaction with the traditional orthodoxy. Adding these issues together Hick argues:

It [*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*] conflicts with our concept of God, which we have received from Jesus, as the loving heavenly father of *all mankind*; could such a Being have restricted the possibility of salvation to those who happened to have been born in certain countries in certain periods of History?⁸⁰

Thus, Hick assumes that this entails the vast majority of humankind throughout history have not been saved and that this in and of itself is sufficient to discredit the traditional interpretation. After all, argues Hick, in the great majority of cases, the religious tradition within which a religious person finds his relationship to the Real depends upon where and when he/she is born. Again, in many cases, the faith that a person accepts is the only faith that has been effectively made available to him/her.⁸¹ So, if a person is born in Sri Lanka it is more likely than not he/she will be “raised” as a Buddhist. Likewise, if person is born into a Muslim family in a Muslim society, that person will be a culturally and linguistically conditioned Muslim, and will see the whole world through the lenses presented to him/her by that society.

Taking all these insights together, Hick asks if it is possible that salvation is taking place not only in Christianity, but also in other great religions of the world! His answer is in the affirmative. “The great world religions, then,” declares Hick, “are ways of salvation.”⁸² In order to argue his point, Hick attempted to know what was taking place within the circles of different religious traditions by observing what each religion was

⁷⁷ John Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977): 165-185.

⁷⁸ Hick, “The Copernican Revolution in Theology,” 26.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*; Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” 180.

⁸¹ J. Hick, “On Grading Religions,” *Religious Studies* 17 (1983): 456-467.

⁸² J. Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Salvation,” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 56.

offering to its adherents. This engagement had profound implications for his views of other religions. In a celebrated passage he says:

Occasionally attending worship in mosque and synagogue, temple and gurdwara, it was evident to me that essentially the same kind of thing is taking place in them as in a Christian Church--namely, human beings opening their minds to a higher divine reality, known as personal and good and as demanding righteousness and love between men and women.⁸³

Hick's phenomenological observation led him eventually to argue that all the great religious traditions attempt to transform their adherents from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.⁸⁴ That is to say, the adherents of every great religion strive to open their minds to a higher reality either by coming together in their houses of worship or in their deeply personal lives. This is the crux of Hick's whole argument.

If the same thing were taking place in all the great religions of the world, and if the various religions are in contact with the same divine reality, as Hick claims, why is there not greater uniformity of belief among the many religions? How would Hick explain the existence of more than one religion?⁸⁵ The answer lies in his understanding of the Divine or, what he calls the "ineffable Real."⁸⁶

⁸³ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 17-18, 62-63.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 9. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Response to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 36.

⁸⁵ Hick makes it clear that his is not an attempt to form a world religion. However, "while there cannot be a world religion, there can be approaches to a world theology. For if awareness of the transcendent reality that we call God is not confined to the Christian tradition, the possibility opens up of what might be called (for want of a better term) global theology." Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 21. In other words, Hick's theory should not be seen as the introduction of a new global religion, but rather as a fresh way of understanding existing religions, an explanatory framework for making sense of the relationship among religious traditions.

⁸⁶ In his later writings, Hick has given greater emphasis to the theme of ineffability, so that the Real is said to be utterly beyond the range of human conceptual linguistic categories. He states, "by 'ineffable' I mean (with qualifications to be mentioned presently) having a nature that is beyond the scope of our networks of human concepts. Thus the Real in itself cannot properly be said to be personal or impersonal, purposive or non-purposive, good or evil, substance or process, even one or many". For a detailed discussion of the subject see, John Hick, "Ineffability," *Religious Studies* 36 (March 2000): 35-46. See also, Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 239, 246-249, 264.

In order to answer these questions we have to examine the way Hick presents a comprehensive theory that accounts for the diversity in belief and practice by appealing to historical and cultural factors. Therefore the different religious expressions can be regarded as historically, culturally, and therefore religiously conditioned human responses to the same reality, the Real. As Hick puts it:

[W]e always perceive [the] transcendent through the lens of [a] particular religious culture with its distinctive set of concepts, myths, historical exemplars and devotional or meditational techniques. And it is this inexpugnable human contribution to religious awareness that accounts for the fascinating variations of religious thought, experience, and practice around the globe and down to through the centuries, in all their rational and irrational, profound and shallow, impressive and absurd, morally admirable and morally reprehensible features.⁸⁷

Drawing heavily upon Kant's epistemology of perception,⁸⁸ Hick suggests that cultural variables function as conceptual lenses through which different peoples understand and respond to the religious Ultimate.⁸⁹ Put another way, although ultimately the various religious traditions encounter the same divine reality, historical and cultural factors shape both the awareness of and the way we respond to this reality. These factors function as filters through which the adherents of the great religious traditions perceive and understand the Real. Therefore, different religions are different responses to the same divine Reality.⁹⁰

As we have seen in our investigation into Hick's thought, there is a religious ultimate that is common to all religions. But what is the nature of this Ultimate? How do we perceive this ineffable Being? To be sure, although Hick maintains that there is a religious ultimate, this ultimate is not the direct object of our religious experience. Hick explains this argument with reference to the Kantian distinction between noumenon and phenomenon in the epistemology of perception.⁹¹ This distinction presupposes a formula according to which there is the religious ultimate in

⁸⁷ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 8.

⁸⁸ Kant's epistemology of perception teaches that the categories of the understanding give conceptual shape to the input of the sensible representation. On this and Hick's use of Kantian epistemology, see Paul Eddy, "Religious Pluralism: Another Look at John Hick's Neo-Kantian Proposal," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meekers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 126-138.

⁸⁹ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 243-245.

⁹⁰ Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 52.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

itself (*an Sich*) and the religious ultimate as experienced by historically and culturally conditioned persons. He refers to the former by the term Real. But the Real as it is in itself is never the direct object of religious experience. Rather, the Real is experienced by finite humankind in one of any number of historically and culturally conditioned manifestations of the real. So, depending upon the culture in which a person grows up, he/she may experience the Real as personal, i.e., Yahweh, Allah, Krishna, or non-personal, i.e., *Dharmakaya*, *sunyata*, *nirguna* Brahman.⁹²

Whereas Hick calls the various personal conceptions, or manifestations, of the Real *personae* of the Real; he refers to the conceptions of the Real as non-personal as *impersonae* of the Real in the following way:

For Kant God is postulated, not experienced. In partial agreement but also partial disagreement with him, I want to say that the real *an sich* is postulated by us as a presupposition, not of the moral life, but of religious experience and the religious life, whilst the gods, as also the mystically known Brahman, Sunyata and so on, are phenomenal manifestations of the Real occurring within the realm of religious experience.⁹³

The Real in itself (*an sich*), then, is the “divine noumenon” that is encountered within the various religious traditions as the range of “divine phenomena” exemplified in the religious history of mankind. Since we are historically, culturally, and linguistically conditioned, as Hick argues, we will never experience the Real in itself (*an Sich*). So, it is hardly an exaggeration for Hick to conclude that, “the Real *an sich* is the ultimate Mystery.”⁹⁴

From the above considerations one is tempted to accuse Hick of promoting radical relativism. After all, is not every religious tradition a human response to the ineffable Real? If this is the case, is there any criterion by which any religion can be judged?

Trying to avoid the pitfalls of relativism, Hick’s answer is in the affirmative. As we have seen, salvation, understood as the transformation

⁹² Ibid., 51-53, 83.

⁹³ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 243. We must note that Hick admits that his philosophical framework is Kantian “with the proviso that the phenomenal world is the noumenal world as humanly experienced. The result is the distinctively non-Kantian thesis that the divine is experienced (rather than postulated, as Kant believed), but is experienced within the limitations of our human cognitive apparatus in ways analogous to that in which he argued that we experience our physical environment.” See, Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 83,104-105

⁹⁴ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 246-247, 349.

from self-centeredness to the Reality-centeredness, Hick argues, is evident in all major religions.⁹⁵ But from our present perspective, it is impossible to rank religions according to their soteriological effectiveness. Therefore,

it may be that one [religion] facilitates human liberation/salvation more than the others, but, if so, this is not evident to human vision. So far as we can tell, they are equally productive of that transition from self to Reality which we see in the saints of all traditions.⁹⁶

Although all the great religions are various responses to the same Real, not all the responses to, and perceptions of, the Real have equal value. “Some mediate God to mankind better than others.”⁹⁷ Therefore, if there is a criterion to judge religious traditions, Hick contends, the basic criterion must be soteriological. Accordingly, religious traditions “have greater or less value according as they promote or hinder the salvific transformation.”⁹⁸ In the light of this criterion:

[W]e can readily see that each of the great world faiths constitutes a context for salvation/liberation: for each has produced its own harvest of saints.... The salvation/liberation, which is the function of religion to facilitate, is a human transformation which we see most conspicuously in the saints of all traditions.⁹⁹

This paragraph makes it clear that the various religions of the world are to be affirmed as equally legitimate religious alternatives that leads their adherents to the ultimate Reality.

⁹⁵ It is noteworthy that Hick’s reflections upon religions are related to what he calls “[the] great religions of the world” or “major religions.” In other words, his reflections do not include Marxism among others, for instance, as he puts it: “Personally I prefer a definition of ‘religion[,]’ which involves an essential reference to the Transcendent and which consequently does not include Marxism.” See, Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 120. Neither does Hick seem to be eager to count the so-called new religious movements as religious traditions. *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹⁶ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 86-87.

⁹⁷ John Hick, “Pluralism and the Reality of the Transcendent” *Christian Century* 98 (1981): 46-47. For a clear discussion of the issue of grading religions see, John Hick, “On Grading Religions,” *Religious Studies* 17 (1981):451-467.

⁹⁸ Hick, *Interpretation of Religion*, 300.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 307.

Evaluation

The three approaches we have examined thus far can be regarded as three answers to the same problem of how to encounter the Other that does not share our religion or culture. Each response presents its argument from/within a particular worldview that is the most binding for its intended audience, which in many cases is alien to an outsider. Therefore, I find it highly problematic, if not impossible, to present an unbiased evaluation of each of the three approaches, since there is always an inherent danger of misrepresentation in every understanding. Bearing this in mind I will nonetheless give a brief evaluation of each paradigm.

As indicated earlier, an exclusivist argues that true religious claims are found only in one's own religion; therefore it is the only religion that leads to salvation. This is the same as to say that no other religion has any true claims among its teaching and doctrines, without denying the fact that other religions do have truth-claims, but these truth claims are only claims. Can this position be sustained in a religiously diverse world?

Harold A. Netland lists seven reasons why exclusivism should be rejected.¹⁰⁰ A careful examination reveals, however, that the theme that underlies all the reasons is the fact that no religious tradition is an isolated entity any longer, for every adherent of every religion is becoming a member of an ever-interdependent global community. The Other has arrived with the teachings and doctrines of its own. As Netland puts it, "Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, among others, are no longer exotic novelties seen only in magazines such as *National Geographic*."¹⁰¹ Or, as Knitter would say, "the Other is a mystery that is both fascinating and frightening--the *mysterium fascinatum et tremendum*."¹⁰²

With the coming of the Other we have realized that although there are major differences between what Griffiths calls "the home religion"¹⁰³ and the alien ones, there are considerable doctrinal similarities as well. Christians, Jews and Muslims argue, for instance, that they worship the same God. They trace their origins back to Abraham, who is considered to be the father of all, hence "Abrahamic Religions."¹⁰⁴ Again, the teaching that murder, for instance, is unacceptable is not a Buddhist virtue only; Christianity, Judaism, Islam, among others, all teach the same and/or similar virtues. Griffiths is right when he says "the greater in number a religion's teachings become, the more likely it is that some other religion

¹⁰⁰ See, Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 27-33.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰² Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Markynoll: 1995), 75.

¹⁰³ Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 53-65.

¹⁰⁴ Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology*, 254-269.

also teaches one or more of them.”¹⁰⁵ If there were any instances of commonness or identity between two religions, and the field of comparative religion teaches that there are, as the above examples show, it would mean that if the relevant teaching of one’s religion were true, so was the teaching of other religion.¹⁰⁶ It is possible to expand the list of examples, but suffice it to say that from an inclusivist and pluralist perspective, no thoughtful religious individual can be an exclusivist with respect to truth because there is at least a differentiated commonness among the major religions of the world. Therefore the claims of the exclusivist paradigm to absoluteness cannot be sustained.

Inclusivism, on the other hand, is an attempt to move beyond the age-old exclusivist understanding of the home religion vis-à-vis other religions. Again, it was due to the ever-increasing exposure of the home religion to other religious cultures that led, for instance, the Christian Church to examine its position and identity in a religiously diverse world.

Inclusivists within Christianity maintain that the saving and self-revealing God of Christians is present and at work in and through the world’s religions. However, whatever truth and saving power are found in other religions are already found in Christianity more fully and more certainly. Some scholars find this position ground-breaking¹⁰⁷ because it breaks with the age-old exclusivist paradigm on the one hand, and criticize it on the grounds that it does not go far enough to see other religions as having equally valid claims to truth and salvation on the other.¹⁰⁸ Because the saving power of God is present more fully and certainly in the home religion, it follows that missionary activity is still a necessary means to invite the adherents of other religions to one’s own, in our case to Christianity.¹⁰⁹ It is for this reason, argues Barnes, that Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims are hesitant to get involved in dialogue because:

¹⁰⁵ Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰⁷ Even a pluralist like Hick would praise the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council in his evaluation. Hick believes that “in comparison with the much earlier dogmatic statements...the Vatican II pronouncements are magnificently open and charitable.” Hick, *God and the Universe of Faith*, 126. In the same place, however, Hick criticizes the Church for not making the Copernican revolution that is needed in the Christian attitude to other faiths.

¹⁰⁸ For a detailed defense of the Inclusivist paradigm see, Gavin D’Costa, *Theology and Religious Pluralism: the Challenge of Other religions* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 80-116; Paul J. Griffiths, “The Uniqueness of Christian Doctrine Defended,” in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D’Costa (Markynoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 157-174.

¹⁰⁹ It certainly goes beyond the scope of this project, but it would be interesting to see if and how the notions of Christian missionary activity and Muslim *da’wah* (invitation, mission) are comparable in this regard.

[T]hey [Non-Christians] accuse Christians of developing more subtle way of proceeding; instead of being quite open about what they are up to, they achieve their conversions by going through the back door.¹¹⁰

If the entire truth is found only in one religion, then whatever is found in other religions is already and necessarily found in the home religion. This inference closes one's horizon to the Other, and therefore to the possibility of learning anything valuable from the Other. If this is the case, then what is the purpose and end of entering into dialogue with the Other? There arises a dilemma at this juncture. After all, can two partners in dialogue be equal conversation partners if there is nothing to learn from the Other on the one hand, and if a genuine dialogue should be anything but idle talk on the other. If one partner comes to the table with the conviction that he/she *owns* the whole truth, thereby closing his/her horizon to new possibilities, what is the meaning and end of dialogue other than teaching the Other what the complete version of the truth is? This question leads us to the conclusion that the Other, who has an inferior, distorted, or incomplete version of the truth must be cultivated, preached to, and converted. In this kind of encounter understanding the Other in his/her otherness is not the purpose any longer. Rather dialogue becomes what Barnes calls just a more civilized form of mission; it loses its primary objective which is to know the Other in order to find out who I am.¹¹¹

Both the exclusivist and pluralist attitudes can be criticized for many more different reasons, from many more different angles. However, the most profound underlying criticism leveled against both exclusivism and inclusivism is that both suffer from what Duffy calls "an *a priori* theory building."¹¹² In other words, that they have insufficient knowledge of other religious communities aside from the bare fact of their existence. As a result, oftentimes their theologies of religions depend upon their own teaching and doctrines, and not the teachings of other religions.

Whereas pluralists, like C. Smith, P. Knitter, and Hick, attempt to avoid this criticism by studying some of the great religions of the world, they give greater emphasis to similarities, ignoring the possibility that there may be some irreconcilable doctrinal differences among religions that no believing Christian, Buddhist or Muslim would be ready to discuss, let alone abandon. For if another religion contradicts their doctrinal convictions, they believe, it is not only different, it is simply wrong. As DiNoia argues, for a Buddhist whatever truth may exist outside of Buddhism has to concur with the teachings of the Buddha, Dharma.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Michael Barnes, *Christian Identity & Religious Pluralism: Religions in Conversation* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1989), 113.

¹¹¹ Barnes, *Christian Identity*, 115.

¹¹² Duffy, "Encountering the Stranger," 4.

¹¹³ J.A. DiNoia, *Diversity of Religions*, 120 ff.

The status of Jesus in Islam and Christianity, which regard themselves as monotheistic religions, is another such case in point. Christians believe in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, which are the two tenets upon which the whole of Christianity depends. Muslims argue to the contrary that this Christian doctrine is simply false, that Jesus was neither crucified nor was he killed by his enemies. However, the Qur'an does not give detailed historical information about the fate of the historical Jesus, one of the greatest prophets of Islam.

The divine nature of Jesus is another disputed problem. It is a theological issue that seems to be irreconcilable between Christians and Muslims. It is not a historical one to be settled with the emergence of new evidence to support either side. By relying on some of the recent literature on the historical Jesus,¹¹⁴ which most Christians do not accept as sound, Hick uses a mythological language in his explanation of Jesus' relation to God.¹¹⁵ Hence, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that not only does Hick's project lay greater stress to similarities, but he also attempts to dismiss some of the basic doctrinal differences among religions, which do not support his project. If this interpretation is correct, it follows that since the proponents of this project are not sufficiently aware, or respectful, of the genuine diversity and incommensurability of doctrines various religious traditions offer, they may end up imposing their own rules and definitions.

At this point, Knitter mentions two general ways in which a well-intentioned pluralist can nonetheless become imperialist. First, he/she could too quickly presuppose or describe the common ground that establishes unity among religions, and second, he or she may easily draw up common guidelines for dialogue among religions.¹¹⁶ Presenting the ultimate Reality or Cosmic Truth etc., as the common ground for all religions seems to be an imperialistic element. For the argument that the adherents of every religious tradition experiences the same Reality, although differently, is the fruit of a particular pluralistic perception of the Real. In a similar vein, forming general and universally applicable guidelines for intercultural understanding

¹¹⁴ Hick relies heavily on Wolfhart Pannenberg in this regard. Hick quotes Pannenberg stating that "After D. F. Strauss and F.C. Bauer, John's Gospel could no longer be claimed uncritically as a historical source of authentic words of Jesus... Today it must be taken as all but certain that the pre-Easter Jesus neither designated himself as Messiah (or Son of God) nor accepted such a confession to him from others." As cited in John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fort Press, 1980), 184.

¹¹⁵ J. Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. J. Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977). The book is a collection of articles that deals specifically with the issue of incarnation within the Christian traditions. See also, Wilfred C. Smith, "Idolatry in Comparative Perspective" in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and P.F. Knitter (Markynoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987):53-68.

¹¹⁶ Knitter, *One Earth*, 43-44.

seems to have similar ramifications. As modern hermeneutics teaches, 'where one speaks from' affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location. The same goes for the pluralistic hypothesis.

An extension of the above criticisms is the question of the validity of speaking on behalf of the Other.¹¹⁷ When a pluralist argues that all the adherents of every religious tradition experience the same Real both personal and impersonal, he/she is making universal claims, telling others what in fact they are experiencing. Recall how Hick was assuring us that his understanding of the Divine is not postulated, as Kant argued, but experienced. However, according to Hick, the Divine is experienced within the limitations of our human cognitive apparatus in ways analogous to that in which he argued that we experience our physical environment.¹¹⁸ If this is the case, is it plausible to create a principle or principles that can be universally applicable? How can Hick infer from a totally personal experience that all the adherents of all religions experience the same Divine, the Real? Given that every experience is personal in nature, however comprehensive it might be, it is questionable whether it is possible to argue that "the realm of ultimate reality consists of a single, noumenal element which Hick calls 'the Real?'"¹¹⁹

CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to give a brief sketch of the current claims about the modes of interreligious encounter. The exposition has shown that three approaches are in fact three different answers to the same problem of how to be prepared for the coming of the Other.

We have seen that none of the above attitudes is sufficient to explain the diversity of religions for the reasons indicated above. However, one of the most important reasons for their insufficiency lies in their lack of genuine interest in the business of understanding. This topic will be the subject-matter of the next chapter where the problem of the coming of the Other will be analyzed through Gadamer's fusion of horizons.

¹¹⁷ For an engaging discussion of the issue of the problem of speaking for others, see Linda Alcoff, "The problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique*, 20 (Winter, 1991-1992): 7. 6-32.

¹¹⁸ See, Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 83,104-105.

¹¹⁹ S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE WAY TO UNDERSTANDING OTHER RELIGIONS: GADAMER'S FUSION OF HORIZONS (*HORIZONTVERSCHMELZUNG*)

INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter analyzed the current literature on the issues of cross-cultural encounter, presenting roughly three general categories in which the attitudes we take towards others are classified: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The chapter argued that none of these categories is sufficiently comprehensive to explain the radical diversity we are experiencing today precisely because of the lack of genuine interest in the business of understanding the Other. Therefore, to appreciate and promote the notion of understanding as an indispensable element in cross-cultural studies, the preliminary requirement is to understand what “understanding” (*verstehen*) itself is.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to explore the possibility, meaning, and significance of understanding from a philosophical point of view in order to pave the ground for the issues discussed in the subsequent chapters. The present discussion, therefore, will evolve around the following question as a recurring theme of this study: how is it possible to understand others in their “otherness” without reducing them to a mere projection of our own subjectivity.

In pursuing this subject, the issue will be analyzed through Gadamer's doctrine of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) for it provides a compelling hermeneutical framework that renders the possibility of understanding others a valid project.¹ It

¹ In his analysis of metaphor, Ricoeur gives a schematic summary of the theory of metaphor within the history of rhetoric, tracing it back to the Greek sophists. Ricoeur criticizes the classical interpretation of metaphor for reducing its function to an abridged comparison of two similar entities. This means, among others, “since it [metaphor] does not represent a semantic innovation, a metaphor does not furnish any new information about the reality.” P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 48-49. Contrary to this argument, Ricoeur's analysis makes it clear that metaphor, as a surplus of meaning, *does* give rise to knowledge about reality because not only does it have an emotive function but a cognitive one as well. It is in this sense that I am referring to the fusion of horizons as a metaphor to make the event of understanding perceivable in the hermeneutical act.

illustrates the expansion and transformation that occurs on both sides when two horizons fuse as an event or happening of truth. This procedure presupposes a dialectical play (dialogue) between one's own horizon (understanding) and the horizon of the text (Other) one is trying to understand, and thereby reaches a new understanding of the subject matter (*Sache*) in a fusion of horizons. Since every understanding also is self-understanding,² one not only comes to understand what the Other is in its otherness, but gains an even better understanding of oneself (*sich versteht*), projecting one's possibilities,³ and one's own culture.⁴

In order to analyze Gadamer's doctrine of the fusion of horizons, it behooves us to try to clarify the phenomenological concept of horizon upon which the entire argument is based.

HERMENEUTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF HORIZON (*HORIZONT*)

Drawing on the Husserlian phenomenological concept of horizon,⁵ Gadamer describes it as "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."⁶ In another passage it is described not as "a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further."⁷ On another occasion Gadamer refers to horizon as "something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving."⁸ A careful reading of the

For an insightful discussion of the role of metaphor not only in the social sciences, philosophy, and literature, but also in science and religion see, Stephen Happel, *Metaphors for God's Time in Science and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

² *TM*, 260; *WM*, 264-265.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William A. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 107.

⁵ *TM*, 245; *WM*, 250; Helmut Kuhn, "The Phenomenological Concept of 'Horizon,'" in *Philosophical Essays: In Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968): 106.

⁶ *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307-308

⁷ *TM*, 245; *WM*, 250.

⁸ *TM*, 304; *WM*, 309; One of the most comprehensive descriptions of the term horizon, as a visual metaphor, is given by Bernard Lonergan. According to Lonergan, "Horizons...are structured results of past achievements and, as well, both the condition and the limitation of the further development. They are structured. All learning is, not a mere addition to previous learning, but rather an organic growth out of it. So, all our intentions, statements, deeds stand within contexts. To such contexts we appeal when we outline the reasons for our goals, when we clarify, amplify, qualify our statements, or when we explain our deeds. Within such contexts must be fitted each new item of knowledge and each new factor in our attitudes. What does not fit, will not be

above definitions allows one to discern at least three characteristics that show the import and function of horizon in the process of understanding.

First, by its very nature every horizon (range of vision) has its limits since it is considered to be the ultimate circumference within which all things, real and imaginable, are bound to appear.⁹ That is to say, to have a horizon means that one's vision is always limited to what can be seen in a given time from a particular vantage point. This seemingly limits the possibility of seeing what is beyond the current range of vision.

Secondly, a horizon gives anyone or anything, whomever/whatever we think might have a horizon, a distinct identity that differs one from others even if there are family resemblances. Because horizons are initially distinct, they divide us, making us who or what we are.¹⁰ If we accept the validity of this description of horizon, we have to accept the argument that the Other always remains as an Other, hence the irreducible character of the Other. In other words, the Other is always more than what I, the subject, make of him or her.

On the other hand, by limiting the totality of a given thing, as suggested above, a horizon also frames it. The frame of a picture, though forming no part of it, helps to constitute its wholeness.¹¹ Necessarily, the horizon determines that which it frames.¹² Helmut Kuhn further remarks:

The fact that the object is framed by a horizon is relevant to its mode of appearance. Its way of being is essentially a "being within." Hence horizon as a guiding notion enables us to reveal shades of meaning cast on the object by its environment."¹³

Thirdly, horizons are open and therefore can be expanded and transformed, since as one moves from the center towards the circumference new horizons open up. It is in this sense that Gadamer speaks of narrowness

noticed or, if forced on our attention, it will seem irrelevant or unimportant. Horizons then are the sweep of our interests and of our knowledge; they are the fertile sources of further knowledge and care; but they also are boundaries that limit our capacities for assimilating more than we already have attained." B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 1973), 237.

⁹ Kuhn, "Horizon," 107.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, "Gadamer on the Human Sciences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 134.

¹¹ The picture-frame metaphor is taken from Helmut Kuhn's above-cited article "The Phenomenological Concept of 'Horizon'" in *Philosophical Essays: In Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968): 106-123.

¹² Kuhn, "Horizon," 107.

¹³ Ibid.

of horizon, of a possible expansion of horizon, of opening up new horizons.¹⁴ However, it is only through our willingness to change our position, figuratively speaking, that we are constantly invited to move beyond the boundary of our current field of vision. This is the point where horizon sheds light on the possibility of knowing what lies beyond our immediate horizon, for as Gadamer argues “what makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it. It is the dialectic of the limit to exist only by being superceded.”¹⁵ In view of the phenomenological concept of horizon, it is now possible to investigate the ways in which the analysis of the term ‘horizon’ provides insight in explicating the event of understanding.

The project of philosophical hermeneutics and of the phenomenological movement considers the Other as a genuine interlocutor in the event of understanding achieved through dialogue in the medium of language.¹⁶ One of the issues that needs to be clarified in this context is the question of what constitutes a text. The question is whether the purpose and manner of dialogue with a text is any different from dialogue with a person. Put differently, is it admissible to use the terms Other and text interchangeably in the process of explaining the event of understanding?

Gadamer notes that interpretation is not applied only to written texts or verbal expressions. Interpretation, rather, is applicable to everything that has been handed down to us by tradition. Therefore, we not only interpret (understand)¹⁷ historical text, figures, or events, we also interpret, and attempt to understand spiritual and mimed expressions.¹⁸ On another occasion Gadamer states that:

¹⁴ *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

¹⁵ *TM*, 343; *WM*, 348.

¹⁶ *TM*, 385; *TM*, 389.

¹⁷ Following Gadamer, the terms interpretation and understanding are used interchangeably throughout this exposition. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer explains how romantic hermeneutics fused understanding and interpretation into a unity while relegating application to a position ancillary to hermeneutics proper. Pietism, on the other hand, saw the interpretive process consisting of three separate subtleties: *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation), and *subtilitas applicandi* (application). Gadamer, however, maintains that understanding, interpretation, and application are not distinct events; rather they constitute the components of a unified hermeneutic act. Thus, understanding is always interpretation, and interpretation is nothing but the explicit form of understanding. *TM*, 307; *WM*, 312; Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 185.

¹⁸ Gadamer, “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 111.

Conversation occurs, no matter when or where or with whom, wherever something comes to language, whether this is another *person, a thing, a word, a flame* (Gottfried Benn)--this is what constitutes the universality of hermeneutic experience.¹⁹

In the light of the above remarks, we can argue that anything “from fleeting speech to fixed documents and mute reminders, from writing to *chiffres* and to artistic symbol, from articulated language to figurative or musical interpretation, from explanation to active behavior ...”²⁰ can be regarded as an Other or a text. In sum, any text or text analogue,²¹ which is

¹⁹ As cited in Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 124.

We should note that Ricoeur, Sokolowski, and Mehta, among others, hold to the same position. Ricoeur, for instance, defines the text as “any discourse fixed by writing.” On the other hand, in another article he widens the meaning of the text when he considers the human sciences to be hermeneutical inasmuch as their object displays some of the futures constitutive of a text as a text. In this second sense, it seems that the meaning of a text is not limited to written discourse. See, Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, trans and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 145,197.

In a similar vein, Sokolowski, when referring to the indispensability of a conversation in the pursuit of truth, refers to different manifestations of the Other. He remarks that “sometimes the Other is *bodily present* and the conversation takes place in speech, but sometimes the other *mind is present in a text* or in an image, and then the conversation takes place in reading, whether the reading be of something written or of something depicted.”(My emphasis). See, Robert Sokolowski, “Gadamer’s Theory of Hermeneutics,” in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 225. According to Sokolowski, then, an Other need not be necessarily a bodily presence, a person or a written discourse.

In his remarkable book *India And The West* J.L. Mehta, following Heidegger and Gadamer, takes text to mean both person and tradition. J.L. Mehta, *India and the West: The Problem of Understanding* (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985), 130.

²⁰ Joseph Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 53.

²¹ I borrowed this two-word concept (text-analogue) from Charles Taylor. He writes that “interpretation, in the sense relevant to hermeneutics, is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study. This object must, therefore, be a text, or a text-analogue, which in some way is confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory--in one way or another, unclear.” See, Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 25.

an event, action, or other entity that can be understood or read or communicated as if it were a text, may also be considered as the text or the Other. In this context, we need to call attention to two fundamental issues that are closely related to the subject under study.

First, the subject-object dichotomy, which results from what Richard Bernstein calls Cartesian Anxiety, is untenable in the process of understanding.²² In other words, there is no subject "over here" and an object "over there" standing independent of one another in constant tension. Rather, subject and object belong together and constitute a total unity in which the process of understanding takes place in the history of interpretation, tradition. Thus, whatever might be called an object is not regarded as a passive entity waiting to be understood by its superior, the subject; but the Other, having an active role to play in the process. Hence, following the above remarks it can be argued that while I, the subject, see the Other as an object, the Other, as a subject, sees me as an Other, therefore an object. Thus, whatever can be said for the object to be studied, can also be said for the subject who is studying the object, hence the equality of the partners in dialogue.

Second, there is no place for a subject to stand outside or apart from a line of events (tradition), no neutral observing Archimedean point, and no place where objects can appear apart from the history of understanding.²³ This, of course, was the focus of concern for modern hermeneutics when it attempted to develop a positivistic hermeneutics with a solid epistemological grounding.²⁴ Even though philosophical and radical hermeneutics (deconstruction) are said to be exclusive of each other in the context of some of the hermeneutical issues, they, nonetheless, share the conviction that the project of modernist positivist hermeneutics is an unattainable ideal.²⁵ That is, both camps are allied in their opposition to traditional epistemology.

²² Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 16, 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16-20.

²⁴ This, of course, has been the position taken by the classical hermeneutic tradition stemming from Schleiermacher up to Betti and Hirsh. See, G.B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.), 109; Joseph Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 27,30.

²⁵ Feldman's interpretation of Gadamer and Derrida supports this argument. He maintains that "Like Gadamer, Derrida emphasizes that any text or event has many potential meanings, many possible truths; no single meaning remains fixed or stable in all contexts.... Derrida insists that every textual interpretation denies or suppresses some alternative meanings, some alternative interpretations-some Other. For that reason, Derrida considers the meaning of a text to be *undecidable*; Gadamer, meanwhile, deems textual meaning to be

Thus, the Other is referred to not only as a text to be studied and to be understood (object), but as another Other that has the right to question me as a subject for the Other.

The above considerations are important for our analysis of the process of understanding vis-à-vis the concept of horizon. It makes the Gadamerian notion that every Other has its own horizon, which makes it different from other Others, intelligible. Moreover, because every horizon is open, there is always a possibility that these different horizons, supposedly existing independently of one another, can interact and eventually fuse, an event called fusion of horizons.²⁶ On the other hand, because every horizon is also limited, the Other with its otherness remains forever irreducible to our own subjectivity as an object.²⁷

What is the nature of the situated and limited nature of our horizons? According to Gadamer, we live in a stream of tradition, history. We always find ourselves in a tradition. We are historical beings. In fact, as Gadamer puts it:

[H]istory does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-

inexhaustible." (My Emphasis). Stephen M. Feldman, "Made For Each Other," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26 no. 1 (2000): 58. In other words, both Gadamer and Derrida question the claims of the positivist hermeneutics, which aims to propose a methodology that guarantees *the* true meaning of the text that is single and definite.

²⁶ *TM*, 306; *WM*, 311.

²⁷ This is akin to Husserl's interpretation of the I's experience of the other Egos as elucidated in his famous Fifth Meditation. Here, Husserl makes it clear that total access to other Egos is impossible because of their plural character. He maintains that "this being there in person does not keep us from admitting forthwith that...neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally. *If it were, if what belongs to other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.* (My emphasis). Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 109. This interpretation does not, however, preclude the I's ability to communicate with other Egos. The I can still understand other Egos, but this understanding is only by analogy because "...the two intersubjectivities are not absolutely isolated. As imagined by me, each of them is necessarily [in] communion with me (or with me in respect of a possible variant of myself) as the constitutive primal monad relative to them. Accordingly they belong in truth to a single universal community, which includes me and comprises unitarily all the monads and groups of monads that can be conceived as co-existent." *Ibid.*, 140.

evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live.²⁸

For Gadamer, then, we cannot exist as an isolated, individual mind or consciousness. We belong to society and culture in the sense of unquestioning internalization of its norms and customs before we have the capacity to reflect and criticize. The very Enlightenment notion of the detached (or superior) subject is itself a cultural form created in time and space by certain minds that were also part of a certain tradition. Failing to recognize this point leads one to failing to see our being-with-others. This line of argument allows us to argue that the subject side of the subject-object dichotomy is neither primary nor self-aware. The subject cannot be what it claims to be because it cannot isolate itself from the world; it is always in the middle of things; it is always along with others. The subject cannot be isolated either, for it is as much collective and social as it is individual.

In the quoted passage, Gadamer speaks about the process of self-examination through which we understand ourselves. By this Gadamer does not even remotely imply that we can eventually understand others or ourselves like detached objects (by objectifying the Other) or subjects as the Enlightenment spirit argued. For, he further argues, because we are historical beings living in history “we are always already affected by history,”²⁹ hence the principle of the historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichte*). If we are constantly being exposed to the effects of history by living in it and not outside of it, it follows that the idea that we can have a Cartesian kind of objective knowledge of it (history, world) or of ourselves is untenable.³⁰ Therefore, as Gadamer says, “to be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.”³¹

Gadamer's exposition of the historical character of being is grounded in Heidegger's notion of “thrownness” according to which Dasein is thrown by the circumstances of birth into the world of time and place.³² This world is not the natural world of science, objectified into observable objects and processes. Rather it is the world of everydayness or what Gadamer calls tradition. This world has an ever-evolving horizon of meanings that prestructures everything we encounter. However, Dasein should not be considered to be imprisoned in tradition. Although Dasein always already finds itself in this world, it does not mean that the latter has complete control over the former, for as Heidegger argues, “Dasein is

²⁸ *TM*, 276; *WM*, 281.

²⁹ *TM*, 300; *WM*, 305.

³⁰ *TM*, 301; *WM*, 307.

³¹ *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

³² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambough (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 164.

initially and for the most part together *with* the ‘world’ it takes care of.”³³ Gadamer, on the other hand, is more optimistic about our relation to tradition, for he argues, “tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves.”³⁴

The foregoing does not negate Gadamer’s main argument, that we belong to tradition long before it belongs to us. Rather it confirms it, for by creating the tradition we are not being freed from it but participating in it. After all, we are not creating a tradition as such out of nothing; but we are giving back to tradition what we have received from it by way of participation. To be sure, even criticism of ourselves or of tradition takes place within tradition. In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship, a circle. We create the tradition, and the tradition shapes our horizons. However, precisely because we are born into a preinterpreted world, it makes or shapes us to a much greater extent than we make or shape it. As indicated repeatedly, we are always already living (interpreting) a preinterpreted existence. In other words, we always find ourselves in a situation. This is what Gadamer calls the hermeneutic situation.³⁵ The hermeneutic circle, states Gadamer, is in fact fulfilled with content [*inhaltlich erfüllter*] circle, which joins the interpreter and his [her] text into a unity within a processual whole. Understanding always implies a pre-understanding which is in turn pre-figured by the determinate tradition in which the interpreter lives and which shapes one’s prejudices.³⁶

What is the relevance of the above remarks in explaining the process of understanding? To answer this question we need to remember the meaning and function of horizon.

As indicated earlier, every Other (text) has an horizon, and we can only see whatever can be seen from a particular vantage point. This means that our understanding of the world outside of our horizon remains to some extent strange or alien. This forces us to be conscious of our limitations and our finite character. It follows that I, as a person with a limited horizon, can have only a limited understanding of the world (Other) in a particular time and place. Now, this point raises another question: namely, if we are limited by our horizons, how can we ever understand others who have different (alien) horizons? How can we venture into alien “worlds?” Moreover, does not this notion negate our hypothesis that understanding others in their otherness is possible?

Every horizon can be expanded and changed if one is willing to change one’s position to acquire a wider horizon. If we accept that there are Others who are other than us, then we have to assume that every Other has a horizon. If one does not have a horizon, one “does not see far enough and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *TM*, 293; *WM*, 298.

³⁵ *TM*, 301-302, *WM*, 307.

³⁶ Gadamer, “Historical Consciousness,” 108.

hence overvalues what is nearest to him [her].”³⁷ This statement should not be read to mean that it is possible for a person not to have a horizon at all. Rather, Gadamer seems to refer to particular cases when a person has a limited or narrow horizon. The following passage sheds more light on the issue.

...[T]o have a horizon means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond. A person who has a horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small.³⁸

Although every finite horizon is limited, no horizon is infinitely closed, for “what makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it.”³⁹ Thus, understanding becomes a possibility if we become cognizant of our limited horizon on the one hand, and its potential to be able to be enlarged by the encounter with the Other on the other.

The tradition in which a person lives shapes his or her horizon. In other words, one sees, understands, and makes sense of the world through one's prejudices (pre-opinions).⁴⁰ We are what we are because of our horizons, and therefore our prejudices. As Gadamer puts it: “It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudgments [pre-opinions] that constitute our being.”⁴¹ The Heideggerian notion that we see things “as things” is helpful in this regard.⁴² In other words, prejudices let us see things “as.” If we fail to see things “as,” we do not see them at all; to understand is to exist already in preunderstandings. Since a horizon consists of prejudices, without them we cannot have any experience at all. In this sense, there is an indispensable relationship between horizon, experience, and prejudice since “when one's prejudgments change, so does one's horizon, and vice versa.”⁴³

If prejudices comprise our horizons, how is a genuine understanding possible? Does not accepting prejudices as the constitutive

³⁷ *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

³⁸ *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307-308.

³⁹ *TM*, 343; *WM*, 348.

⁴⁰ Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics Versus Science*, trans and ed. John M. Connolly and Thomas Keutner (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 74.

⁴¹ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 9; *TM*, 276-277; *WM*, 281.

⁴² Michael Gelven, *A Commentary On Heidegger's Being and Time*, 2nd rev. ed. (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 95.

⁴³ Jan E. Garrett, “Hans-Georg Gadamer On ‘Fusion of Horizons,’” *Man and World*, 11(1978): 393.

elements of our horizons mean that it is impossible to communicate with others? There is no one easy answer to this question.

The Enlightenment spirit argues that prejudices can only be a barrier to understanding truth. In order to obtain an objective knowledge of the world we must somehow shed our prejudices since truth is the opposite of prejudice. This is what Gadamer calls “the prejudice of the Enlightenment against prejudice itself, which denies tradition [the Other] its power.”⁴⁴

Against this Enlightenment idea of truth, Gadamer argues, “the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world.”⁴⁵ Although we live in a stream of tradition in which we acquire our horizons that are shaped by prejudices as a result of our experience of the world around us, we can nonetheless rehabilitate our unjustifiable prejudices through self-critique and the encounter with other horizons, thereby testing and rehabilitating our prejudices. It is only through this encounter that we can understand others in their otherness by overcoming the foreign element in a text (horizon of the Other).⁴⁶

To be sure, Gadamer does not argue that every prejudice leads us to a correct understanding, to truth. Rather, he tells us that it is through prejudices that we understand or misunderstand, for there are justifiable prejudices that lead to understanding, and then there are unjustifiable ones that lead to misunderstanding.⁴⁷ The important thing is to be aware of one’s prejudices, and accept them, for “it is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition [Other].”⁴⁸ Therefore, instead of trying to overcome all prejudices or to ignore them, Gadamer asks us to rehabilitate them by encountering with the Other because the prejudices are there whether we accept them or not. Even the Enlightenment project of suspending prejudice itself was, as Gadamer argues, a prejudice against prejudice,⁴⁹ and a hopeless one.

In order to shed more light on the problem of the possibility of understanding the Other, we need to refer to Gadamer’s two insights as premises for the remainder of this discussion. Both of these premises are answers to a series of questions Gadamer himself asks:

⁴⁴ *TM*, 270; *WM*, 275.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 9.

⁴⁶ Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice. R. Wachterhauser (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 396.

⁴⁷ *TM*, 270; *WM*, 275; *TM*, 277; *WM*, 281-282.

⁴⁸ *TM*, 270; *WM*, 274.

⁴⁹ *TM*, 270; *WM*, 275.

[A]re there really two different horizons here--the horizon in which the person seeking to understand lives and the historical horizon [horizon of the Other] within which he[she] places himself [herself]? Is it a correct description of the art of historical understanding to say that we learn to transpose ourselves into alien horizons? Are there such things as closed horizons?⁵⁰

First, by emphasizing the communal character of *Dasein*, Gadamer argues that an individual is never an isolated entity; an individual always lives alongside, and therefore understands with the others in a tradition. Similarly, thanks to the expandable character of a horizon, a culture, which has its own horizon as a genuine Other, is never closed. Thus, when we say, for instance, that in order to understand others we need to transpose ourselves into the horizons of others, "this does not entail," says Gadamer, "passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own.... Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single horizon."⁵¹ It is due to this assumed all-encompassing horizon that there is a differentiated commonness among horizons, however alien they may look. It is a dialectical play (give-and-take structure) between the familiarity and strangeness of every horizon that makes understanding possible.

The second premise is related to another aspect of the concept of horizon, which presupposes an interrupted reciprocal interaction among horizons of different kind. As Gadamer says:

The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we continually have to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons, which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.⁵²

Our earlier insights into what constitutes a text, and what or who the Other is, allows us to argue that Gadamer's remarks are not limited to the relationship between the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present. Rather, it describes what happens when two horizons, whether historical, cultural, or individual, encounter each other.

⁵⁰ *TM*, 304; *WM*, 309.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *TM*, 306; *WM*, 311.

The quoted passages make it clear that however different our horizons might be, we still understand the Other. This is due to the fact that we share some common elements in tradition, language, the world. Because of our situatedness within tradition, which has an all-encompassing horizon, we do not regard what the Other says as totally alien, for it is always part of us, and vice versa.

On the other hand, because every horizon has its limits, and every horizon bears with it a kind of alien element, understanding others is never complete. Hence, there cannot be any single interpretation that is correct “in itself.” Rather, it is through the process of overcoming this foreign element that horizons fuse. As Gadamer puts it, like different standpoints, the separate horizons enter into one another⁵³ in the medium of language through an open encounter with the Other.

FUSION OF HORIZONS: ASSIMILATION OR PARTICIPATION?

Gadamer’s account of the event of understanding as a fusion of horizons has been criticized by several scholars. There are two central arguments around which all the critiques seem to evolve. The first one is that Gadamer’s project of philosophical hermeneutics gives tradition an unquestionable authority that makes critical reflection impossible. Caputo, for instance, argues that in Gadamer’s hermeneutic project “the truth of the tradition is never put in question, only [the] dynamics of its communication, extension, renewal, and constant reification.”⁵⁴ He goes on to argue, “His [Gadamer] ‘tradition’ is innocent of Nietzsche’s suspicious eye, of Foucaultian genealogy. He does not face the question of the ruptures within tradition, its vulnerability to difference, its capacity to oppress.”⁵⁵ Thus, according to Caputo, Gadamer “offers us the most liberal possible version of a fundamentally conservative idea. He allows as much movement and play as will not disrupt the ageless truths of tradition or cause it too much difficulty.”⁵⁶

On the other hand, Habermas charges that

Gadamer’s prejudice for the rights of prejudices certified by tradition denies the power of reflection. The latter proves itself, however, in being able to reject the claim of tradition. Reflection dissolves substantiality because it not only confirms, but also breaks up, dogmatic forces.⁵⁷

⁵³ Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” 396.

⁵⁴ Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 112.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer’s Truth and Method,” in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 237.

What Habermas finds troubling in Gadamer is that by giving tradition, and therefore prejudice, ultimate authority Gadamer is denying the power of reason in the hermeneutic act.

The second critique can be formulated into a question: if understanding is what is agreed at the end of conversation with the Other, and if the event of understanding takes place only when two horizons fuse with the conquest of the alien element, then how can we sustain the otherness of the Other. The critics pursuing this argument charge that Gadamer's interpretation of tradition tends to approach the Other only to assimilate him/her. Robert Bernasconi, for instance, argues that although Gadamer recognizes the otherness of the Other as a hermeneutical virtue, the doctrine of the fusion of horizons "seems fundamentally antagonistic to alterity."⁵⁸ He continues his criticism with the charge that according to fusion of horizons, "I can recognize myself in what appears to be the Other only insofar as that other is a reflected other, the other of myself."⁵⁹

In a similar vein, Marina Vitkin argues that "one of Gadamer's metaphors for the hermeneutic project, that of 'alienness and its conquest gets across, contrary to his [Gadamer's] explicit intentions, the violence involved in 'fusing' the unfusible."⁶⁰ Thus, she argues:

[I]n radical interpretation, 'fusion of horizons' is impossible without violence to the alien one, and hence 'fusion,' 'synthesis,' and 'integration' are euphemisms for, and so inadvertent invitations to, yoking others by force into a frame of reference alien to them.⁶¹

Expressing his indebtedness to Derrida, John Caputo argues that because the aim of philosophical hermeneutics is to come to an agreement within a conversation through the fusion of horizons, the Other is assimilated and reduced to a mere projection of my subjectivity, losing his or her otherness.⁶² The remainder of this chapter will investigate the two arguments to see if their allegations can be sustained.

⁵⁸ Robert Bernasconi, "'You Don't Know What I'm Talking About': Alterity and the Hermeneutic Ideal," in *The Specter of Relativism: Truth Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 287, 194.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶⁰ Marina Vitkin, "The 'Fusion of Horizons' on Knowledge and Alterity," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no.1 (1995): 73.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶² John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 112-115; Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Knowing Who We Are* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 41-59.

In order to respond to the first critique, namely, that prejudice denies the power of reason and reflection, we need to revisit the way Gadamer explains our relation to tradition vis-à-vis the problem of understanding. Gadamer argues that understanding others is possible, and takes place in the medium of language. However, contrary to Enlightenment philosophers, Gadamer argues that “all understanding is interpretation.”⁶³ Therefore, “it is not possible to isolate the indisputably correct, normative understanding that could then be distinguished from and serve as the arbitrating foundation for the competing purposes of different interpreters.”⁶⁴ It follows that understanding must not be regarded as an epistemological procedure through which an objective interpretation of some state of affairs is reached. Our inability to reach an objective interpretation stems from the way we interact with the world around us, or more correctly, the world in which we live.

I submit that the critics who charge that Gadamer’s exposition of our relation to tradition gives the tradition an unquestioned authority fail to see that his account of this relationship is not a monological one. Rather, there is a reciprocal relationship between the tradition in which we live and ourselves, the makers of tradition. This does not, however, negate Gadamer’s argument that because we are always born into a pre-constructed, pre-interpreted world, our interpretation of the world and of ourselves will always be just another interpretation and thus the impossibility of an objective interpretation.

What Gadamer’s critics seem to find misleading in philosophical hermeneutics is his explanation of the function of prejudice in the event of understanding.⁶⁵ According to Gadamer, we approach our object (Other, text) with certain prejudices through which we can understand or

⁶³ *TM*, 389; *WM*, 392.

⁶⁴ David C. Hoy, “Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson,” in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 113.

⁶⁵ Gadamer is not alone in his account of the function of prejudices in every interpretation. His analysis seems to be grounded on Heidegger’s exposition of the fore-structure according to which every interpretation is grounded in a fore-having (*Vorhabe*), a fore-sight (*Vorsicht*), and a fore-conception (*Vorgriff*). See, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 239-144. Influenced by Heidegger’s analysis, Bultman too argues that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible. See, Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?,” in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1992), 242-248. However, while Gadamer seems to use the terms prejudices and prejudices interchangeably, Bultman makes a clear distinction between presuppositions (*Voraussetzungslosigkeit*) and prejudices (*Vorurteil*). According to Bultman, presuppositions are the necessary conditions for any kind of understanding whereas prejudices should be rejected in order to remain within the orbit of objective knowledge. Ibid; Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics*, 106.

misunderstand. Although, "there are certain prejudices that constrain our possibilities for communication and understanding, they simultaneously enable us to communicate and to understand."⁶⁶ Gadamer's critics seem to misinterpret his exposition of our relation to tradition for the following reasons.

First of all, it is true that Gadamer's account of prejudice and the function of language in understanding can be read as a naïve and uncritical acceptance of the reality of existing conditions. This seems to be both Caputo's and Habermas' basic argument. However, we must realize that Gadamer is not proposing to replace "something" that somehow enables the interpreter to move beyond the contingencies of language and tradition with prejudices that deny reason its right to reflect; prejudices (pre-opinions) are simply there whether we accept them or not.⁶⁷ In other words, "the prejudices and the fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his [her] free disposal."⁶⁸ Rather, without denying the workings of ideology, forces of domination, or the existence of a non-linguistic, material domain, Gadamer is at pains to describe the inescapable linguistic dimension which the connection to the world is always embedded.⁶⁹ This argument certainly does not allow us to count all prejudices as justifiable. What it is telling us, however, is that, without denying them we need to be conscious of the presence of prejudices that could hinder us from understanding since "it is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition,"⁷⁰ that is, deaf to what the Other is trying to tell us.

Secondly, Gadamer is not proposing a framework that makes the interpreter the prisoner of tradition, denying his or her right to criticize and

⁶⁶ Stephen M. Feldman, "Made for Each Other: The Interdependence of Deconstruction and Philosophical Hermeneutics," *Philosophy And Social Criticism* 26 no. 1 (2000): 56.

⁶⁷ While both traditions (deconstruction and philosophical hermeneutics) admit the function of prejudices in every understanding, their response to the question of how to confront prejudice is different. Considering prejudices as the constitutive elements of our being, philosophical hermeneutics aims to recognize and rehabilitate them to avoid misunderstanding. Deconstruction, on the other hand, seems to rebel against prejudices without denying them, because they seem to limit the "infinite in which we live." See, Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 41-59. In this sense, deconstruction may be regarded as a protest against prejudice. Simply put, what deconstruction seems to say is this: we may be surrounded by prejudices, and therefore tradition, but I, as a free person, am not going to succumb to their power. For a fine critique of deconstruction, see Madison, *Hermeneutics of Postmodernity*, 106-122.

⁶⁸ *TM*, 295; *WM*, 301.

⁶⁹ Ingrid Scheibler, *Gadamer: Between Heidegger and Habermas*, (Lanham: Rowman, Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 86.

⁷⁰ *TM*, 270; *WM*; 274.

even to break with it. Gadamer states that “However much it is the nature of tradition to exist only through being appropriated, it is still part of the nature of man to be able to break with tradition, to criticize and dissolve it...”⁷¹ This makes it clear that Habermas’ and Caputo’s charge that tradition has an unquestionable authority cannot be sustained. The meaning of the quotation is this: every act of understanding, critique, and/or communication takes place within the limits of tradition and in the medium of language. In other words, one still can pursue a critique of ideology (or of the authority, in the ordinary sense of the word) only from a position that is itself ultimately dependent upon and supported by the shared background sphere of social praxis (*soziales Einverständnis*).⁷²

To be sure, Habermas agrees with Gadamer’s critique of historical objectivism in that the former also maintains that an objectivist view of history is impossible, for it conceals the interconnection of historical effects (*den wirkungsgeschichtlichen Zusammenhang*) in which historical consciousness itself is located.⁷³ Although these remarks support Gadamer’s argument, Habermas nonetheless believes that an ideal speech situation can be created as a norm to function as a method for understanding. In other words, Habermas invokes the need for a universal, normative social theory to provide a critical dimension to the otherwise uncritical genealogy.⁷⁴ But is it possible to create an ideal speech situation that guarantees a normative social theory in the first place? Is it not true that even the norms upon which the social theory is grounded originate within a context that is constantly being exposed to the effects of history? If this is the case how can we speak about a social theory, which is normative, but not historical/ideological? Paul Giurlanda puts it elegantly when he says “we need norms by which to judge the norms. And if we obtain *these* norms, we need still more norms to judge the judging norms, etc.”⁷⁵

These reflections reveal that while trying to criticize Gadamer’s account of the human situatedness within tradition, Habermas falls prey to the very objectivism that he is trying to avoid. Therefore, Habermas’ critique of Gadamer seems to be an argument against Habermas’ own critique of an objectivist interpretation, and therefore does not do justice to philosophical hermeneutics.

⁷¹ *TM*, XXXVII.

⁷² Scheibler, *Gadamer*, 87.

⁷³ *TM*, 300; *WM*; 306; Habermas, “A Review of Gadamer’s Truth and Method,” 224.

⁷⁴ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 56-59.

⁷⁵ Paul Giurlanda, “Habermas’ Critique of Gadamer: Does it Stand up?” *International Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol. XVII, No.1, no. 105, (March 1987): 38.

The second critique questions the feasibility of the event of understanding as a fusion of horizons as presented by Gadamer without assimilating the otherness of the Other. There are two interrelated themes to this critique. The first one has to do with the status of the Other in the event of understanding. The second is related to the notion of overcoming the alien element in a conversation in order to reach an agreement.

In his recent book, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, Caputo attempts to analyze the ways philosophical hermeneutics and radical hermeneutics answer the question of how to be prepared for the coming of the Other. According to Caputo, both Gadamer and Derrida are willing to take the risk of welcoming the Other.⁷⁶ However, they differ as to how to go about taking the risk. For Gadamer, according to Caputo, "taking that risk... is the only way to make what the Other says one's own (*anzueignen*), which is what he [Gadamer] calls the 'fusion of horizons.'"⁷⁷ On the other hand, "for Derrida, taking that risk, putting one's own meaning and self at risk, indeed one's own home, is the only way to let the Other come."⁷⁸ But in the process of putting oneself and one's own meaning at risk Derrida differs, says Caputo, from Gadamer in that he (Derrida) does not say that "we make the Other our own, but would let the Other break into what is our 'own,' which means that for Derrida the Other would breach, not fuse with, our horizons."⁷⁹ The soundness of Gadamer's arguments can be examined by analyzing the way Gadamer presents his views on a genuine dialogue with Other.

We have established thus far that according to Gadamer, the key to understanding the Other is conversation or dialogue. However, not every conversation is genuine and therefore not every conversation leads to a genuine understanding since "there are...distortions of the I-Thou encounter that are not reciprocal."⁸⁰ Gadamer argues that there are three ways in which we interact with the Other as exemplified in the I-Thou structure. He starts his exposition with a caution: "the experience of the Thou must be special because the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us."⁸¹ This is a moral imperative around which all the argument should evolve.

The first type of experience sees the Thou as a predictable object according to which we understand the Other not as a genuine Other, but "as any other typical event in our experiential field."⁸² This type of experience,

⁷⁶ Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 41.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ P. Christopher Smith, "The I-Thou Encounter (*Begegnung*) in Gadamer's Reception of Heidegger," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 516.

⁸¹ *TM*, 358; *WM*, 364.

⁸² *Ibid.*

says Gadamer, is not moral since it contradicts Kant's idea of the categorical imperative, which holds that we should not see the Other as a means but as an end in him/herself.⁸³ By reducing the Other to a mere object⁸⁴ to be studied, as in the empirical sciences, this type of encounter is monological and is far from representing a genuine conversation.

In the second case, the Other is regarded as a person but "despite this acknowledgment, the understanding of the Thou is still a form of self-relatedness."⁸⁵ In other words, although one acknowledges the Other as capable of presenting his or her own opinion, this opinion is undermined by the superior position of the I, who claims to know the truth of this opinion from its own position. In its extreme version "one claims to know the Other's claim from his[her] point of view and even to understand the Other better than the Other understands himself[herself]."⁸⁶

According to this type of experience, then, the Other may be said to have been recognized as an Other, but he or she nonetheless is forced to comply. The opinion of the Other in this kind of conversation is accepted only if in total agreement with the position of the dominant I. What is missing in this kind of experience seems to be the lack of awareness of the situated character of both the I and the Other within a tradition in which they live. Since the dominant I is not self-critical, i.e., does not admit that he or she is exposed constantly to the effects of history, he or she does not allow the Other's opinion to challenge his or her own. In other words, "each party...seeks...to preserve self-referentiality and to avoid yielding to the interplay that exists between the two of them."⁸⁷ The inevitable result of this kind of encounter is the assimilation of the Other into one's own horizon.

Genuine conversation takes place when each interlocutor opens him/herself to each other, appreciating each other's existence, which is the highest type of hermeneutical experience.⁸⁸ Here, being open to the Other is not an option for Gadamer:

The mere presence of the Other before whom we stand helps us to break up our own bias and narrowness even before he[she] opens his mouth to make a reply. That which becomes a dialogical experience for us here is not limited to the sphere of arguments and counter-arguments, the exchange and unification of which may be the end meaning of every confrontation. Rather, as the experiences that have been described indicate, there is something else

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Smith, "I-Thou Encounter," 516.

⁸⁵ *TM*, 359; *WM*, 365.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Smith, "I-Thou Encounter," 517.

⁸⁸ *TM*, 361; *WM*, 367.

in this experience, namely, a potentiality for being other [Andersseins] that lies beyond every coming to agreement [Verständigung] about what is common.⁸⁹

In other words, even before an actual conversation begins I must be ready to accept the Other as an equal conversation partner. This readiness to be open to the Other “involves recognizing that I myself accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so.”⁹⁰ This kind of experience lets me accept the Other not only as any Other in its otherness, but as a *genuine Other* who might have something to tell me. Thus, one does not try to argue the other person down, but really considers the weight of the Other's opinion. Moreover, in a genuine conversation, one does not try to discover the weaknesses of what is said, but tries to bring out the strength of what is said.⁹¹ It is only through this kind of encounter with the Other that we can test, and therefore rehabilitate, our prejudices. According to Gadamer, there is no higher principle than holding oneself open to this kind of conversation through which one not only comes to accept the possibility that the Other might be right, but even recognizes the possible superiority of the Other.⁹²

In this context, one can argue that what all Gadamer's critics, including Caputo, Marina Vitkins, and Bernoscani, have in common is that they seem to identify Gadamer's doctrine of the fusion of horizons with the second type of the I-Thou relationship in which one feels superior in understanding the other. As stated above, Gadamer explicitly dismisses this kind of I-Thou encounter because it “can have very varied degrees of tension, to the point of the complete domination of one person by the other.”⁹³ Instead, Gadamer considers the third type of encounter in which the other is seen as an equal partner and even potentially superior as a genuine hermeneutical experience (conversation). Moreover, following Kierkegaard, Gadamer argues, “it is the other who breaks into my ego-centeredness and gives me something to understand.”⁹⁴ These remarks of Gadamer make it clear that in the fusion of horizons the Other is not considered as a passive object to be understood and to be assimilated. Rather, the Other has an indispensable (equal) role to play not only in expressing him/herself as a genuine Other, but also in helping test and therefore rehabilitate unjustifiable prejudices, which results in breaking ego-centeredness. Thus the event of understanding as agreement is not

⁸⁹ Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” 383.

⁹⁰ *TM*, 361; *WM*, 367.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Gadamer, “Reflections On My Philosophical Journey,” in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), 36.

⁹³ *TM*, 359; *WM*, 365.

⁹⁴ Gadamer, “Reflections,” 46.

achieved through assimilating the Other into my subjectivity, but letting the Other express his/her opinion with regard to the subject (*Sache*) of the conversation. This is not assimilation, but participation in the conversation as an interlocutor.

This investigation into Gadamer's thought and that of his critics reveals that their misunderstanding results from the tendency to confuse the Other as the interlocutor in dialogue with the subject-matter (*Sache*). In other words, Gadamer's critics seem to interpret the fusion of horizons to mean that in the process of understanding as agreement one interlocutor enters into the horizon of the other and understand him/her. This is not what fusion of horizons purports to show.

Gadamer argues that we always converse with an Other regarding something, which is what we call the subject--matter (*Sache*). "The goal of all communication and all understanding," argues Gadamer "is agreement in the matter at hand."⁹⁵ Moreover, the *Sache*, the matter at hand or the subject matter, is inherent in every understanding. Therefore, conversation or dialogue, which takes place in the medium of language, is the process through which the truth of the subject matter is uncovered. It is in this sense, I believe, that Gadamer states that fusion of horizons takes place when the alien element in a text is overcome.⁹⁶ Given the fact that the real concern of the hermeneutical reflection is the subject matter at hand and not the person per se, what Gadamer refers to as alien is nothing but what is unknown before the conversation, which brings two partners (i.e., person-person, interpreter-text) together in the first place because "understanding each other (*sich verstehen*) is always understanding each other with respect to something."⁹⁷ Moreover, as Grondin puts it "if Gadamer insists on this element of agreement, it is to underline the point that understanding is primarily related to the issue at hand and not to the author's intention as such."⁹⁸ That is to say, "when we understand a text (the Other), we do not place ourselves in the author's (the Other's) inner state; rather, if one wants to speak of 'placing oneself,' we place ourselves in his [her] point of view."⁹⁹ Therefore, when two partners in dialogue claim to have come to an agreement (understanding) their horizons fuse in terms of that particular subject matter. Thus, the fusion of horizons is a process in which what is alien or unknown before the conversation becomes known at the end of conversation.

To be sure, not every conversation is a process in which the truth of the matter is uncovered and therefore an agreement is reached. This may

⁹⁵ Gadamer, "Circle of Understanding," 69.

⁹⁶ Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 396.

⁹⁷ *TM*, 180; *WM*, 183-184.

⁹⁸ J. Grondin, "Gadamer's Basic Understanding of Understanding," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40.

⁹⁹ Gadamer, "Circle of Understanding," 69.

be because the partners in dialogue see each other as objects to be studied, as in the case of first type of I-Thou encounter. Or they may see each other as persons to be conversed with, and yet one or each of them tries to dominate the other, as in the case of second type of I-Thou encounter. Even in the authentic conversation an agreement may not be reached because of the complexity of the subject or because of other contingencies, one of which may be the barrier of language.¹⁰⁰ However, what seems certain is that every authentic, in some cases even inauthentic, experience puts the interlocutors in a new position, and not necessarily a better one. The partners in dialogue, therefore, do not remain the same as they were before or even at earlier stages of the conversation. By exposing themselves to the Other, they change; their horizons broaden; they do not see the world the same way they did before the encounter. The fact that the end of every conversation is the beginning of a new one shows the circular character of the hermeneutic experience.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown how understanding a genuine Other is possible from a philosophical point of view. The basic metaphor used in this process has been the fusion of horizons as elucidated by Gadamer.

The investigation has made it clearer that understanding the Other is possible and achievable through a genuine dialogue, and that understanding is an ever-continuing process. Our understanding is never objective; understanding the Other, i.e., the subject matter (*Sache*), is always incomplete. This is because we are always born into an already pre-interpreted world, which limits the subject's ability to have total control over the object. On the other hand, being born into a tradition makes communication possible among those who share the same tradition. This gives rise to the recognition that the knower cannot know everything nor can he or she be certain about what he or she thinks he or she knows in an absolutist sense. Hence, there is the necessity of being open to the Other and to have a willingness to let the Other speak and be heard. In light of the insights gained from this chapter, the next chapter will analyze Al-Biruni's study of other religions as an incipient paradigm to determine if theory and practice ever coincide.

¹⁰⁰ Although Gadamer presents language as the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement takes place, he nonetheless sees the real hermeneutical problem to be not a "correct mastery of language but coming to proper understanding about the subject matter," *TM*, 385; *WM*, 388.

CHAPTER THREE

AI-BIRUNI'S UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER RELIGIONS

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Interest in religion has a long history. Some scholars have argued that the roots of this interest may be traced back to as early as the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia, which show a lively interest in the ceremonies connected with various centers of that ancient world.¹ The first comparative religionist, according to Professor Sharpe, might be the “first worshipper of a god or gods who asked himself, having first discovered the facts of the case, why his neighbor should be a worshipper of some other god or gods.”² What is new, however, is the interest in the study of religion as an academic discipline, which attempts to study it as a social phenomenon; “as a special, unique area of culture and experience, alongside art, politics, and other human symbols.”³

What brought about this change of emphasis is not so much discovering the existence of other religions, for the existence of the latter had been known for centuries. It is rather the discovery of the nature of the self as a knowing subject.⁴

The Enlightenment philosophers', notably Kant's, concentration on the conditions of the possibility for human knowing led to the conviction that knowledge depends as much on the nature of the knower as it does on the object to be known. This meant that knowing is not just a matter of passively accepting or experiencing what is out there; the knowing subject has an active part to play in the process. So, if knowledge is considered in some sense to be dependent on, or relative to, the particular knower, then

¹ Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 1; A. Jeffery, “Al-Biruni's Contribution to Comparative Religion,” in *Commemorative Volume* (Calcutta, 1951), 126.

² Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 1.

³ William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 5.

⁴ This argument does not deny the fact that the move toward pluralistic thinking is partly an effect of our contact with the people who have different worldviews even within the same society. What is meant by the argument, rather, is the idea that the sense of respect for others and the increasing awareness of global cultures were brought about, in part, by the consciousness of the positioned nature of our own views as a result of the Enlightenment, and its understanding of the theory of knowledge.

meaning and truth are relative to the society or historical perspective in which they are formulated.⁵

The fundamental shift in the theory of knowledge has had enormous influence on all the sciences in general, but on the *Geisteswissenschaften* in particular, including theology and religious studies. It was a turning point especially for religion because it had been the sole interpretive framework of the entire universe throughout known history. With the advent of the Enlightenment, however, religion itself became the subject of interpretation, even losing its privileged position as the sole interpreter.⁶ The real issue became not so much whether religion should be a subject of investigation like a cultural element as to how to interpret and understand religion, in general, but religions other than one's own in particular.

Historically, one of the obstacles for understanding other religious traditions had been the lack of reliable information. Analyses of other religions have often been based not on the religions themselves, but on the tenets of other religions as they are described and evaluated in the scripture and the tradition of a particular religion of which the interpreter was a part. Since a considerable amount of available information came from polemical discussions, it was natural that the conclusions the student of religion would reach would be polemical also.

One can argue that the lack of reliable information does not pose a significant problem in modern times since all the sacred texts of the world's great religions have been adequately translated and are readily available. Moreover, we have access not only to the scriptures of other religions but also to their interpretations from-within. In addition to these, there are numerous institutions wherein the original languages in which these texts were written (Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, Hebrew, and the rest) can be mastered.

The more difficult obstacle seems to be the issue of rendering a relatively correct interpretation of the available data (text)⁷ for, as indicated above, there are different interpretive frames, or points of view, that are situated within different language games. Each point of view speaks from a certain place and, from that location, tries to see the whole subject matter within the categories of its limited horizon. If "the horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point,"⁸ as Gadamer argues, then each point of view can see only what is

⁵ For a fine description of the emergence and the evaluation of the interpretive frames in the study of religion, see William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 1-14.

⁶ One of the better introductions to the critical study of religion is Samuel Press' *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory From Bodin to Freud* (New haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁷ W. C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 15.

⁸ *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

within the range of its horizon, whereas the rest remains blurry, or in the dark, although every horizon is capable of being transformed and altered since there is no horizon that is infinitely closed.⁹

In studying an alien culture, therefore, it is not enough for the student of religion merely to read that tradition's sources; he or she has the ethical obligation of trying to read and understand them from that tradition's own epistemological point of view as well. For as indicated in W.C. Smith's well known maxim, no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers.¹⁰ This approach presupposes a will to interpret and understand other religions in their own terms without losing allegiance to one's own.

It is argued that until recently the major motive behind the interest in other religions has been to demonstrate that the latter were simply wrong and that one's own religion was superior to all of the rest, hence exclusivism. For as Sharpe argues, this assumption leads the adherent of a particular religion to believe that the tradition in which he or she stands enshrines all that he or she needs to know; and sometimes it contains all that he or she ought to know, since whatever lies outside the authoritative revelation is at best irrelevant, and at worst dangerous.¹¹

Although prevalent throughout history, the above approach was not the only model for studying religions other than one's own. There were a number of scholars within the Islamic tradition that showed genuine interest in studying and understanding other religions on their own terms.¹² The establishment of the tradition of *Al-Milal Wa al-Nihal* within the history of Islam is a living testimony to this genuine interest. Some of these scholars who, for a long time, were relegated to the status of mere historians, heresiographers, or theologians are now being studied as the forerunners of a contemporary discipline--the comparative study of religion. Thus, Sharpe, among others, would declare that Shahrastani (d.1153) could be seen as the first systematic historian of religion in world literature. In his book *Kitab*

⁹ *TM*, 302; *WM*, 307.

¹⁰ W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 60.

¹¹ Eric J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 8-9.

¹² Whereas the interest of Jahiz of Basra (d. 869), of Ibn Khazm of Cordova (d. 1064), and of An-Nawbakhti (d. 912) and of Ibn Babuya (d. 1001), in other religions was polemical, scholars such as Tabari (838-923), wrote about Persian religion; Mas'udi (d. 956) about Judaism, Christianity and the religions of India, Yaqubi (d.890), An-Nadim (c.990), Abu'l Ma'ali (d. 1092), were so objective in their interest in other religions themselves that they were accused of not being good Muslims by their fellow Muslims. For a detailed examination of the views of these and other scholars, see Gulam Haider Aasi, *Muslim Understanding of Other Religions* (Pakistan: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Islamic Research Institute, 1999), 30-41; A. Jeffery, "Contribution," 1; Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 11.

al-Milal wa al-Nihal (The Book of Religious Parties and Schools of Philosophy) Shahrastani attempts to “describe and systematize all the religions of the then known world, as far as the boundaries of China.”¹³

Possibly the best representative of those who initiated a genuine interest in other religions, however, was Abu Raihan Muhammad Al-Biruni. His accomplishments in other disciplines, notably in natural sciences,¹⁴ overshadowed his crucial contribution to the comparative study of religious traditions. Hence, Professor Schimmel would state that Al-Biruni's Book, *India*, can well be regarded as the first objective book ever written on the history of religion.¹⁵

This chapter aims to explore the possibilities of understanding other cultures through personal encounters, textual studies, and objective observations as exemplified in Al-Biruni's study of the religious traditions of India.

Al-Biruni's method of studying other cultures has the potential, I submit, to create new challenges as well as opportunities for the purpose of a dialogue among cultures that has the purpose of understanding as its primal objective. In pursuing this subject, I will first present a brief biographical background of Al-Biruni, and only then attempt to enter into a full discussion of the relevant issues.

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AL-BIRUNI

The available literature does not agree on when and where Al-Biruni was born.¹⁶ Neither is there an historical record of his burial place. We have it on the authority of some scholars, however, that he was born in

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Al-Biruni must have been a prolific writer. On the authority of different scholars such as Yaqut, Professor Nasr states that the number of works attributed to Al-Biruni comes to a total of 180. Many of Al-Biruni's books are no longer extant, however. See S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 107-115. For a detailed discussion of Al-Biruni's works in various fields of science see also, Ahmad S. Dimirdash, *Al-Biruni Abu Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad* (Cairo: Dar al-Maa'rif, 1980), 28-43. See also, Abdul R. Nowshervi, “Al-Biruni's Contribution to Natural Sciences,” in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979):582-586.

¹⁵ Annemaria Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 86.

¹⁶ Dimirdash, *Al-Biruni*, 17; F.A. Shamsi mentions fourteen different views on Al-Biruni's birth date and place. For a detailed discussion of the subject, see F.A. Shamsi, “Abu Al-Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Bayruni 362/973-CA.443/1051,” in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 260-288.

973 A.D. in Khawarizm, near modern Khiva in Uzbekistan, and died in 1048 A.D. probably in Ghaznah, today's Afghanistan.¹⁷

Little is known of Al-Biruni's background or his early life except that he must have had the privilege of belonging to a social class that had access to the best education of his time. On the personal level, Al-Biruni himself states, "in accordance with my natural disposition I was from my youth possessed with real greed to acquire knowledge."¹⁸ In pursuit of this burning desire, Al-Biruni began studying languages at an early age because for him language was one of the key elements in doing comparative study. Since Khawarizmian was his mother language, he was able to communicate well in both the Arabic and Persian languages. Of Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew he attained at least sufficient knowledge to use dictionaries in his studies.¹⁹ Later in his life he learned Sanskrit as the indispensable guide for penetrating Indian society. His command of Sanskrit reached a point where, with the aid of pundits, he was able to translate some Indian books into Arabic, and Arabic books into Sanskrit, as Al-Biruni himself informs us.²⁰

The region in which Al-Biruni was born was a thriving cosmopolitan center and had gained prominence in the wake of Islamic conquests.²¹ Although once controlled by the Abbasid caliphate, Khiva had long been under the control of the Samanids, a Persian dynasty, at the time of Al-Biruni's birth. It is well known that the Abbasid Caliphate, and later the Samanids, were great supporters of art, literature, and learning. There were, therefore, libraries and learning centers that contained Greek, Syriac, Babylonian, Manichaean, and Zoroastrian books, as well as thinkers from different parts of the world.²² Hence, as stated above, Khiva along with other Central Asian cities like Bukhara and Samarkand, which presently seem so remote from the centers of civilizations, were then in the

¹⁷ G. Allana, "Abu Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni," in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 149.

¹⁸ F. Krenkow, "Ebu'r Raihan al-Beruni," *Islamic Culture* 6 (1932): 195.

¹⁹ E.S. Kennedy, "Al-Biruni (or Beruni), Abu Rayhan (or Abu'l Rayhan) Muhammad Ibn Ahmad" in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, vol.2 (New York: Charles Scribners's Sons, 1989): 155.

²⁰ *India*, 8; *Tahqiq*, 7; Edward Sachau, Preface to *Tahqiq ma li-l Hind min maqula maqbula fil-'aql aw mardhula.*, ed. E. Sachau (Hayderabad, 1958). English translation, *Al-Beruni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India*, E. Sachau (London, 1910), XXXVIII; S. Hussein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," *The Islamic Quarterly* 10, nos. 3 & 4 (1966): 58; Kennedy, "Al-Biruni," 155.

²¹ Ainslee T. Embree, Introduction to *Alberuni's India*, ed. Ainslee T. Embree, trans. Edward Sachau (New York: The Norton Library, W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1971), vi.

²² Gunindar Kaur, "Al-Biruni: An Early Student of Comparative Religions," *Islamic Culture*, 56 (1982): 150.

mainstream of the great international culture that had grown up as a result of Islamic influences.²³ As one of the centers of medieval civilizations, it was not unusual to find non-Muslim scholars in the society from whom Al-Biruni must have benefited.²⁴

Professor Sachau reports that after distinguishing himself as one of the leading scholars of his time in science and literature, Al-Biruni assumed an active political role as counselor of the ruling prince of the Mamunid family in Khawarizm, his dwelling place until 1017.²⁵ On the other hand, although related to the Mamunid family, Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah always looked for a pretext to interfere in the affairs of the then independent Khawarizm.²⁶ When Mahmud eventually invaded Khawarizm (1017), Al-Biruni was taken to the court in Ghaznah as a scholar and prisoner of war along with other scholars and princes of the defeated dynasty and with Indian scholars from other conquered regions.²⁷

Al-Biruni's forced removal from Khawarizm to Ghaznah seems to be one of the most significant turning points in his intellectual odyssey. It seems to have played a determinative role in the direction and the tone of Al-Biruni's scholarship in that it was after this date that he had the opportunity to study and absorb Hindu culture more intensively than ever before.

Information about Al-Biruni's life and about his relationship with Sultan Mahmud in Ghaznah is scanty and ambiguous. Obviously, Al-Biruni accompanied Mahmud on raids into the lands of the Indian kings, probably as an astrologer.²⁸ Although an astrologer for the Ruler, Al-Biruni did not approve of the invasion of these lands by the Sultan. Nor did he believe that the invaders were doing a favor to the local peoples by bringing a *higher* culture to a *lower* one.²⁹ Quite the contrary; Biruni expressly criticized Mahmud for destroying the Hindu culture:

Yamin-addaula Mahmud marched into India during a period of thirty years and more. God be merciful to both

²³ Embree, Introduction, v.

²⁴ F. Krenkow has citations from Al-Biruni's *Kitab al-Saydala*, informing us that a certain Roman (Greek?) lived in his neighborhood. On his visits to him, Al-Biruni would take seeds, grains, fruits, and plants with him to learn their names in the language of that foreigner, and would make note of these names in Arabic. Kaur, "Al-Biruni," 150; F. Krenkow, "Biruni and MS. Sultan Fatih NO.3386," in *Commemorative Volume* (Calcutta, 1951): 195. See also, Anton Heinen, "Al-Biruni and Al-Haytam: A Comparative Study of Scientific Method," in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 501-516.

²⁵ Sachau, Preface, VIII.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dimirdash, *Al-Biruni*, 23-24.

²⁸ Nasr, *Cosmological Doctrines*, 108.

²⁹ Embree, Introduction, IX.

father and son! Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions, and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people.³⁰

Al-Biruni suggests that one of the reasons for the hatred among Indians towards Muslims is the invasion of India by Mahmud of Ghaznah. This is also, according to Al-Biruni, why the Hindu sciences were to be found only in remote places, far away from those lands that were conquered by the Muslims where “our hands cannot reach.”³¹ It is clear that India at that time was not an ideal place for a foreigner like Al-Biruni whose intention was to study this new culture with a view to establishing friendly relations between the two cultures, Hinduism and Islam.

It was against this background and context that Al-Biruni recorded what he knew about Indian culture, which he acquired through personal encounters, textual studies, and observation.³² Al-Biruni’s interest in Indian culture reached its zenith with *Fi tahqiq ma li’l-Hind min maqbulatin fi’l-‘aql aw mardulatin* (Al-Beruni’s India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India).

We shall now venture into the world of Al-Biruni to see if, and how, the ideas and method of an eleventh-century scholar can contribute to the current discourse on interreligious understanding.

AL-BIRUNI’S METHOD OF STUDYING OTHER RELIGIONS

Professor Jeffery’s article “Al-Biruni’s Contribution to Comparative Religion” remains one of the best introductions to Al-Biruni’s thought. The study is informative, i.e. it gives the reader valuable information about Al-Biruni’s views on the religious traditions he examined; namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Greek religion, Judaism, Christianity, Sabaeans, Khawarizmians, Arabian

³⁰ *India*, 22; *Tahqiq*, 16.

³¹ *India*, 22; *Tahqiq*, 16.

³² As will be made clear in the following pages, Al-Biruni’s method overlaps the method of modern anthropology. One of Malinowski’s best students, Evans-Pritchard, mentions four conditions for doing good fieldwork: (1) the anthropologist should spend sufficient time in the field: one to three years; (2) the anthropologist should be in close contact with the people he is studying; (3) comprehending the native language and concepts is of central importance for the field experience; (4) the anthropologist should study the “entire culture and social life.” E.E. Evans-Pritchard, “Fieldwork and the Empirical Tradition” in *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962): 64-86.

paganism, and Islam.³³ However, it fails to present a comprehensive treatment that would allow the reader to evaluate Al-Biruni's contribution to a wider interdisciplinary study of religion. I concur with Gunindar Kaur's assessment that by discussing one theme after another, one religion after another, the study seems to lose the overall import of Al-Biruni's contribution.³⁴

A more fruitful approach would be to explore what questions Al-Biruni was trying to answer. What spurred Al-Biruni into the study of other religions that were believed to have no common ground with his own religion? What were the underpinnings of his method that we call comparative? The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to the investigation of these questions. However, precisely because Al-Biruni does not offer a comprehensive account of his method of investigation of other cultures, it is left to the interpreter to construct one that will be loyal to Al-Biruni.

Al-Biruni's approach to the study of religious traditions presupposes, first of all, a genuine willingness to see truth and value in other cultures, without being forced to insist that there are universal truths in all religious traditions or, like a radical pluralist, that all cultures are equally valid in their religious and social expressions. Rather, what Al-Biruni seems to be arguing is that there is a common human element in every culture that makes all cultures distant relatives, however foreign they might seem one to another.³⁵ Hence, Bruce Lawrence comments that Al-Biruni must have "postulated a pattern of human conduct, belief and relationship to the natural environment that was the same among Indians as among other civilized peoples."³⁶ This is the main argument that underlies Al-Biruni's whole project. This theme is discernible in the passages on *India* where Al-Biruni compares and contrasts the views and customs of different cultures.

In order to argue his point that there is a common human element that makes all cultures distant relatives, Al-Biruni starts with a critique of the available literature on Hindu culture in his own society. According to

³³ Professor Tümer's book *Biruniye Göre Dinler ve İslam Dini* remains one of the best analysis of Al-Biruni's life, works, the method he employed in his study of comparative religions, and the way in which Al-Biruni gave information about the religions with which he was familiar. For a detailed discussion of these and some other similar issues, see Günay Tümer, *Biruniye Göre Dinler ve İslam Dini* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1975).

³⁴ Kaur, "Al-Biruni," 152.

³⁵ Franz Rosenthal, "Al-Biruni Between Greece and India," in *Biruni Symposium*. Ed, Ehsan Yarshter (New York: Iran Center, Columbia University, 1976): 10.

³⁶ Bruce B. Lawrence, "Al-Biruni's Approach to the Comparative Study of Indian Culture," in *Biruni Symposium*. Ed, Ehsan Yarshter (New York: Iran Center, Columbia University, 1976), 31.

Al-Biruni, not only was the available literature on Hinduism insufficient, it was also misleading, which was a more serious violation of being truthful to truth (al-haqq). He complains, "Everything which exists on this subject in our literature is second hand information which one copied from the other, a farrago of materials never sifted by the sieve of critical examination."³⁷ This, according to Al-Biruni, was inconsistent with the ethical framework provided by the Scriptures of both Christianity and Islam. He illustrates his argument by referring to the Qur'an and the Bible respectively. The Qur'an reads, "Speak the truth, even if it were against yourselves." (Qur'an: 4, 134); in a similar vein it is stated in the Bible that "Do not mind the fury of kings in speaking the truth before them. They only possess your body, but they have no power over your soul" (Cf. Matt.x.18, 19, 28; Luke xii. 4).³⁸ It is therefore safe to argue that it was religious and ethical concerns, more than anything else that led Al-Biruni to study other cultures from a comparative perspective.

The method we are hoping to construct can be said to have three distinctive characteristics, which have secured Al-Biruni a privileged place in the history of what is known as the human sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*.

A Phenomenological Method

Al-Biruni's method is phenomenological. This position is stated in the very beginning of Al-Biruni's book, *India*, where he states clearly that his book was not polemical, and that he was interested in stating the facts as they are presented by the Hindus themselves. Says Al-Biruni:

³⁷ Al-Biruni, *India*, 4-6; *Tahqiq*, 4; In this context, one has to note that Al-Biruni's critique concerning the lack of reliable information about other cultures was oriented specifically towards the literature on Hindu culture. There were, as stated earlier, studies that investigated the Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, etc., religions in an objective way. Although there may be various reasons for the mistreatment of the Hindu religion in Al-Biruni's society, lack of any explicit reference to this *alien* religion in the Qur'an and the Hadith literature may be the most significant one. Whatever the Muslims knew about these religions depended on hearsay and on secondary sources until the time of Al-Biruni. Says Al-Biruni with regard to this observation, "Abu-al'abbas Aleranshahri...has given a very good account of the doctrines of the Jews and Christians...Besides, he furnishes us with a most excellent account of the Manicheans...But when he came in his book to speak of the Hindus and the Buddhists, his arrow missed the mark..." Al-Biruni, *India*, 6-7; *Tahqiq*, 4-5. In a similar vein, Al-Biruni criticizes Al-Eranshahri for his reliance on the information obtained from the common people among Hindus and Buddhists, and not from the reliable sources.

³⁸ *India*, 4-5; *Tahqiq*; 2-3.

I shall *not* produce the arguments of our antagonists *in order to refute such of them, as I believe to be in the wrong*. My book is nothing but a simple historic record of facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus *exactly as they are*, and I shall mention in connection with them similar theories of the Greeks in order to show the relationship existing between them.³⁹

In other words, Al-Biruni attempts to understand the Hindu culture in its own terms, letting the subject matter (*Sache*) speak for itself. The concern to record facts as they are, without any prejudgments, is one of the most significant aspects of Al-Biruni's methodology.⁴⁰ In this sense, one can argue that Al-Biruni's approach to the study of religious traditions comes close to the contemporary phenomenological method in the study of religion although Al-Biruni never used the term phenomenology.

It is not the aim of this chapter, of course, to trace the history of phenomenology of religion; nor is it to discuss all the issues pertaining to

³⁹ *India*, 7; *Tahqiq*, 5.

⁴⁰ Al-Biruni's method was not polemical in itself, but it certainly was controversial given the conditions in which he lived. He must have been aware of the fact that by letting the Hindus speak for themselves, as one of the aspects of his method, he would be accused by his fellow Muslims of spreading the heathenish opinions of Hindus without refuting them. Instead of simply compromising his scientific outlook, Al-Biruni seems to have justified his method, at least in his mind, in the following way. "If Muslims find them objectionable," Al-Biruni says, "we can only say that such is the belief of Hindus, and they themselves are best qualified to defend it." *India*, 7, *Tahqiq*, 5. In other words, Al-Biruni neither defended nor attempted to refute the worldview of the Hindus, which he believed to be in conflict with his own religion.

Some scholars have argued that this (stating the facts as they are) may have been the reason why Al-Biruni's book made so little impression on succeeding generations of scholars in his culture. See Ainslee T. Embree, "Foreign Interpreters of India: The Case of Al-Biruni," in *The Scholar and the Saint*. Ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 7. Rosenthal also argues that while Al-Biruni's loyalty to what he adjudged to be the Truth, namely "the original oneness of all higher civilizations" led him to investigate and appreciate the Indian thought, other Muslims after him ignored and/or belittled his work as being controversial.

Against this argument, there are scholars who argue that Al-Biruni's work must have had pivotal effect on the tolerant attitudes of succeeding Muslim rulers towards Hindus. Although interrupted at times, it also commenced a tradition of contact with Hindus, as a result of which the latter were given the *dhimmi* status in the legal language, if not in the theological language as well. Nasr, "Encounter of Religions," 58.

it.⁴¹ Yet it is necessary and fitting to examine one of the more significant foundational concepts of phenomenology with a view to getting a better insight into what Al-Biruni attempted to accomplish. It is the phenomenological concept of *epoche*-abstention.

Epoche was the term used by the Greek skeptics to designate the attitude that they recommended one should adopt in the face of a world of doubt and uncertainty, an attitude of non-commitment and suspension of judgment.⁴² However, as a phenomenological term, it has been widely identified with the name Husserl and his phenomenological project whose influence has been pivotal in the history of Western thought in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Epoche is one of the key concepts Husserl used in his phenomenological method through which he hoped to answer the questions of how to begin to philosophize⁴³ and of how to get access to the transcendental sphere of absolute subjectivity, which is the absolute foundation of all knowledge.⁴⁴

In pursuit of his project, Husserl proposes a twofold procedure. In the first place, he tries to determine the way I, the thinking and acting

⁴¹ For the history and development of phenomenology and the issues it deals with see Hans Penner, *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988); H. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: An Historical Introduction* (The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984) and a more recent book by Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999). Of course, one of the classics of this field is Van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (Harper Touchbooks, 1973).

⁴² W.T.Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy: The Twentieth Century to Wittgenstein and Sartre*, 2nd rev. ed., vol. V. (Washington, D.C.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 265.

Although Al-Biruni never used the concept *epoche* in his studies that are available to us, given his deep involvement and versatility in Greek science and philosophy, one is tempted to speculate about whether he was familiar with this term, and whether he applied it in his studies without necessarily using the concept *epoche* explicitly as a technical term in his terminology. For Al-Biruni's relation to Greek philosophy, see Majid Fakhry, "Al-Biruni and Greek Philosophy--An Essay in Philosophical Erudition," in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 344-350; Seyyed H. Nasr, "Al-Biruni as Philosopher" in *Al-Biruni Commemorative Volume* (Pakistan: Hamdard Academy, 1979), 400-406.

⁴³ William J. Lenkowsk, "What is Husserl's *Epoche*?: The Problem of the Beginning of Philosophy in A Husserlian Context," *Man and World*, 11 (1978), 299.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Ströker, "Phenomenology as First Philosophy: Reflections on Husserl," in *Edmund Husserl and the Phenomenological Tradition*, ed. Robert Sokolowski (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 253.

subject, find myself in relation to the world; the attitude I hold towards things that I am surrounded by--things with which I may or may not have any conscious relationship. This attitude Husserl calls the *non-reflective attitude* or *natural standpoint* that involves judging, valuing, deciding, and position taking.⁴⁵ Simply put, I see the world simply there for me, whether I pay any special attention to it or not.⁴⁶ All my judgments, position-takings, deciding and so on, take place according to preconceived notions. This attitude or stand Husserl contrasts with what may be called the phenomenological stance, transcendental-phenomenological reduction or phenomenological *epoche*.⁴⁷

According to Husserl, the natural standpoint inhibits the way to philosophizing, that is, to having access to the transcendental sphere.⁴⁸ Therefore, "instead of remaining at this point," he says, "we propose to alter it radically,"⁴⁹ which is the second step that leads us to another unavoidable question of the plausibility of performing this alteration. For Husserl, it is possible only through the performance of an initiating act which he called the "transcendental-phenomenological *epoche*" that presupposes a suspension of natural attitude--a certain refraining from judgment...⁵⁰ Only through this suspension, according to Husserl, does the vast richness of the transcendental sphere become accessible. Only in this way is a return to the things themselves (*Zu den Sachen*) possible--a return to the given, objective world,⁵¹ to the data directly given in our experience or consciousness.

The influence of the phenomenological movement can be observed not only in various branches of philosophy, but in the field of religious studies as well. Soon the phenomenological concept of *epoche* was incorporated into the study of religion.

One of the leading figures responsible for introducing phenomenology into the study of religion was Van der Leeuw, according to whom phenomenology is the systematic study of what appears (*phenomena*).⁵² Like Husserl, he argues that *epoche* is concerned with

⁴⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 20.

⁴⁶ Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1967), 91, 95.

⁴⁷ *Meditations*, 20, 21

⁴⁸ Note that when Husserl expands this idea into the idea of transcendental ego, it always has a kind of quasi-spatial metaphor at the basis of it, something that is very hard to avoid in a discursive language. In philosophy, however, it should be questionable whether this common sense metaphor should be applied as well.

⁴⁹ *Ideas*, 96.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 98; Husserl, *Meditations*, 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Leeuw, *Religion*, 683.

bracketing of what lies behind appearances, not with the bracketing of subjectivity. In other words, the phenomenologist purports to see the objectified world, the given, as it gives itself to our consciousness, to our experience. In this interpretation of *epoche* Van der Leeuw seems to be in complete agreement with Husserl.

In Professor Smart's project, *epoche* has come to mean methodological agnosticism or the suspension of truth questions concerning the focus of a religion.⁵³ This interpretation of *epoche* presupposes an approach that takes its main objective as simply to describe or to explain the religious phenomena without the affirmation or denial of existence. It is in this context that Smart makes a crucial distinction between the expression of religion and its description.⁵⁴ Phenomenology of religion in this sense has come to be described as a new science which seeks to describe religious phenomena while suspending truth judgments through bracketing, hoping to let the subjective religious facts speak for themselves.⁵⁵

Although the value-free methodology in human sciences in general, and in religious studies in particular, is considered to be the fruit of the Enlightenment spirit, Al-Biruni echoed similar themes in his study of alien cultures in terms of objectivity, neutrality and letting the subject speak for itself as stated in a previously quoted passage. The present writer argues that, while in a sense Al-Biruni comes close to the modern phenomenologist, he differs from them significantly.

First of all, by presupposing the possibility of a value-free method in human sciences, the modern phenomenologist seems to be ignoring the affective (*Gefühl*) dimension of human existence. This non-committed attitude gives the thinking, acting subject a false sense of superiority over the subject to be studied, allowing the unacknowledged presuppositions and norms, which have not been adequately reflected upon, to control the process of understanding.⁵⁶ True, Al-Biruni too aims to provide a method that would provide a relatively objective interpretation of the subject (*Sache*) to be studied, but he is also conscious of the fact that this ideal would never be reached. He is aware of his limitations as a human being. Thus, towards the end of *India*, he says, "We ask God to pardon us for every statement of ours which is not true,"⁵⁷ acknowledging the fact that as

⁵³ Ninian Smart, *Science of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 54; Eric J. Lott, *Vision, Tradition, Interpretation* (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988), 284.

⁵⁴ Ninian Smart, *Reason and Faiths* (London: SPCK, 1958), pp. 4-6. In his study, *Reason and Faiths*, Smart argues that there is a crucial difference between the statements "Jesus died for our sins," and "Christians say 'Jesus died for our sins.'" Whereas the first statement is regarded as expression of faith, the second one is just a descriptive, phenomenological statement.

⁵⁵ Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 91.

⁵⁶ Lott, *Vision*, 182.

⁵⁷ *India*, II, 246; *Tahqiq*, 547-548.

human beings we see the world through the lenses provided to us by the society and culture in which we find ourselves.

Secondly, the modern phenomenologist is interested in the phenomenon as it gives itself to our consciousness, ignoring the diachronic dimension. Moreover, he or she presupposes an ideal context divorced from the historical process and does not aim to investigate the complex causal relations.⁵⁸ Al-Biruni too concerns himself with the phenomena, but he is also interested in finding out what lies behind appearances by paying special attention to the historical-cultural context, the unique conditions that surround the particular event at hand. The best example that would support this argument is his evaluation of Hindu hatred towards Muslims in Al-Biruni's time.

Al-Biruni argues that hatred among Hindus towards Muslims is commonplace. This is a phenomenological observation, seeing the object as it gives itself to the consciousness of the interpreter without paying any special attention to the causal relations. In other words, when I, the phenomenologist, observe Hindu society, what becomes evident is that there is a sense in which I can observe the existence of hatred, quite regardless of what is causing it. This is phenomenology. But, Al-Biruni, like a modern anthropologist or an interpretive sociologist, wants to understand what is causing this hatred. Al-Biruni, moreover, argues that without considering the context in which a particular event takes place, our interpretation would be incomplete and the conclusions we reach would be polemical, and hence a misrepresentation. Finding out the fact that there is hatred among Hindus is only one stage of the problem-solving process. The second stage is answering the unavoidable question of what is causing this hatred, in order to be able to rehabilitate the prejudices, and to improve relations among cultures. While Al-Biruni mentions different reasons, two are directly related to the current subject.

The first one is the religious factor. According to Al-Biruni, the Hindus "differ from us in religion as we believe in nothing in which they believe, and vice versa."⁵⁹ He describes their attitude as fanatical, which is directed not only to Muslims, but also to those who do not belong to them--against all foreigners. They call them, that is, *mleecha*, i.e., impure, and forbid having any connection with them. He further observes that: "they are not allowed to receive anybody who does not belong to them, even if he was inclined to their religion."⁶⁰ This is also one reason, argues Al-Biruni that makes any relationship with the Hindus quite difficult.

A more serious and obvious reason for the hatred, according to Al-Biruni, was the resentment felt by the Indians against foreign invaders in general, and Muslims in particular. When Muslims entered into India, the country was already bleeding from the depredations of the Sakas and

⁵⁸ Lott, *Vision*, 183.

⁵⁹ *India*, 17; *Tahqiq*, 13.

⁶⁰ *India*, 19-20; *Tahqiq*, 15.

Hunas. Then came the Muslims: The repugnance of the Hindus against foreigners increased more and more when the Muslims began to make their inroads into their country. "Succeeding events planted a deeply rooted hatred in their hearts," observes Al-Biruni.⁶¹ The following passage, which was quoted earlier, seems to explain the real reason behind this hatred: "Mahmut utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, by which the Hindus like atoms of dust scattered in all directions.... Their scattered remains cherish, of course, the most inveterate aversion towards all Muslims."⁶²

From these passages it is safe to conclude, first, that while Al-Biruni opts for a method that would help the interpreter understand facts as they are, he has no pretense of presenting a presuppositionless method of understanding, which is only an ideal.

Second, according to Al-Biruni no genuine understanding is possible without considering the context in which a particular event takes place or a concept assumes a new meaning. If one seeks to understand the hatred between Hindus and Muslims in the eleventh-century India, one cannot afford to ignore the background (historical context) of the problem. In other words, in Al-Biruni's approach to the study of religious traditions, the co-existence of phenomenological and historical strands is a necessary element for a genuine analysis.

A Dialogical Method

Al-Biruni's method is dialogical. This premise can be understood in a number of ways. In the first sense it is used to explicate Al-Biruni's intention of studying the Indian culture and writing his major book, *India*; in the second sense it refers to the ways in which Al-Biruni went about collecting his material in pursuing his project.

As stated above, Al-Biruni wrote *India* with a view to helping those who wished to enter into dialogue with Hindus. According to Al-Biruni, dialogue with Hindus was necessary since there were many subjects that were intricate and obscure, which would be perfectly clear if there were more connection between Muslims and Hindus.⁶³ In other words, the purpose of studying other religions is to "promote better acquaintances between adherents of different religious traditions, to emphasize 'the universal elements in all religions,'"⁶⁴ as described by modern students of religion.

⁶¹ *India*, 21; *Tahqiq*, 16.

⁶² *India*, 22; *Tahqiq*, 16.

⁶³ *India*, 17; *Tahqiq*, 13.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 253; Smith, *Faith of Other Men*, 13.

Since Abu Sahl shared Al-Biruni's conviction on this matter, as stated in the preface of *India*,⁶⁵ he asked Al-Biruni to write what he knew about the Hindus "as a help to those who wanted to discuss religious questions with them (Hindus), and as a repertory of information to those who want to associate with them."⁶⁶ This can be interpreted to mean that there were people in Muslim society who sought to enter into discourse with Hindus in matters of religion, science, philosophy, and so on. Hence, Al-Biruni must have had a certain audience in mind to address when he was writing *India*. In this sense, it can be argued that Al-Biruni is the first scholar, at least in the Muslim world, whose interest in other religious traditions went beyond the then common tendency of treating the Hindus as heretics or polytheists, despite their apparently idolatrous practices.

As previously argued, for Al-Biruni, the best way to enter into the world of another culture was through personal encounters, textual studies, and observation. He must have been aware, however, of the fact that there would be no entrance into the life of another civilization without awareness of the veils that inhibited clear understanding by the very nature of language. As a result, as noted previously, not only was Al-Biruni able to overcome the language barrier by learning Sanskrit, but his proficiency in Sanskrit eventually led him to translate books from Arabic into Sanskrit, and from Sanskrit into Arabic.⁶⁷ In this endeavor Al-Biruni did not hesitate

⁶⁵ Abu Sahl must have been one of Al-Biruni's teachers. Al-Biruni tells us that he (Abu Sahl) too studied the current literature on Hinduism and found that the scholars were biased when it came to describing the religion of the Hindus. He then asked Al-Biruni to write what he knew about the Hindu culture, religion, and science as he was the best qualified to do so.

⁶⁶ *India*, 7, II, 246; *Tahqiq*, 547-548.

⁶⁷ One of these books is entitled *Samkhya*, which is about the origins and description of all created things, and is assumed lost. The other one is *Patanjali*, which, according to Al-Biruni, is about the emancipation of the soul from the fetters of the body. *Ibid.*, 8. Al-Biruni's translation of *Patanjali* was edited by Hellmut Ritter and was published in *Oriens* under the title of *Kitab batanjali ahl-hindi fi'l-khilas min al-amthal* in 1956. For the Arabic translation with a German introduction, see Hellmut Ritter, "Al-Biruni's Übersetzung des Yoga-Sutra des Patanjali," *Oriens*, 9 (1956): 165-200. Shlomo Pines and Tuvia Gelbum published an English translation of Al-Biruni's rendering into Arabic of all four chapters of *Patanjali* and its comparison with related texts in a series of articles. See Shlomo Pines and Tuvia Gelbum, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of Patanjali's "Yogasutra," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 29, No.2 (1966):302-325; *idem*, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of Patanjali's "Yogasutra": A Translation of the Second Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (1977): 522-549. *idem*, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of Patanjali's "Yogasutra": A Translation of the Third Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1983):258-304. *idem*, "Al-Biruni's Arabic Version of of

to study with, and learn from, the Hindu scholars, especially when dealing with complicated philosophical and religious issues. He says in a passage in *India* that:

I have found it very hard to work my way into the subject, although I have a great liking for it, in which respect I stand quite alone in my time, and although I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books from places where I supposed they were likely to be found, in procuring [them] for myself even from very remote places, and from Hindu scholars who understand them and are able to teach me.⁶⁸

Obviously, Al-Biruni could make intelligent use of the Pundits and Sastris whom he engaged extensively at a time when the prevalent attitude towards other cultures was one of hostility. Mohammad Yasin puts this dramatically when he says, The *Indica*⁶⁹ is like a magic island of quiet, impartial research in the midst of a world of clashing swords, burning towns, and burned temples.⁷⁰

Al-Biruni's attempt to learn the Hindu religion, science and philosophy was not confined to personal encounters alone; he engaged in textual studies as well. As he states, he did not hesitate to spend money and time to collect the Hindu books wherever they were to be found, some of which Al-Biruni translated into Arabic.

What is remarkable about Al-Biruni, according to Franz Rosenthal, is that ideas to be found in the literature of other cultures he studies, *Yogasutras* for instance, entered Al-Biruni's own epistemological thinking.⁷¹ One example of such cases is the following statement in which Al-Biruni discusses the relationship between the desire for knowledge and what happens when the unknown becomes known. From the translation of the *Yogasutras of Patanjali* Al-Biruni reads: "When a potential object of

Patanjali's "Yogasutra": A Translation of the Fourth Chapter and a Comparison with Related Texts," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 52, No.2 (1989):265-305. See also, Louis Massignon, "Al-Biruni et la valeur internationale de la science Arabe," in *Commemoration Volume* (Calcuta, 1951), 218.

⁶⁸ *India*, 24; *Tahqiq*, 18.

⁶⁹ Al-Biruni's *India* is sometimes referred to as *Indica*.

⁷⁰ Mohammad Yasin, "Al-Biruni in India," *Islamic Culture*, 49 (1975): 212.

⁷¹ Franz, Rosenthal, "On Some Epistemological and Methodological Presuppositions of Al-Biruni," *The Commemoration Volume of Biruni International Congress* (Tehran: High Council for Culture and Art, 1973), 546.

Knowledge is unknown, the desire to know it increases until it is known. Then the desire quiets down."⁷²

This statement, like many others in Al-Biruni's books, is not a mere report or a quote from *Patanjali*; Al-Biruni seems to have internalized the meaning and incorporated the foreign ideas into his own thought patterns when he found them admissible. Therefore, it can be argued that by entering into dialogue with Hindus, Al-Biruni seems to have regarded the notion of dialogue both as a means and as an end in the study and understanding of alien cultures.

A Comparative Method

Al-Biruni's method is comparative. According to some prominent scholars, the only ultimately justifiable reason for engaging in the study of other religions is to improve relations among the adherents of different religious traditions.⁷³ What else can be the meaning and end of all the effort the student of religion puts into his or her studies? As has been indicated repeatedly, this issue was the essential motive behind Al-Biruni's cross-cultural interest also: to eradicate the common misconceptions about Hinduism and to promote a better acquaintanceship between the two religious traditions, Islam and Hinduism.

Al-Biruni must have postulated, as Bruce Lawrence states, that there was a pattern of human conduct, belief and relationship to the natural environment that was the same among Indians as among other civilized peoples.⁷⁴ However, this assessment should not lead the reader to conclude that Al-Biruni was proposing a sort of perennial philosophical view that presupposes the transcendental unity of all religions. Rather, as a believing Muslim, he simply welcomed certain differences among different peoples. In other words, he believed that "God has created the world as containing many differences in itself,"⁷⁵ and these differences should be welcomed. In order to prove his argument, he attempted to explore some of the most disputed issues, such as God, polytheism, creation, caste system and so on, in different cultures. For the purpose of this chapter, however, we will discuss only the notion of God, which is the most common theme in every culture, around which all the other issues evolve.

Before we begin to investigate how Al-Biruni examined the problem of God in comparative perspective, it is necessary to mention the fact that his thoroughly tolerant and objective outlook throughout does not prevent him, at times, from dismissing some of the ideas of the Hindus as

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 251.

⁷⁴ Lawrence, "Al-Biruni's Approach," 32.

⁷⁵ G. Morgenstierne, "Al-Biruni, The Founder of Comparative Studies in Human Culture," in *The Commemoration Volume of Biruni International Congress* (Tehran: High Council for Culture and Art, 1973), 6.

abominable⁷⁶ if these ideas were in contradiction with the facts and common sense. This, in fact, is one of the most significant aspects of Al-Biruni's comparative approach, for his criticism includes any view that he considers to be unscientific, baseless, and foolish whether it be Hindu, Muslim or Greek.⁷⁷ This is based on the conviction that in every society there are educated and uneducated classes whose understanding differs significantly, especially when it comes to comprehending abstract concepts.⁷⁸ Whereas the educated class "strives to conceive abstract ideas and to define general principles," says Al-Biruni, the uneducated classes "do not pass beyond the apprehension of the senses, and are content with derived rules..."⁷⁹

One such abstract idea is the concept of God. Al-Biruni begins his treatment of Hindu religion and philosophy by a definition of their concept of God as understood by the educated people.

The Hindus believe with regard to God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and end, acting by free-will, all-wise, almighty, living, giving life, ruling, preserving; one who in his sovereignty is unique, beyond all likeness and unlikeness, and that he does not resemble anything nor does anything resemble him...⁸⁰

This, according to Al-Biruni is what the educated Hindus believe about God.⁸¹ As for the uneducated class, Al-Biruni finds most of their

⁷⁶ *India*, 31; *Tahqiq*, 23.

⁷⁷ Al-Biruni's tolerant outlook is well known. However, his tolerance did not extend to the fool, bigot, or dilettante, as illustrated in the following account. "Upon his showing an instrument for setting the times of prayer to a certain religious legalist, the latter objected that it had engraved upon it the names of the Byzantine months, and this constituted an imitation of the infidels. 'The Byzantines also eat food' stated Al-Biruni, 'then do not imitate them in this' and rejected the fellow forthwith. Kennedy, "Al-Biruni", 156.

⁷⁸ *India*, 27; *Tahqiq*, 20.

⁷⁹ *India*, 27; *Tahqiq*, 20.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* Note the similarities between the Hindu definition of God and the chapter entitled *The Unity* in the Qur'an which reads:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

1. Say: He is Allah, the One!

2. Allah, the eternally besought of all!

3. He begetteth not nor was begotten.

4. And there is none comparable unto Him. (Qur'an, CXII)

⁸¹ Instead of commenting on the possible differences between the Islamic concept of God and the Supreme Being of the Hindus, Al-Biruni quotes extensively from the Hindu literature, notably from *Patanjali*, *Gita* and *Samkhya* to give a correct definition of the Hindu concept of God as it is described in their own literature. However, even a superficial analysis will

views on the concept of God are simply abominable. But he goes on to argue, as part of his general thesis that similar errors occur in other religious traditions. He specifically refers to Islam, criticizing what he calls the anthropomorphic doctrines and teachings of the *Jabriyya* sect, for instance.⁸²

The discussion of the concept of God is closely related to the much-discussed issue of the Indian idol worshipping or rather associationism (*Shirk*). As is well known, idol worshipping is considered to be the greatest sin in Islam⁸³; and Muslims had regarded Hindus as idol worshippers, at least in the theological language, although there was no explicit reference to the Hindu religion in the Qur'an. Therefore, Al-Biruni's criticism oriented specifically towards the label of *mushrikun* attached to Hindus.

Many Muslim scholars consider al-Biruni's treatment of idol worshipping among Hindus to be polemical even today. He is aware of the fact that idol worshipping is abominable, and is the greatest sin in Islam. And yet, he argues that not all the Hindus are idol-worshippers. With this argument Al-Biruni has the educated class in mind. With regard to this class he writes "those who march on the path to liberation or those who study philosophy and theology and who desire abstract truth, which they call *sara*, are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and never would dream of worshipping an image to represent him."⁸⁴ Al-Biruni goes even further in this regard and argues that Hindu scholars *do* in fact enjoy the help of God in their endeavor.⁸⁵

As for the uneducated class, Al-Biruni admits that the majority of the Hindu people, who are uneducated, may be regarded as idol-worshippers although he is hesitant to label them with that derogatory term. However, he attempts to justify the beliefs and actions of uneducated people, who have an "aversion to the world of abstract thought which is only understood by the highly educated."⁸⁶ In pursuit of his argument Al-Biruni creates an imaginary scenario that illustrates the innately human disposition to idolatry, regardless of one's religious beliefs.⁸⁷

Al-Biruni argues that certain cultures create idols initially not to worship them, but to honor certain venerated persons or places to keep their

reveal the fact that Al-Biruni seems to avoid deliberately the subtler theological discussions-discussions about the nature of personal versus impersonal God in Hindu and Islamic theologies. See *India*, 27-30; *Tahqiq*, 20-22.

⁸² *India*, 31-32; *Tahqiq*, 22-24.

⁸³ The Qur'an reads explicitly that shirk is the one sin that God will not forgive (Qur'an, 4:48, 116); paradise will be absolutely denied to a person who is guilty of this sin (Qur'an, 5:72).

⁸⁴ *India*, I, 113; *Tahqiq*, 85.

⁸⁵ *India*, II, 108; *Tahqiq*, 433.

⁸⁶ *India*, I, 111; *Tahqiq*, 84.

⁸⁷ Lawrence, "Al-Biruni's Approach," 34.

memory alive when they are absent or dead, or, more importantly, to meditate on an invisible, imperceptible God.⁸⁸ With the passage of time, however, the origin of, and the reason for, setting up these idols are forgotten, becoming a matter of custom, and the veneration of the idols becomes a rule for general practice. This disposition is deeply rooted, according to Al-Biruni, not only in the nature of the common people of India, but also in the nature of all uneducated human beings in every culture including Islam.⁸⁹

To illustrate his argument, Al-Biruni develops an imaginary scenario according to which if a picture of the Prophet of Islam or of the Ka'ba were made and were shown to an uneducated man or woman, he or

⁸⁸ W.C. Smith's interpretation of the concept of God in Hinduism comes close to that of Al-Biruni when he says "...sophisticated Hindus have tended to hold that the great mass of customs and beliefs, gods and temples, and all, that make up the so-called Hindu religion (*dharma*) are but one stage on an ultimate human journey that leads beyond these things." Smith, *Faith of Other Men*, 26.

This passage can be interpreted in a number of ways. In the first place, it accepts the Al-Birunian notion that there is a sophisticated class, which Al-Biruni calls the educated class on the one hand, and then there is an uneducated or common class, which is not mentioned explicitly but is implied as the opposite of sophisticated Hindus. Secondly, it tells us that the main purpose of erecting idols, constructing temples and so on is only a means to attempt to attain the highest goal, that is, knowing the unknowable, unperceivable, and invisible God.

Although there are several stories narrated by Al-Biruni from Hindu literature that explain the origin and intention of erecting idols, temples and so on, two of them are worth quoting in support of the above interpretation. The first one is about the quest for God by a son of Abrahman. "Abrahman had a son called Narada, who had no other desire but that of seeing the Lord. It was his custom, when he walked about, to hold a stick. If he threw it down, it became a serpent, and he was able to do miracles with it. He never went without it. One day being engrossed in meditation on the object of his hopes, he saw a fire from afar. He went towards it, and then a voice spoke to him out of fire: 'what you demand and wish is impossible. You cannot see me save thus.' When he looked in that direction, he saw a fiery appearance in something like human shape. Henceforward it has been the custom to erect idols of certain shapes. The other story is about a King who sought to see God. Having convinced the King that he would never see Him, God recommended that the King 'occupy himself with his empire in as straightforward and prudent a way as possible: turn your thoughts upon me when you are engaged in civilizing the world and protecting its inhabitants, in giving alms, and in everything you do. And if you are overpowered by human forgetfulness, make to yourself an image like that in which you see me...' From that time, the Hindus say, people make idols in different shapes. *India*, 115-116; *Tahqiq*, 86-87. (My emphasis).

⁸⁹ *India*, 112; *Tahqiq*, 84.

she would kiss the picture, throw himself or herself before it, as if he or she were not seeing the picture but what the picture represented.⁹⁰ In other words, although the actions and attitudes of these imaginary actors may outwardly look like idol worshipping, in reality these people would never dream of worshipping any but God alone. The same can be said, Al-Biruni seems to suggest, for the practices of the uneducated people in Hindu society.

In this context, Al-Biruni likens the custom of idol worshipping among Hindus to the old Hellenistic belief that the images or representations of divine beings have no magical power. Since, the ancient Greeks, “considered the idols as mediators between themselves and the First Cause, and worshipped them under the names of different stars and the highest substances.”⁹¹ In other words, people do not worship these images as deities; they rather function only as reminders for the non-philosophical pious man and woman of existence of the divine.⁹² In a similar vein, Al-Biruni mentions the “heathen Arabs” in this context to argue that they too worshipped idols hoping that they (idols) would intercede for them with God.⁹³

⁹⁰ *India*, 111; *Tahqiq*, 84. With these remarks Al-Biruni predicted with great precision what would be a common practice within a segment of Muslim community in subsequent generations. As is well known, the worship of images is prohibited in ancient and medieval Jewish tradition as well as in Islam from the very outset. The rejection of representing the transcendent Divine Being or the Prophet of Islam and his immediate companions has never been really challenged or attacked in the lands of Islam. And yet, it is very common to see the pictures of Ali, the fourth caliph and the son-in-law of the Prophet, hanging on the walls of the houses of many Shi'ite Muslims in Iran and elsewhere to keep his memory alive. Although this is not the place to compare and contrast the issues of idol-worshipping in Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, Al-Biruni seems to draw parallels between Hindu and Greek practices in real life, and the Muslim practices in his scenario as part of his comparative method.

⁹¹ *India*, 123; *Tahqiq*, 94.

⁹² Since this idea seems to be akin to the idea held by the early Christian vis-à-vis the issue of icons, Richard Walzer maintains that it may have reached the Muslim world through John of Damascus by the middle of the eighth century in the Capital of the Umayyad Kingdom. Richard Walzer, “Al-Biruni and Idolatry,” in *The Commemoration Volume of Biruni International Congress*, (Tehran: High Council for Culture and Art, 1973), 318.

⁹³ *India*, 123; *Tahqiq*, 94. As has been made clear throughout, Al-Biruni has a critical mind and attitude. His fairness and objectivity in his critiques, from which no absurd or foolish view is immune irrespective of its origin, led Professor Sachau to question Al-Biruni's commitment to Islam. Sachau comments “...his [Al-Biruni] recognition of Islam is not without reserve. He dares not to attack Islam, but he attacks the Arabs.” Sachau, Introduction, XIV. Obviously, Sachau's reading of Al-Biruni regarding this matter is not correct, for nowhere does Al-Biruni even implicitly attack Islam

Al-Biruni's tolerant treatment of the concept of God and how it relates to the issue of idol worshipping in the Indian context does not mean that he is justifying the practices of the uneducated class. Quite the contrary, he finds them abominable, but not unique to the Indian religion. What Al-Biruni emphasizes, however, is that similar practices can be observed in even higher cultures where the division between educated and uneducated class is inevitable also.

CONCLUSION

Our reflections on Al-Biruni's study of other religions in this chapter have displayed a great conformity with the insights we gained from the previous chapter where it was emphasized that understanding other people, and therefore other cultures, is possible and necessary, and can be achieved only through dialogue. In light of this and the previous chapter, then, the following chapter will examine the issue of the possibility of moving beyond the categories examined earlier.

as a belief system for any reason. He *does* attack, however, Muslims and their heathenish practices when he compares them with the abominable practices of the other cultures, Hinduism in particular. This attitude comes from his firm belief in telling the truth (*al-haqq*), which is the basic tenet of his whole project.

CHAPTER FOUR

BETWEEN EXCLUSIVISM AND PLURALISM

INTRODUCTION

The first chapter was an exposition of the current approaches in the face of the problem of the coming of the Other as it has been discussed in the relevant literature. The chapter argued that the three approaches, namely exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, which were regarded as the three responses to the problem of the coming of the Other, fall short in explaining the diversity of religion for the reasons explained earlier. The second chapter was a philosophical investigation of the meaning and nature of understanding itself as a fusion, which is considered to be one of the key concepts, if not the single most important one, in the study of cross-cultural understanding. Against this background, the third chapter presented Al-Biruni's treatment of other religious traditions as an exemplification of the so-called fusion.

In light of these observations the current chapter aims to accomplish two tasks: first it will revisit briefly the objectivism-relativism debate to show its relevance to our broader discussion; second, it will attempt to examine the issue of the possibility of moving beyond the typical attitudes of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism to a new model for discourse in inter-religious understanding. The basic thesis of this second move will be that any attempt to move beyond exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is untenable and is a contradiction in terms, since not only does each religious tradition make particularistic claims to universality but every individual as well. In this sense, the whole chapter may be regarded as an overly ambitious attempt to deconstruct the current stance, which categorizes the diverse conceptual schemes as if they were impenetrable and clearly circumscribed totalities in themselves like Leibniz's monads.

As a background to the current chapter, let us summarize some of the key points of each category. Religious exclusivism maintains that only one world religion is correct and all others are mistaken. Inclusivism contends that only one world religion is fully correct but others contain some of the truth of the one correct, religion. Religious pluralism asserts that ultimately all world religions are correct, each offering a different salvific path and a partial perspective on a single transcendental reality. Several reasons were mentioned for the inadequacy of each attitude. However, the underlying cause for their insufficiency lies, we argued, in their inclination to mold their theories according to an a priori theory building process. Because of this, although each category ostensibly represents a different and tightly defined conceptual scheme, we argue that

it is more reasonable to examine the issue of the current paradigms under two general categories of exclusivism and pluralism.¹ On the other hand, because exclusivism and pluralism move within the categories of some sort of objectivism and relativism, they are considered to be the theological equivalents of objectivism and relativism within which many contemporary debates are structured in philosophy and cultural studies.²

OBJECTIVISM-RELATIVISM DEBATE REVISITED

Objectivism

Richard Bernstein describes objectivism as “the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness.”³ In his analysis of the objectivism-relativism debate, Bernstein argues that objectivism is motivated by what he calls “the Cartesian anxiety.” This “anxiety” is based upon an either /or assumption,⁴ according to which either our beliefs about what counts as true and right can be given solid foundations in the form of universally valid standards for rational assessment, or we are destined for an intellectual and moral chaos “where nothing is, where we can neither touch the bottom or support ourselves on the surface.”⁵ With its attempt to establish a solid ground, objectivism comes close to foundationalism, which is a project that aims to ground all knowledge and belief upon an unshakeable foundation.

The origin of the contemporary debate about objectivism, and therefore Cartesianism, can be traced at least back to Descartes⁶ and his

¹ Joseph Runzo, “God, Commitment, and Other Faiths: Pluralism vs. Relativism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 5, No.4 (October 1998): 343-364. For a critique of Runzo’s relativism and a defense of inclusivism see, Philip L. Quinn, “Religious Pluralism and Religious Relativism,” in *Relativism and Religion*, ed. Charles M. Lewis (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995): 35-51.

² Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ Descartes, “Second Meditation,” in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, et al (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80

⁵ *Ibid.*, 80, ff. See also, Wesley Salmon, *The Foundations of Scientific Inference* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967).

⁶ To be sure, the objectivism-relativism debate does not start with Descartes. As Bernstein puts it, “the *agōn* between objectivists and relativists has been with us ever since the origins of Western philosophy, or at least from the time of Plato’s attack on the Sophists and on Protagoras’ alleged relativism. But it is only in recent times that the complex issues that this debate raises have

attempt to place all knowledge upon a solid superstructure⁷ to avoid what we called above the intellectual and moral chaos. In order to do that, Descartes believed that we⁸ could rid our minds of all worries and devote ourselves to the general demolition of our opinions.⁹ The only way to clear our minds of all previous presuppositions, opinions, and prejudices, according to Descartes, is through a method of doubt. Doubt everything until you can find a proposition that you cannot doubt any more. In order to find that proposition, which would allow us to create a solid ground for knowledge, Descartes doubts even the most profound convictions—including the existence of God. His doubt, however, is not the doubt of skeptics; if it were it would mean that he would have to reject permanently all of his former beliefs, opinions, etc., which would make it impossible even to think about the very procedure of doubt itself. To be able even to start any physical or mental activity, including doubting, it is necessary that one be equipped with at least the basic tools, which in our case are concepts that are constantly presented to us by the society and by our senses through which we make the world around us meaningful. This inference leads us to reason that it is not possible to start from nothing—fact of which Descartes must have been aware.¹⁰ That is why, he presupposed that some of his former beliefs were true; but even if they may be true, Descartes wants to rediscover them so that there would be no place for uncertainty. The main purpose of the methodic doubt, then, is to find one single indubitable proposition that he can use as a solid foundation upon which to rebuild all knowledge.¹¹

become almost obsessive and have spread to every area of human inquiry and life.” Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 8.

⁷ R. Descartes, “First Meditation,” in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham et al (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 76.

⁸ Descartes seems to be speaking for all of us, “for he is convinced that anyone who embarks upon the quest for certainty methodically, and without becoming confused will travel the same route as he himself does in his meditations. Thus, the “I” of the Meditations is as much an invitation to the reader to put myself or herself in Descartes’ place, as it is a way for Descartes to report his own progress.” Georges Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 16.

⁹ Descartes, “First Meditation,” 76.

¹⁰ As Descartes says, “But to accomplish this [demolition of my previous opinions], will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, *which is something I could perhaps never manage.*”(My emphasis). Descartes, “First Meditation,” 76.

¹¹ Descartes likens his attempt to that of Archimedes, for as Descartes says “Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakable.” Descartes, *Second Meditation*, 17.

Descartes' methodic doubt went to such an extent that he questioned even the possibility that anything existed at all, God included. What about Descartes himself, the doubting subject? If nothing exists, does it not follow that Descartes himself does not exist also? The answer, which will be the first step of his project, is "no" because, says Descartes, "if I convinced myself of something or thought anything at all then I certainly exist."¹² What if there was a deceiver of supreme power who constantly deceives me about my existence? Descartes argues, as a second step in his project that:

In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly. I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, [*Cogito, sum*] is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.¹³

The proof of his existence is that there was every reason to doubt everything including God; the only thing that Descartes could not doubt was the fact that he was thinking. Therefore, according to Descartes, there was a solid ground, or the Archimedean immovable point, upon which he could build all knowledge. And this point was the *cogito*. Therefore as Bernstein puts it when explaining the vision of objectivism, "at the heart of the objectivist's vision, and what makes sense of his /her passion, is the belief that there are or must be some fixed, permanent constraints to which we can appeal and which are secure and stable."¹⁴

The influence of Descartes, with the Enlightenment, can be observed in the methodologies of the subsequent generation of thinkers. Earlier, objectivism was a wide set of views about the goals and nature of scientific knowledge. Later, especially with the emergence of the Enlightenment spirit, however, even those who worked within the social sciences and the humanities attempted to utilize scientific principles with a view to attaining objective knowledge.¹⁵ Although there are myriads of

At this point, the formidable question arises as to how Descartes could create a solid ground upon which all knowledge is supposed to be grounded.

¹² Descartes, "Second Meditation,"80.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 19.

¹⁵ Even Max Weber, who is considered to be the father of interpretive sociology (*Verstehende* sociology) and the first to demonstrate a significant methodological alternative to the positivist movement, could not help arguing that there must be specific rules for objectivity. However, Weber did not succeed in applying his own method to the analysis of various traditions. One of these traditions, for instance, was Islam. As Bryan Turner has proven

scholars that fit within this category, such as Mill, Comte, etc., probably the most comprehensive treatment of objectivity in social sciences comes from Durkheim in his *Rules of Sociological Method*.¹⁶

According to Durkheim, social scientists before him failed to apply the objectivist method in their studies. The task of sociologists therefore was to apply the scientific methods used in the natural sciences sufficiently. Like Descartes, Durkheim argued that in order to arrive at objective knowledge social scientists must eradicate all his/her preconceptions.¹⁷ The first and most fundamental rule in doing so is to “consider social facts as things.”¹⁸ According Durkheim,

we must, therefore, consider social phenomena in themselves as distinct from the consciously formed representations of them in the mind; we must study them objectively as external things, for it is this character that

convincingly “Weber was one of the first sociologists to abandon his own philosophical guide-lines...On the one hand, Weber does provide a stimulating framework within which one can raise important theoretical issues in relation to Islamic development. On the other hand, Weber inconsistently applied in practice those methodological and philosophical principles which he declared were crucial to an adequate sociological approach.” For a brilliant discussion of the subject matter, see Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 3.

Weber’s views on the issue of objectivity in the social sciences are scattered all over his writings, but “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy”, seems the most comprehensive. See, Max Weber, “‘Objectivity in Social Science and Sociology,” in *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans and ed. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch with a foreword by E. A. Shils (Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1949): 49-112; Weber’s analysis of Islam as a religion, and of Muslim societies as cultures is found in his major sociological analysis of religions, *The Sociology of Religion*. See, Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff, introd. T. Parsons (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

On the other hand, there are those who argue that Weber’s was not an attempt to diminish the subjective character of every interpretation, but to save the lectern from those who abuse it to promote their own political goals, religious creeds, and moral stances as scientifically proven truths. See, Austin Harrington, *Hermeneutic Dialogue and Social Science: A Critique of Gadamer and Habermas* (London: Routledge, 2001), 8-9.

¹⁶ Harrington, *Hermeneutic Dialogue*, 7.

¹⁷ E. Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Muller, ed. George E. G. Catlin (New York, The Free Press, 1938), 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

they present to us...This rule is applicable, then, to all social reality without exception.¹⁹

What makes it possible for Durkheim to argue that the social phenomena can be treated as givens is his conviction that the social facts are neither imaginary nor ideal, but really effective as causal influences on human action. Therefore they can be observed and explained objectively.

Let us summarize what we have said thus far. Objectivism was a philosophical strategy initiated above all by Descartes, and brought to a great degree of refinement by the entire epistemological tradition of modern thought in almost every field that takes as its aim the studying of the phenomena. The underlying idea of objectivity in sciences, especially in the social sciences and the humanities, is that there are rival, total, internally coherent, but externally incompatible visions of the world. The best way to observe and judge them is to stand outside of their world, and evaluate these rival available worlds from an extraneous, and impartial, uncontaminated viewpoint.²⁰ How do we observe these incompatible and rival worlds (phenomena) from an external world? There is one clear answer: clear your mind, as Descartes²¹ and later Durkheim²² urge us to do, of preconceptions, prejudgments, and presuppositions.²³

The objectivist position in philosophy, social sciences, and religious studies can be criticized on various grounds. Our brief analysis allows us to argue that there is a certain objectifying process taking place in every attempt to arrive at objective knowledge or interpretation of the subject matter, the Other. This has several ethical implications.

The first ethical implication is that in this process the subject matter, i.e., the text, the Other, (*Sache*,) is materialized, externalized, reified, and regarded as a sensory datum to be treated methodically. The second one is an extension of the previous one. As Harrington puts it, “‘objectivity’ [in this sense] can [also] mean to deprive of inner soul, spirit or vital agency, to reduce solely to a thing or object of gratification or manipulation, to ‘violate,’ ‘de-humanize’ or treat purely as a means to some ulterior end.”²⁴ This attitude undermines the Kantian ethical notion to treat the others not as means but ends in themselves,²⁵ which is a serious deficiency not only in philosophy and social sciences, but more specifically in cross-cultural studies including religion.

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

²⁰ Ernest Gellner, “Tractatus Sociologico-Philosophicus” in *Objectivity and Cultural Divergence*, ed. S.C. Brown (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984):249-250.

²¹ Descartes, “First Meditation,” 17

²² Durkheim, *Rules*, 31

²³ Gellner, “Tractatus Sociologico-Philosophicus,” 250.

²⁴ Harrington, *Hermeneutic Dialogue*, 13.

²⁵ *TM*, 358; *WM*, 364.

The objectivist attitude can be criticized on the epistemological (technical) level also. The objectivist methodologies fail to take account of the process of research as itself a particular social practice with its own cultural characteristics, which in principle could themselves form the object of, for instance, sociological or anthropological analysis.²⁶ Furthermore, the objectivist fails to ask, let alone answer, the question of the legitimacy and the possibility of studying a people, a cultural form, and a pattern of thought as givens. It is this kind of objectivity that generates the kind of attitude that becomes the blueprint of exclusivism as we will see later in this chapter.

Relativism

Having examined briefly what we can understand about the concept of objectivism, it is time to analyze another key concept in philosophy and cultural studies that is pertinent to our investigation: relativism. Before we determine what is understood by relativism, a brief examination of the background against which relativism has been developed is in order.

There are at least two reasons why relativism has gained popularity in the twentieth century. The first one can be attributed to the failure of the program of logical positivism.²⁷ This occurred in the form of a backlash “against the disillusionment, frustrated expectation, and dashed hopes of those who had relied upon what proved to be the empty, failed promises and bankrupt program of the logical positivists.”²⁸ This failure was represented in the attempts of the philosophers like Carnap and others, who belonged to the so-called Vienna Circle. Their attempt was to eradicate speculative metaphysics. In so doing, they sought to employ logical analysis and the method of empirical sciences²⁹ to provide a universal and empirical grounding for all human thinking.

The second reason has to do with the success achieved in the social sciences, notably in cultural anthropology in their effort to study, and therefore understand, the cultural patterns of distant peoples.³⁰ Previously, philosophers, like Hume, had insisted on the homogeneity of all human cultures:

[T]he great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations...Mankind are so

²⁶ Harrington, *Hermeneutic Dialogue*, 12.

²⁷ James F. Harris, *Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1992), 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular.³¹

In a similar vein A. Comte, the first thinker who coined the term sociology, had attempted to prove through his “Law of the Three Stages” that all societies follow determinate stages. The first stage begins with the most primitive societies in the religious stage. The second stage that every society must go through is the metaphysical stage, which is the transmission period. Finally, comes the modern, positivist, and therefore the scientific stage. At this stage,

Social physics...occupies itself with the study of social phenomena, considered in the same light as astronomical, physical, chemical, and physiological phenomena, that is to say as being subject to natural and invariable laws.³²

Through this threefold and,

[N]ecessary chain of successive transformations the human race, starting from a condition barely superior to that of a society of great apes, has been gradually *led up to the present stage of European civilization*.³³

It is noteworthy to see that, in spite of the sophisticated theories of these thinkers, modern anthropology and sociology have proved that there was not “a great uniformity among the actions and thought patterns of men” as Hume had predicted. Neither have all societies followed the same path in their journey to progress as Comte had professed. In other words, empirical evidence showed that there was not “a great uniformity among the cultures” but a great variety that could not be judged by a set of standards developed by a particular culture. With this realization, “the various cultural differences with which many relativists are concerned became much more pronounced than they had been at any other time since the Enlightenment itself.”³⁴

It is safe to argue, then, that obsession with relativism in the later part of the twentieth century was due, in part, to the failure of the positivistic project of grounding all knowledge on a solid stand, i.e., God, the *cogito*. If objectivism was destined for failure, what was the best

³¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 83.

³² A. Comte, *System of Positive Philosophy*, vol. 4, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1967; London, 1877), 599, 557.

³³ *Ibid.*, 560.

³⁴ Harris, *Against Relativism*, 9.

candidate that could replace it? The answer is “Relativism,” which in Bernstein’s terms,

[i]s the basic conviction that when we turn to the examination of those concepts that philosophers have taken to be the most fundamental--whether it is the concept of rationality, truth, reality, right, the good, or norms--we are forced to recognize that in the final analysis all such concepts must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture.³⁵

In other words, the relativist is profoundly suspicious of objectivism’s desire for universal ahistorical standards. This suspicion comes from the fear that to advocate universal standards, which relativists deem impossible, will inevitably serve to privilege one particular and limited worldview over others, which are unique in themselves. Moreover, while objectivists tend to see challenges to universal standards or rational judgments as threats to truth, justice, and stability, relativists see attempts to fix absolute standards as stifling, dogmatic, and ultimately oppressive.³⁶

Peter Winch is considered to be one of the major representatives of relativism. His contribution to cultural studies, especially to anthropology, is immense. His book *The Idea of a Social Science*³⁷ and his now famous article “Understanding a Primitive Society”³⁸ are considered to be among the classical statements of relativism.

During the formative years when social sciences were still in search of their identity as sciences, approximation to natural sciences was universally considered to be the only option for examining the various aspects of human culture and human interaction, which are the subject matter of social sciences and humanities. It is Winch who is responsible, in part,³⁹ for offering an analysis of the social sciences, which places them in

³⁵ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 8.

³⁶ Barnes, Barry and David Bloor, “Relativism, Rationalism, and the Sociology of Knowledge” in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 46-47.

³⁷ P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958)

³⁸ P. Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Evanston and New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 78-111.

³⁹ We must note that Winch is not alone in his attack on the project of establishing a kind of social science that would let the interpreter embark on a journey that leads to an objective interpretation of an alien culture. Hans-George Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* and Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* have been the major catalyst for prompting the current critical re-examination of the problem of epistemology and science also.

sharp contrast with the natural sciences. What Winch attempted to do was: instead of trying to emulate the methods of the natural sciences, he argued that the social sciences must develop a very different kind of methodology.⁴⁰ His project, therefore, was “an attempt to relativize the supposed universality and privileged claims to truth of modern science.”⁴¹

Taking as his point of departure the later Wittgenstein’s language games, Winch separates the social sciences from the natural sciences by abandoning the notion of a unified and formalist account of science.⁴² Social sciences and natural sciences are different in that their subject matters are different, and therefore they must apply different methodologies. This was an attempt to show that research in the social sciences, or any understanding of different social practices in different cultures, is not the result of the scientific method of the natural sciences. The logical interpretation of the above argument seems to be this: the data available to the social sciences always require some interpretation and any understanding of any alien culture and pattern of thought etc. must be relative to a particular language game.⁴³ This interpretation allows us to argue that, according to Winch, there can be no social science that is immune from the influence of relativity, which is inherent in every understanding.

What does this mean? How is this interpretation supposed to help us in our attempts at understanding other cultures? Winch cautions us against the possible superficial generalizations in our analysis of cultures other than our own. But has he gone far enough? Or has he gone so far as to suggest that there are no criteria by which we can judge a behavior or a social custom as “correct” or “mistaken”?⁴⁴ Bernstein’s answer is as follows:

Winch seems to be suggesting that forms of life may be so radically different from each other that in order to understand and interpret alien or primitive societies we not only have to bracket our prejudices and biases but have to suspend our own Western standards and criteria of

⁴⁰ Winch, *Idea of a Social Science*, 8; Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 26.

⁴¹ Robert C. Ulin, *Understanding Cultures: Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory* (Austin, TX.: University of Texas Press), 26.

⁴² Winch, *Idea of a Social Science*, 24-32. Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” 89-90.

⁴³ A careful reading of Winch will reveal that he is not trying to diminish the function of method in the natural sciences. What he argues is that the method used in the natural sciences is not applicable in the social science. As they both have different goals and different subject matter to investigate, it is necessary and fitting that they have different means to reach their goals.

⁴⁴ Winch, *Idea of a Social Science*, 91.

rationality. We may be confronted with standards of rationality about beliefs and actions that are incompatible with or incommensurable with our standards.⁴⁵

If Bernstein's interpretation is correct, then there seems to be a contradiction running behind Winch's whole project. While Winch is struggling to save the social sciences from the influences of Cartesian Anxiety, by assuming the possibility of bracketing our prejudices or prejudgments, which was the Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice, he seems to be opting for an objectivist interpretation: bracket your prejudices and previous opinions, and you will arrive at an objective interpretation: knowledge. Recall, this was what Descartes sought to accomplish in his attempt to find a solid ground for all knowledge.

Another point is the question of criteria. On the one hand, Winch implicitly argues that it is possible to understand alien cultures and primitive societies as long as we bracket our prejudices. On the other hand, he states explicitly that there cannot be any objective universal criteria by which we can judge and criticize other cultures. This is because any attempt to establish a criterion takes place in a certain context, and reflects the standards of a particular language game from which that criterion emanates. We cannot, argues Winch, "overlook the fact that 'criteria and concepts' have a history."⁴⁶ Thus, the main issue, according to Winch, becomes one concerned with differences in criteria of rationality because any time we talk about standards or criteria of rationality, we must ask, "Whose?"⁴⁷

In order to illustrate his point, Winch refers to African Azende's use of magic.⁴⁸ The practice of magic is manifested in terms of oracles that the Azende use to direct their lives. The practice of magic is so central to the lives of the Azende that, according to Winch, "a Zande would be utterly lost and bewildered without his oracle...It is rather as if an engineer, in our society, were to be asked to build a bridge without mathematical calculation..."⁴⁹ This is another way of saying that oracles, or magic function in a way similar to mathematics or physics in modern societies.

⁴⁵ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 27.

⁴⁶ Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," 101.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁸ For an engaging discussion of this issue in the context of the exchange between Winch and MacIntyre the reader is referred to the following material: P. Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson (Evanston and New York: Harper & Row, Publishers), 78-111; P. Winch, "The Idea of a Social Science," *ibid.*, 1-18; A. MacIntyre, "Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?" *ibid.*, 62-78. For a lengthy discussion of the function of the magic in African Azende's life see, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among Azende*, with a foreword by C. G. Seligman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937).

⁴⁹ Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," 86.

The question arises as soon as we compare the rationality and intelligibility of the function of oracles in the Azende with the rationality and intelligibility of science in “modern societies.” Can the yardstick of “modern science” measure the claims of the Azende concerning witchcraft? The answer must be ‘no,’ according to Winch, because “Azende statements concerning witchcraft cannot be translated in to the language games of science without reifying their intentionality.”⁵⁰ This position does not, however, negate the possibility of any criterion of rationality that discriminates “the correct” from the “the mistaken.” What this line of argument implies, however, is that although every society has some form of rationality, different societies might have different rationalities imposed upon them by their respective language games. It must be in this sense that Winch talks about “our standards and yours.”⁵¹ Hence, every time we talk about standards of rationality, argues Winch, it is essential that we ask “whose” concept of rationality is being referred to,

[S]ince something can appear rational to someone only in terms of *his* understanding of what is and is not rational. If our concept of rationality is a different one from his, then it makes no sense to say that anything either does or does not appear rational to him in our sense.⁵²

Our inquiry into the thought of Winch enables us to conclude that, according to Winch, cross-cultural understanding is possible, however culturally and linguistically relative this understanding might be. But there are no universally applicable criteria that would allow us to criticize any other culture, since there are no context-independent criteria of what counts as being justified or rational.

As our reflections on the objectivism-relativism debate have demonstrated, objectivism and relativism are two terms that are comparable to exclusivism and pluralism with respect to the issues of truth and the criteria of truth.⁵³ These reflections have pivotal significance for our general attempt to determine whether Al-Biruni’s treatment of Hinduism and Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons set the context to go beyond the typical interpretations of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in discourse on intercultural understanding. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to this particular theme.

⁵⁰ Ulin, *Understanding Cultures*, 29.

⁵¹ Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” 99.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵³ It would be a reductionistic and superficial statement to argue that there is a one-on-one correspondence between exclusivism and objectivism, on the one hand, and pluralism and relativism on the other. As stated earlier, the aim of this chapter is to deconstruct such an understanding.

BEYOND EXCLUSIVISM AND PLURALISM: A QUESTIONABLE ATTEMPT

Earlier, we stated that there are two issues with which we will deal with in this chapter. The first one has to do with the debate over the problem of objectivism and relativism and how it relates to the exclusivism-pluralism debate. This we have just completed.

The second issue is to determine the possibility of moving beyond objectivism and relativism, and therefore beyond exclusivism and pluralism. The thesis of the argument was that any attempt to move beyond exclusivism and pluralism would be untenable. A more viable approach would be to accept these approaches i.e., exclusivism and pluralism, not as well-defined, well-circumscribed, and therefore closed totalities in themselves but as certain attitudes we take towards the Other with regard to this or that particular issue. In other words, they represent only two of a great variety of attitudes within, what I call, the circle of attitudes.

That is why I did not refer to objectivism and relativism as the two extreme ends of a wide spectrum of opinions on a straight line. Rather, all the attitudes are located on a circle and the term “extreme” is not relative to other more or less “extreme” attitudes (stances). They are just attitudes.

None of these attitudes are incorrect by themselves. As human dispositions and emotions they must be explained, but cannot be explained away. These attitudes, along with numerous other potential positions (emotions), some of which we recognize, some of which we do not, are there and appear when the context is right. Therefore, any argument that claims to have attained a constant non-exclusivist position towards the external world is a contradiction in terms, since every assertion contains some element of exclusivist-positivist stance. More importantly, to argue for a non-exclusivist-positivist position towards the external world is to deny the influence the emotions (or prejudices) have on every understanding. This is more deleterious to the process of understanding than the one that explicitly takes an exclusivist stance.

Before we begin to reflect on the subject-matter in a more detailed manner, I must state clearly that the line of reasoning pursued in this chapter has its roots in the previous chapters, which are in turn rooted in Al-Biruni’s method of studying other religions and in Gadamer’s notion of the fusion of horizons. This metaphor makes the event of understanding (*Verstehen*) intelligible; it is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject, but the mode of being of *Dasein* itself.⁵⁴ For, *Dasein* understands itself and the world here and there infinitely in the interaction and in the form of conversation with its surroundings. And in every conversation, whether authentic or inauthentic, lies an assertion. This is what takes place in every conversation: whether it be reading, writing, or performing a musical piece.

⁵⁴ *TM*, XXX.

To be sure, there is nothing questionable and wrong about having assertions and making claims; this is the nature of how humans interact with their environment. In Gadamer's words, every time one opens one's mouth one wants to be understood; "otherwise, one would neither speak nor write."⁵⁵ There would be no conversation, and therefore no understanding.

What is questionable and wrong, however, is to argue that only a particular truth-claim is the embodiment of the entire truth, whatever that truth may be; other truth claims are at best already represented in our truth or they are simply wrong. An equally detrimental scenario appears within a certain kind of pluralistic approach, according to which every truth claim is true and valid for each person because there is no way to determine the validity or falsity of any claim at all, a scenario that leads to radical relativism. This means that the proponents of these categories suggest implicitly that one must belong within a particular category; i.e., exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and relativism, and see the world from that limited perspective.

To avoid these pitfalls, a more viable and promising strategy is to open to the possibility that a certain truth claim might articulate a particular issue better than the competing truth claim. In other words, a truth-claim (interpretation) can be true with respect to a particular issue, and another truth-claim (interpretation) can be valid with respect to another issue. And each truth-claim (interpretation) is subject to (open to) new interpretations, since every interpretation is approximation. Seen from this argument, the validity or falsity of each claim is measured not by the interpreter's belongingness to a certain a priori defined category, but by the effectiveness of each interpretation in making the subject matter more intelligible.

The above remarks clearly question several opposing positions with respect to issue of the plurality of religious traditions. In the first position an Other, as religious traditions, or traditions in general, cannot be understood except by their participants. Even if it were possible to understand an alien tradition--this position holds--there would be no way of justifying our interpretations, since "our" standards are different from "their" standards.⁵⁶ In other words, there is neither a meta-language through which reality is constructed, nor can one assume a God's-eye-view from which other religions can be evaluated.

⁵⁵ Gadamer, "Reply to Jacques Derrida" in *Dialogue And Deconstruction: The Gadamer Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 55.

⁵⁶ Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," 97,99; Winch, *Idea of a Social Science*, 100.

According to a second position a common element is shared by all the great religious traditions of the world,⁵⁷ which makes them the same in essence. In this sense, a Buddhist's experience of *Nirvana* is the same as what Christians experience when they speak about the experience of the union with a loving God.⁵⁸ Similarly, a Sufi experiences the same Ultimate in the state of *fana* (annihilation) as does a Buddhist in the state of *Nirvana*. This is the position implicitly held by certain pluralist philosophers of religion and theologians. Pluralism of this kind, espoused by Hick, for instance "ends up in a subtle imperialism in which what one announces as common to all is really one's own reading of it."⁵⁹ Thus, because basically it is the same Real that is experienced by the adherents of every religious tradition, there is no serious reason why one attempts to understand other religions, a position leading to a kind of indifference or apathy that hinders cooperation amongst the people of various cultures.

A third position, which is advocated by the exclusivist camp, holds that there is no common element at all between the home tradition i.e., religion, and all the other traditions. Thus there is no compelling reason why one even bothers to understand other religious traditions because they are false and therefore rival to the home religion.

The reason why I mentioned these positions again is to raise another point to be able to sustain our attempt to deconstruct the kind of stance that puts innumerable attitudes into certain categories. As can be seen from the analysis, there is an apparent tension running behind all of the above positions: either religious traditions are irredeemably different, and therefore rival, or they are so analogous that it is almost absurd to mention any major inconsistencies among them. Are religions traditions rival? Are they so different from each other that there is no relatively common ground that would make understanding possible? Or, are all religious traditions basically the same? In order to answer these questions we need to determine, what makes a tradition different from others.

Following our initial thesis, we are convinced that there are no clearly defined boundaries across the great traditions or religions of the world. This does not negate the fact that there are certain practices, customs, or emotions that do not have historical and conceptual equivalents in another religion. But this does not mean that because there are certain untranslatable customs, beliefs, or emotions, the possibility of understanding, comparison, and evaluation across cultural boundaries also should be ruled out. For, the claim that two "rival" traditions contain non-equivalent concepts or terms presupposes that someone has already

⁵⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, ed. Paul F. Knitter (Markynoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 64.

⁵⁸ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Markynoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 193-194.

⁵⁹ Cobb, *Transforming Christianity*, 96.

understood, and therefore necessarily compared them each in its own terms.⁶⁰ Otherwise, it would be impossible, and therefore absurd to refer to certain beliefs and customs of one tradition as false, for then the question of “how do you know?” would need to be answered. Moreover, as Amélie Rorty puts it, the inability to translate exactly, and the inability to be certain that translations are correct, does not foreclose the possibility of understanding and evaluation across the cultural boundaries for,

The poignant sense of untranslatability...does not argue for incomprehensibility: a translator might be able to fabricate a ‘missing verse’ good enough to fool discerning native literary critic.⁶¹

However, this argument does not mean that because we can make sense of every concept, belief, or emotion of an alien culture or religion, which is only imaginable at the moment, we can translate them into our own cultural framework. Moreover, the event of understanding does not necessarily lead us to the inference that once an alien culture or religion is understood, the alienness between the two “rival” or “alien” traditions is dissolved, since understanding by itself does not necessitate total agreement in every aspect. Rather, as Gadamer states, “the goal of all communication and all understanding is agreement in the matter at hand”⁶² (*Sache*). Hence understanding is always understanding with respect to *a* particular subject matter.

One other point that has great import for our discussion is the argument that non-understanding, and therefore non-agreement, or inconsistency occur not only in the context of comparing different cultures, but also within a particular tradition,

For it is not merely that different participants in a tradition disagree; they also disagree as to how to characterize their disagreements and as to how to resolve them. They disagree as to what constitutes appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, and conclusive proof. A tradition then not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but [also] is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of

⁶⁰ For detailed discussion of the issue of translation across the boundaries of cultures, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 375-376. The chapter “Tradition and Translation” is especially illuminating.

⁶¹ Amélie Rorty, “Relativism, Persons, and Practices,” in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. M. Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 420-421.

⁶² Gadamer, “Circle of Understanding,” 69.

that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings.⁶³

Therefore, in our endeavor to evaluate the truth-claims among world religions or cultures, we will do well if we keep in mind that a religion or a culture is not itself true or false any more than any other human institution.⁶⁴ This interpretation presupposes that religion, as an institution, is a human attempt to respond to the highest reality, God. However, while the institutionalized religion is a human product, revelation is not. The problem of conflicting truth-claims results, in the final analysis, from the finite human being's attempt to comprehend the infinite Ineffable in its infinity. Thus, it is consistent with this view that distinctions and sameness among traditions of enquiry are human constructions drawn according to the specific assumptions, interest, and priorities of an interpreter or the community of interpreters.⁶⁵ Therefore, religion as an institution or a system of beliefs

[is]only ...more or less expedient, only more or less effective in meeting its intended goals. What is true or false, and what is fundamentally in conflict between such systems are, the underlying, specific truth-claims within the systems.⁶⁶

This line of reasoning allows me to argue that there are divergences and convergences among various religious traditions with respect to certain issues. Although some of the divergences, which may result from lack of contact or from misunderstanding, can be overcome easily through contact and conversation, there are certain "core beliefs"⁶⁷ or "vital core of beliefs" which are definitive of that very tradition.⁶⁸ It is these core beliefs that must be retained and preserved if a tradition is to retain its integrity and identity.⁶⁹

To be sure, while these core beliefs are the essence of every religion, or every culture for that matter, and are not subject to change, at least in principle, our responses to, and interpretation of, these essences change considerably in time. It is these core beliefs that protect the uniqueness of each religion on the one hand; it is also the interpretation of

⁶³ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 43; MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 221-222.

⁶⁴ Runzo, "Pluralism vs. Relativism," 345.

⁶⁵ Daniel Vokey, *Moral Discourse in a Pluralistic World* (Notre Dame, University of Notre dame Press, 2001), 27.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Vokey, *Moral Discourse*, 70.

⁶⁸ Runzo, "Pluralism vs. Relativism," 345.

⁶⁹ Vokey, *Moral Discourse*, 70.

these essences that keep conversation going among the great religions of the world, on the other. Thus, any claim to a kind of transcendental unity of religions cannot be sustained;⁷⁰ neither is it reasonable to argue that religions are irreducibly different that there is no common ground that makes conversation, and therefore understanding possible.

Let us elaborate this argument by reference to certain theological issues between Christianity and Islam.⁷¹ Two of the most controversial issues between Christianity and Islam concern the issue of the death of Jesus (*'Isa*) on the Cross and his resurrection and his divine status. These issues divide the two religions on the one hand; yet paradoxically it is also these issues that keep conversation going, on the other.

At this stage of the discussion, we will consider the views of one leading Muslim scholar, Mahmoud Ayoub currently a professor of Islamic studies at Temple University, on the issue of the divinity and the death of Jesus. With his deep knowledge of Christianity,⁷² Ayoub believes in the necessity and the urgency of dialogue. However, he accuses the so-called promoters of dialogue of using it as an occasion to promote their own hidden agenda even though they do not admit it. As he puts it, partners in dialogue hope that “through dialogue the truth that I seek will be seen by the other.”⁷³ He criticizes Muslims for not taking other religions seriously.

In reference to Christianity, he suggests that Muslims should study Christianity “not simply from the Qur’an...we must” says Ayoub, “also

⁷⁰ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 92. For an excellent treatment of the issues of a “perennial philosophy” see, Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. Peter Townsend, with an introduction by Huston Smith (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975).

⁷¹ Although I have spent a good deal of time studying some of the great religions of the world in general but Islam in particular, I still cannot claim to be a theologian by profession. As a student of hermeneutics and social sciences, I am exploring the possibilities of creating a space for dialogue between cultures by utilizing certain views of some of the leading theologians. In other words, I am not interpreting the sacred scriptures per se of the respective religions. Mine is only a humble, perhaps at times controversial, attempt to understand what can be understood from the interpretations of the scriptures by their interpreters.

⁷² Ayoub was born into a Muslim family in Lebanon. He was educated in a Christian Missionary school, and soon converted to Christianity at an early age. Later, he felt that the school he had attended was not “Christian enough” and joined an American Southern Baptist group. During his graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania and at Harvard, he studied Christianity and Islam intensively, and converted to Islam. See Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 97-98.

⁷³ Cited in Atallah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (New York: 1997), 98.

know what the Christians think of themselves.”⁷⁴ The same criticism goes for the participants of other religions traditions. He criticizes Christian missionary activity, among other issues between Muslims and Christians. He is critical, for instance, of the content of the Second Vatican Council’s views on Islam, for taking an “absolute minimalist approach”⁷⁵ vis-à-vis Islam.

With regard to the view that Muslims venerate Jesus, Ayoub states clearly that Muslims do more than just revere Jesus. But they do it not to please the Church or to promote ecumenism; rather, the Qur’an demands of Muslims, as part of the principles of their faith, to “accept all the prophets and messengers of God who came before Muhammad.”⁷⁶ The fact that both Christians and Muslims do more than venerate Jesus may be a common ground upon which a genuine conversation be conducted.

Ayoub’s views on an Islamic Christology are the most controversial. He wrote a series of articles, attempting to articulate his views on this subject in detail.⁷⁷ However, for our current purposes we will limit ourselves only to the issue of the death and the divine status of Jesus.

Part of Ayoub’s criticism against Christians (not Christianity per se) emanates from the conviction that they (Christians) are neither ready nor willing to appreciate the fact that the Qur’an presents an Islamic Christology. According to Ayoub,

It is no longer profitable to take the Qur’anic statements about Jesus simply as distortions of, or borrowings from, the Gospels. Rather, they should be accepted as

⁷⁴ Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 104.

⁷⁵ In the *Nostra Aetate*, it is declared that “Upon the Moslems [sic] too the Church looks with esteem. They adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, maker of heaven and earth and speaker to humankind... Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, his virgin mother; and at times they call on her, too, with devotion...” “Declaration On the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” (*Nostra Aetate*), para. 3. in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

⁷⁶ Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 104.

⁷⁷ Ayoub’s lengthy discussion about the possibility of an Islamic Christology can be found in the following two articles: M. Ayoub, “Towards and Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in Early Shi ‘i Muslim Literature,” *The Muslim World* LXVI, No.3 (July 1976): 163-188; Idem, “Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion: A Study of the death of Jesus in Tafsir Literature,” *The Muslim World* LXX, No. 2 (April 1980): 91-121. See also, Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an* (New York: Barnes and Nobles, 1965); James Roy King, “Jesus and Joseph in Rumi’s Mathnawi,” *The Muslim World* LXXX, No. 2 (April 1990): 81-95.

authentically Islamic statements and as expressing an Islamic view.⁷⁸

Precisely because the Christology Ayoub is presenting is an Islamic one, it is natural that it differs significantly from the Christian Christologies. There are at least two issues that need to be made clear at the outset to be able to pursue the subject further.

The first issue is the Christian doctrine that Jesus is fully divine.⁷⁹ Ayoub makes it clear that Islam denies the claim that Jesus was divine, without denying his special humanity.⁸⁰ Moreover, Islam accepts Christ as the savior; but because Islam has no concept of original sin, his function in human history is like any other prophet. In other words, Christ was a savior “in that he, by his message, helped to save humanity from error and to guide its steps further on the path to God, to whom we all belong, and to whom we shall all return.”⁸¹

As a committed Muslim interlocutor, Ayoub’s view on the issue of the divinity of Jesus is firm, clear, and simple. The human Christ is a servant and a prophet of God, which is not subject to interpretation. Ayoub’s position vis-à-vis the issue of the divinity of Jesus in Islam corroborates our argument that a person or a religious tradition, or otherwise, should not be categorized as an exclusivist or as a pluralist. Rather a person can be committed and firm as a result of his/her beliefs, religious or otherwise, with regard to a particular issue without necessarily belonging to any particular category.

The second issue has to do with the issue of the death of Jesus on the cross. Although Islam denies the *sacrifice* of Jesus on the cross, as *atonement for sinful humanity*, Ayoub is convinced that Islam denies “neither the actual death of Christ nor his general redemptive role in human history.”⁸² Of course, this is a serious argument since traditionally the great majority of the Muslim interpreters of the Qur’an (*Mufasssirun*) interpreted the verses (Qur’an, 4: 157-158), which narrate the death of Jesus, to mean that his enemies were not able to kill Jesus.

⁷⁸ Ayoub, “Towards an Islamic Christology,” 166.

⁷⁹ The use of “fully divine” in this context does not even remotely imply that Islam gives Jesus some kind of a lower status of divinity, but divinity nonetheless. The reason why I used these two terms stems from the fact that they were formulated as such in the Council of Nicea (325), and are still to be found in the Nicene Creed. See, McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 17-19. See also, Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 64-66.

⁸⁰ Ayoub, “Towards an Islamic Christology II,” 94.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 167. For a detailed discussion of the role of Jesus in the popular Muslim piety see, Ayoub, “Towards an Islamic Christology,” esp. pp: 166 ff.

⁸² Ayoub, “Towards an Islamic Christology II,” 94.

In order to prove his point, Ayoub first attempts to put the crucifixion--event in a context. In order to do that, he refers to certain verses in the Qur'an (Qur'an, 3:49; 61:6) with a view to supporting his highly symbolic interpretation of those particular verses. According to Ayoub, the Qur'an accuses the Jews for killing their own prophets unjustly. In other words, it is commonplace among Jews to kill their own prophets sent them by God. Thus, the crucifixion of Jesus was another such act by Jews. So, according to Ayoub's interpretation of the above verses, Jews declared that they had killed Jesus, which was some sort of victory over God. Against this declaration, God reproaches the Jews for claiming to have killed Jesus, and the verse goes as follows:

And for their saying: 'We have surely killed the Christ, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God.' They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; rather it was made only to appear so to them. And those who have differed concerning him are in doubt regarding him (or it, the truth); they have no knowledge of him (or it), except the following of conjecture. They did not kill him (or it, their doubt) with certainty. Rather, God took him up to Himself, for God is Mighty and Wise (Qur'an, 4-157-158)⁸³

The key words, according to Ayoub, are *wa lakin shubbiha lahum*. Some commentators have interpreted these words, *shubbiha lahum*, to mean that another person was made to bear his (Jesus) likeness (*shabah*) and die in his stead, Judas perhaps? This is generally known as the "substitutionist theory."⁸⁴ Although still widely held among the interpreters, later commentators questioned the validity of this interpretation on at least two grounds: (1) that the grammatical structure of the verses does not allow us to interpret them in this way; (2) it is not acceptable for God to punish an innocent man (Judas or another) to die unjustly to save another (Jesus).⁸⁵

Having examined the comments of a number of scholars, Ayoub concludes that Muslim commentators of the Qur'an were not able to

⁸³ The translations presented here belonged to Ayoub himself.

⁸⁴ Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology II," 95.

Throughout his writings by "Substitutionist theory" Mahmut refers to a theory or a set of theories whose basic argument is that it was not Jesus who was crucified. Rather, knowingly or unknowingly, someone else may have been executed. Ayoub makes use of different sources both from Christian and Muslim sources at length that explain the great variety of the substitutionist theories and the notion of justice and how both Christian and Jewish converts made things even more complicated by bringing their background into their interpretation of these specific verses at a great length in "Towards an Islamic Christology II," 96-115.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

disprove Jesus' crucifixion. The problem that hindered a correct interpretation of the verses under discussion, according to Ayoub, is that,

[C]ommentators have generally taken the verse to be an historical statement. This statement, like all the other statements concerning Jesus in the Qur'an, belongs not to history but to theology in the broadest sense.⁸⁶

After analyzing all the theories, which are mostly substitutionist, Ayoub gives his own interpretation of the verses. According to him, it is possible that Jesus was killed, since if one takes the context in which that event took place, one realizes that the people to whom Jesus preached his message could have killed yet another prophet, as they had done before. The fact of the matter is that they may have killed Jesus, the man, but they could not eradicate Jesus, "Word of God," that is, the message Jesus preached as a prophet.⁸⁷

Ayoub supports his argument by referring to another verse from the Qur'an, which apparently does not lend itself to a literal interpretation. "Man [Humankind] may wish to extinguish the light of God with their mouths," that is, with their words of foolish wisdom, but God will perfect His light in spite of our foolishness and obstinacy." (Qur'an, 9:32).⁸⁸ Clearly, by "the light of God" is meant the message of God, and by "their mouth" is understood, as Ayoub suggest, "words of foolish wisdom." Similarly, it is possible for humankind, who is the crown of creation, "made in the best of forms," (Qur'an, 95:4) on the one hand, and "wrongdoing foolish" (Qur'an, 33:72) on the other, to kill yet another prophet.⁸⁹ But at the end, it is God's Word, Will, and Wisdom that will be triumphant.

This exposition of Ayoub's analysis of the verses, which mention the death-event of Jesus, corroborates our argument that a person need not be labeled either as an exclusivist when he/she is committed to a certain belief, nor should he/she be categorized as a pluralist when he/she shares certain views on certain issues with an individual who may be a member of another tradition or religion. As our reflections have indicated throughout the study, all is interpretation. Again, there is such a great variety of interpretations even within the same tradition or religion that, it is sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to locate an interpreter in this or that tradition. The same goes for the stance that categorizes people according to their views--a stance, which we have ventured to deconstruct.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 116.

⁸⁷ Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology II," 117.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 118.

These examples further support our earlier insights⁹⁰ into Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons when we attempted to show that understanding is possible and achievable through an open dialogue with respect to a certain subject matter (*Sache*). But this understanding is never complete, in the sense that there is not one single interpretation that is capable of exhausting the very essence of the subject matter at hand.

Al-Biruni must have followed the same logic a thousand years ago in his treatment of Hindus. Al-Biruni, who was a committed Muslim, was able to take an inclusivist approach in his study of other religions. However, he did not advocate a relativistic approach either. There were people among Hindus, according to Al-Biruni, whose ideas with respect to certain issues were abominable because they did not reflect common sense, neither were they scientific. However, this did not preclude him from appreciating what he thought to be worthy of value both in the ordinary Hindu way of life and in Hindu philosophy and science.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have attempted to argue our point that the typical interpretations of Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism fail to elucidate the reality of the diversity of religions, the coming of the Other. However, our criticism was not so much against these so-called paradigms or

⁹⁰ The reader is referred to the second chapter of this study where we dealt with the whole issue of understanding and the intelligibility of understanding by using the Gadamerian notion of the metaphor of the "fusion of horizons."

⁹¹ Al-Biruni does not hesitate to dismiss the views of the uneducated class, for instance, about God in Hindu culture as abominable. However, his criticism is not limited to Hindus only. "Folly," says Al-Biruni, "is an illness," and this illness is found in every culture irrespective of its religious affiliation. Al-Biruni criticizes Hindus sarcastically, for instance, for "taking the greatest possible care to withhold it (knowledge) from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from a foreigner." *India*, I, 23-24; *Tahqiq*, 18-19.

On the other hand, his critical mind does not preclude Al-Biruni from appreciating the contributions other cultures make to human civilization. Such is the case when he states, for instance, that "...Hindus construct ponds intended for the ablutions. In this they have attained to a very high degree of art, so that our people (the Muslims), when they see them, wonder at them, and are unable to describe them, much less to construct anything like them." *India*, II, 144; *Tahqiq*, 463. Al-Biruni further believes that Hindus are excellent philosophers, mathematicians, and astronomers. He admits that he "first stood to their astronomers in the relation of a pupil to his master..." to learn the subtleties of science and philosophy. *India*, I, 23; *Tahqiq*, 17. The reader is referred to the third chapter of this study where Al-Biruni's treatment of Hindus is investigated in a greater detail.

approaches themselves, as it was against the stance that puts certain views into certain categories.

We have shown that exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and many other possible attitudes comprise a circle of attitudes. In other words, it is absurd to argue that an individual or any particular religion and culture, are irreducibly exclusivist, pluralist, or inclusivist in nature. Rather, an individual may assume one or more of these attitudes with respect to certain issues in a given time. We have illustrated our argument by referring to *certain views* of a theologian *with respect to certain issue* who, on the one hand, is committed to one doctrinal issue, and is open to another new interpretation of certain issues, on the other. It is this genuine openness and genuine commitment that make conversation and therefore understanding possible.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The coming of the “Other” has plunged every religious tradition and culture into deep conceptual crisis. The Other here represents every individual and every other religious tradition- a tradition that is considered to be “alien” to the home religion and culture. The questions of how to prepare for the coming of the Other, and what attitude to take towards the Other have been the two questions this study has attempted to deal with throughout.

In order to investigate the problem, the first chapter has attempted to present a critical analysis of the current modes of interreligious encounter. The analysis has shown that the three conceptual frameworks; exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, are in fact three responses to the same problem of how to prepare for the coming of the Other. We have shown that none of these frameworks is sufficient to explain the diversity of religions or the coming of the Other. Although we have mentioned several reasons for their insufficiency, we have argued that the most important reason lies in the fact that all of the proponents of these categories seem to establish their theories vis-à-vis the Other according to an a priori theory building process. This objectifies and reifies the Other before any genuine encounter takes place, whether that Other be a person, an idea, a cultural form or a religious doctrine. This attitude is a questionable one not only because it attempts to study a cultural form or a pattern of thought simply as a phenomenon, but also because it violates the basic ethical notion of seeing others not as means but as ends in themselves.

As a response to the shortcomings mentioned in the first chapter, the most important of which was the lack of a genuine interest in the business of understanding, the second chapter aimed to explore the meaning of understanding on a theoretical (philosophical) level with a view to arguing the possibility, intelligibility, and justifiability of understanding. In pursuing the subject, we have analyzed the issue through Gadamer’s doctrine of the fusion of horizons, for it provides, we argued, a compelling hermeneutical framework that renders the possibility of understanding others a valid project. As a visual metaphor, the doctrine of the fusion of horizons illustrates the expansion and transformation that occurs on both sides when two horizons fuse as an event or happening of truth. This procedure presupposes a dialectical play between one’s own (the interpreter’s) horizon (understanding) and the horizon of the interpretandum, thereby reaching a new understanding of the subject matter (*Sache*) in a fusion of horizons.

In our analysis of the fusion of horizons, we have seen that the term horizon plays a significant role in the process of understanding, since a horizon was described as the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. In this sense, to have a horizon means that one’s vision is always limited to what can be seen in a given

time from a specific angle. However, the limits or boundaries of a horizon are not fixed; they move and alter as we move. Therefore, a boundary makes it possible also to see what lies behind and beyond the immediate horizon, for what makes a limit to be a limit always includes knowledge of what is on both sides of the boundary. However, because every person, cultural form, or tradition has its own distinctive horizon, the Other always remains as an Other, refusing to be assimilated into the subjectivity of other subjects--an insight that considers the Other as a genuine interlocutor in a genuine conversation.

On the other hand, because every horizon is open, there is always a possibility that different horizons, supposedly existing independently of one another, can interact and eventually fuse, an event called the fusion of horizons. These insights make us aware of the fact that we, as the interpreters of the subject-matter, are finite beings and are constantly exposed to the effects of history in which we live, through which our horizons are constantly shaped and reshaped. This interpretation concludes that our grasp of the interpretandum is always interpretation and, therefore approximation.

The third chapter explored the unique contribution of Al-Biruni to comparative theology and cultural hermeneutics. The analysis has followed the study of Al-Biruni's method of studying other religious traditions within its historic context and analyzed the questions he was attempting to answer, reexamining its relevance to our contemporary situation. The investigation into Al-Biruni's method, which is phenomenological, dialogical, and comparative, has confirmed our conviction that there tends to be an inherent intuition in every culture, which sees itself as the center of the universe. According to this intuition, there is only one true culture, religion, and Truth. This intuition, which is commonplace among various cultures, appears to be incompatible with the radical diversity of religious and cultural worlds. The purpose, then, should be to alter this intuition, which can be achieved by knowing accurately the religious and cultural forms of other peoples through, among others, personal encounters, textual studies, and observation. Therefore, a student who seeks to venture into the climate of different worlds must be conscious of the radical diversity not only between him/herself and the culture he/she is studying, but even within the same culture, and must welcome the Other in their otherness so that he/she may be welcomed by the Other.

This is not an easy task to accomplish since it requires openness to what is unknown. By being open to the unknown, and therefore to new possibilities, one is forced implicitly to revise--at times even to change totally--one's deepest convictions. It is this openness that enabled Al-Biruni to contribute greatly to overcoming the Muslim misconceptions of Hinduism not only in his time, but in subsequent generations as well. As a result, although Al-Biruni did not explicitly state that he considered the Hindus as *ahl al-Kitab*, the People of the Book, our investigation enables us to conclude that Al-Biruni's encounter with Hindu Culture led him to

include at least some segments of the Hindu society into his moral and religious world.

In the final chapter we have explored the possibilities of moving beyond the typical interpretations of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism to a new model for discourse in interreligious understanding. The thesis of this chapter has been that such an attempt to move beyond exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is untenable and is a contradiction in terms, since not only does each religious tradition make particularistic claims to universality but every individual as well. In this sense, such a project would be an overly ambitious attempt to deconstruct the current stance, which categorizes the diverse conceptual schemes as if they were impenetrable and clearly circumscribed totalities in themselves.

Rather, we have argued, there is a great flexibility and penetrability among various theoretical frameworks with respect to certain issues without denying the fact that there are also certain “core beliefs” that make a religious tradition or culture distinct and unique. This understanding protects us from the pitfalls of the two extremes of objectivism-exclusivism, which argue that a particular truth claim is the embodiment of the entire truth, so that other truth claims are at best already presented in our truth or are simply wrong. An equally detrimental scenario appears within a certain kind of pluralistic approach, according to which every truth claim is true and valid for each person or each religious tradition because there are no objective criteria to determine the validity or falsity of any claim at all, leading to a radical relativism.

To avoid these pitfalls, a more fruitful strategy would be, we have argued, to be open to the possibility that certain truth claims might articulate a particular issue better than the competing truth claim. In other words, a truth claim (interpretation) can be valid with respect to a particular issue, and another truth-claim can be valid with respect to another issue. Each truth-claim (interpretation) is subject to new interpretations, since every interpretation is an approximation. In this view, the validity or falsity of each claim is measured not by the interpreter’s belonging to a certain a priori defined theoretical framework, but by the effectiveness of each interpretation in making the subject matter more intelligible. In other words, an individual or any particular religious tradition and culture, is not irreducibly exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist in nature. Rather, as a participant in a certain tradition, an individual may assume one or more of various attitudes in a circle of attitudes with respect to certain issues in a given time. To illustrate our argument we have referred to some views of Mahmoud Ayoub who, on the one hand, is committed to one doctrinal issue with respect to certain issues, open to new interpretations of other issues. These while being two attitudes make it possible for one religious tradition or culture to learn from other cultural perspectives and thereby to evolve, on the one hand, and to protect the “core belief,” and therefore identity of a religion or culture, on the other. It is this genuine commitment, genuine openness, and what may be called “soft exclusivist” or “non-absolutist”

stance that can keep conversation going, leading to a fusion of horizons with respect to the subject matter (*Sache*) at hand in the medium of language.

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THE COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH IN VALUES AND PHILOSOPHY

PURPOSE

Today there is urgent need to attend to the nature and dignity of the person, to the quality of human life, to the purpose and goal of the physical transformation of our environment, and to the relation of all this to the development of social and political life. This, in turn, requires philosophic clarification of the base upon which freedom is exercised, that is, of the values which provide stability and guidance to one's decisions.

Such studies must be able to reach deeply into one's culture and that of other parts of the world as mutually reinforcing and enriching in order to uncover the roots of the dignity of persons and of their societies. They must be able to identify the conceptual forms in terms of which modern industrial and technological developments are structured and how these impact upon human self-understanding. Above all, they must be able to bring these elements together in the creative understanding essential for setting our goals and determining our modes of interaction. In the present complex global circumstances this is a condition for growing together with trust and justice, honest dedication and mutual concern.

The Council for Studies in Values and Philosophy (RVP) unites scholars who share these concerns and are interested in the application thereto of existing capabilities in the field of philosophy and other disciplines. Its work is to identify areas in which study is needed, the intellectual resources which can be brought to bear thereupon, and the means for publication and interchange of the work from the various regions of the world. In bringing these together its goal is scientific discovery and publication which contributes to the present promotion of humankind.

In sum, our times present both the need and the opportunity for deeper and ever more progressive understanding of the person and of the foundations of social life. The development of such understanding is the goal of the RVP.

PROJECTS

A set of related research efforts is currently in process:

1. *Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change: Philosophical Foundations for Social Life*. Focused, mutually coordinated research teams in university centers prepare volumes as part of an integrated philosophic search for self-understanding differentiated by culture and civilization. These evolve more adequate understandings of the person in society and look to the cultural heritage of each for the resources to respond to the challenges of its own specific contemporary transformation.

2. *Seminars on Culture and Contemporary Issues*. This series of 10 week crosscultural and interdisciplinary seminars is coordinated by the RVP in Washington.

3. *Joint-Colloquia* with Institutes of Philosophy of the National Academies of Science, university philosophy departments, and societies. Underway since 1976 in Eastern Europe and, since 1987, in China, these concern the person in contemporary society.

4. *Foundations of Moral Education and Character Development*. A study in values and education which unites philosophers, psychologists, social scientists and scholars in education in the elaboration of ways of enriching the moral content of education and character development. This work has been underway since 1980.

The personnel for these projects consists of established scholars willing to contribute their time and research as part of their professional commitment to life in contemporary society. For resources to implement this work the Council, as 501 C3 a non-profit organization incorporated in the District of Columbia, looks to various private foundations, public programs and enterprises.

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