

## The Postmetaphysics of Religious Difference

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Mervyn Frederick Bendle

**Abstract:** This article contests the dominant paradigm in the theology of religions which promotes a type of pluralism purporting to recognise a limited form of "otherness" and "difference" but which emerges upon analysis to obviate these by incorporating religions into a single theological or philosophical schema, reducing their concrete plurality and particularity to an abstract unity based on ontotheological presuppositions. It therefore proposes a perspective that draws upon contemporary postmetaphysical thought, particularly the work of Rosenzweig and Levinas. It suggests that the appropriate posture in the face of religious difference is one that valorises otherness and nurtures and sustains religious difference.

IT HAS RECENTLY BEEN REMARKED THAT "the most dramatic change in the study of religion in the last twenty-five years has been the vast increase in the knowledge, by Western scholars, of the world's diverse religious traditions".<sup>1</sup> This expansion of knowledge has placed great pressure on theology and philosophy to provide a conceptual framework within which this diversity can be comprehended. Generally, this framework has been provided by the Western theistic tradition and it appears that this problematic has narrowed rather than broadened over the past quarter-century.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, despite the ingenuity of translators, it appears the translated "expressions in European languages [still] reflect the integral structures of theistic European religions".<sup>3</sup>

This conceptual dependency is to be expected, given that the vocabulary of theology operates paradigmatically to simultaneously enable and constrain the expression of ideas. It is a situation with particular significance for the theology and philosophy of religions which have seen a great deal of activity during the period concerned, driven by the

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1. R. C. Neville, "Religions, philosophies and the philosophy of religion", in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38:165-181 (1995) 165.

2. Neville, "Religions, philosophies and the philosophy of religion", 168.

3. Neville, "Religions, philosophies and the philosophy of religion", 172-3.

considerable energy of John Hick, Hans Küng, William Cantwell Smith, Gordon Kaufman, Paul Knitter and others. Despite differences within a shared commitment to religious pluralism, these thinkers share a belief in an ultimate truth and unity of human religious experience which finds expression in a search for a comprehensive view of the religious traditions of the world. Recent research<sup>4</sup> suggests that a revisionist reading of this body of work can be usefully undertaken and this reveals the presence of a highly influential paradigm<sup>5</sup> that may be characterised in terms of "abstracted theism" or ontotheology. That is, it proceeds from a basic presuppositional complex the key elements of which may be identified as follows: that the various religious traditions of the world, while apparently "plural", are nevertheless "grounded" in some way in the one underlying "reality"; that this one ground may be assimilated to "God", "Ultimate Reality" or "the divine" conceived in some way; that this plurality of traditions may be comprehended as "merely" different, culturally and linguistically mediated, apprehensions of this ground; that therefore the manifold religious differences of the world are merely phenomenal, and the otherness of the world's religions may be overcome; and that this will come to pass because the religious traditions of the world share an historical trajectory tracing an evolutionary and progressive path towards the triumph of "the one true faith", or a convergence of faiths and the emergence of "one world religion" or "global theology" or "global ethic" in some form.

While it is not suggested that this vision of the religious situation of the world is present in exactly this form in every one of the writers cited above, it is proposed that it can be identified as an ideal type whose basic structure fundamentally informs the theology of religions. And indeed, as a vision of religious pluralism it offers many attractions. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, it is vulnerable to the criticism that ultimately, despite its efforts, it does not properly respect the full ramifications of religious difference. While the case can only be sketched below as a prologue to a more positive contribution in the main part of the paper, it seems that despite the attempts of various thinkers to provide a philosophical and theological foundation for religious pluralism the advance has been at the cost of incorporating the possibly irreducible alterity of the world's religious traditions into an all-encompassing conceptual system that does not finally respect the particularity and alterity of the traditions concerned. Ironically, Knitter

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4. M. F. Bendle, *The face of other gods: a postmetaphysical theory of religious difference* (Ph.D Thesis, LaTrobe University, 1996).

5. Hans Küng, for example, speaks of "we theologians of a new paradigm" committed to "the comprehensive liberation of humanity", and the birth of "a future ecumene of religions and cultures". See H. Küng, *Theology for the third millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 179-81.

himself has recently come to recognise these limitations as the following self-criticism makes clear:

Thanks to the chidings of my postmodern friends, I have realized over the years that I, like many proponents of religious pluralism, have too hastily hoisted the banner of pluralism, before sufficiently recognizing the reality of "plurality". We pluralists have been too quick to propose an "ism" or a system on the vast, buzzing array of plurality; and in so "proposing" we have "imposed".<sup>6</sup>

This paper seeks to sketch the types of criticism to which Knitter alludes in order that their potential seriousness can be properly appreciated. Having outlined the nature and extent of the challenge facing the theology of religions, the paper then proceeds to a more extended discussion of an alternative approach to religious difference that responds to the challenge. This alternative is derived from a reading of the work of the Jewish philosophers, Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas.

#### 1. THE MOVE TO ABSTRACTION

Operating throughout the dominant paradigm in the theology of religion is the process of *abstraction*, criticism of which, it has recently been suggested, should be the primary task of the philosophy of religion: "Abstraction selects out certain elements to be actualised or enacted or represented and implies that the elements and options left behind can be treated as trivial.... What is gained is definiteness and focus. What is lost is what cannot be carried along in the abstraction."<sup>7</sup> The key question in any such abstraction concerns the basis upon which the crucial decisions are made as to what is abstracted as essential and what is disregarded as trivial or contingent. If we apply this critique to the theology and philosophy of religions the best example of abstraction is Hick's claimed "Copernican revolution" whereby "Christocentric" Christianity is abstracted as "Theocentric" theism and what Christians have hitherto termed "Father", "Christ" and the "Holy Spirit" are allegedly shown to be merely phenomenal apprehensions of "the Ultimate Reality to which...the great religious traditions constitute different human responses," and which can be abstracted through philosophical analysis.<sup>8</sup> As this illustrates, throughout the dominant paradigm of the theology of religions there prevails a rationalist assumption that there is a "higher court" of reason in which matters of essentiality can be resolved: what John Milbank describes as an

6. P. Knitter, "Dialogue among the world's religions", in S. Scholl (ed.), *Common era* (Ashland: White Cloud, 1995) 2.

7. Neville, "Religions, philosophies and the philosophy of religion", 170.

8. J. Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity", in J. Hick and P. Knitter (eds.), *The myth of Christian uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987) 34.

“Archimedean point of theoretical reason from which one can objectively survey all religious traditions”.<sup>9</sup> In this fashion, abstraction involves the reconstruction and reformulation of central doctrinal positions, beginning with the Christian but also involving the other traditions with which commensurability is sought. As one recent critic has observed, “to play the pluralist game properly, parties are expected to countenance quite radical re-interpretations and amendments being made to their own positions as well as those of others”.<sup>10</sup> Such abstraction is executed and justified *as if* the perpetrators occupy an independent, overriding, or “meta” position from which the central elements of Christianity and other religions can be evaluated, certain ones selected for retention or deletion, and a superior – that is, more readily commensurable – formulation invoked in terms of a claimed metadiscourse – based on reason and academic religious scholarship – that encompasses the religions concerned and of which the writers implicitly believe they are masters. In this fashion, such theorists allocate to themselves a superior subject-position within the discourse of the philosophy and theology of religions that grants them the prerogative to execute the processes of abstraction that mandate the terms of commensurability between religions and the ultimate form of reconciliation that may thereby be achieved.

Theological abstraction inherently privileges analyses that seem to disclose *commonalities* between religions and de-emphasise *difference*. The procedure is to identify as essential those features that are – or at least appear to be – held in common by the religions concerned. It is, of course, the prevalence of this procedure throughout academic scholarship and general discourse that allows us to talk about “religions” at all, instead of only about Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and so on, considered in isolation and their particularity. In this fashion, the dominant paradigm of the theology of religion favours a pluralism based on the belief that all religions share a common “ground” – conceptualised, for example, as the one underlying “Ultimate Reality” – although the “ground” may be no more than a conceptualisation of a consensus of scholarship about the nature of the religious phenomena concerned, a scholarship fundamentally informed by ontotheological presuppositions. This paradigm has powerful proponents. Hick states the position quite precisely: “each religious tradition refers to some thing...that stands transcendingly above or undergirdingly beneath and giving meaning or value to our existence”.<sup>11</sup> While the specifics of the world’s religions might vary,

9. J. Milbank, “The end of dialogue”, in G. D’Costa (ed.), *Christian uniqueness reconsidered* (New York: Orbis, 1990) 174.

10. P. Donovan, “The intolerance of religious pluralism”, *Religious studies* 29 (1993) 217.

11. J. Hick, *An interpretation of religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 294.

the abstracted “essence” – which Hick calls “the Ultimate” or “the Real” – is constant. In a major set of essays committed to the view that “a pluralist turn is taking shape”,<sup>12</sup> Kaufman describes the abstractive undertaking: “the task of Christian theologians today...is to penetrate through the multiplicity of Christian...philosophies, theologies, and myths, to the basic categorial pattern that informs them.”<sup>13</sup> Kaufman specifically equates religious progress with the demise of religious diversity and difference – which he sees as mere “parochialism” – in the name of a “higher humanism”: “it is no longer possible...or desirable, for us to continue living simply and uncritically out of the parochial religious and cultural traditions we have inherited.”<sup>14</sup> W. C. Smith calls for the development of a global theology based on universally applicable – abstractive theistic – theological categories: “what have been called the religions of the world are indeed parts of this world, are temporal, contingent, mundane, [whose] primary significance lies in their role as mundane intermediaries between humankind and God.”<sup>15</sup>

In his recent “Forword” to a major new anthology of texts from a wide range of religious traditions, Ninian Smart applauds the “growing convergence and complementarity among the faiths, large and small, of our shrinking planet”.<sup>16</sup> The editor of the same work states the basic principle of abstractive theism: “humanity’s search for God, or for the Ultimate Reality, called by whatever name, is at the root of all religions.”<sup>17</sup> Küng’s foundationalist understanding of the nature of religion similarly leads him to declare that there can be “no dialogue between the religions without investigation of *the foundation of the religions*”.<sup>18</sup> The “Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions”, drafted by Küng and adopted with amendments at the convention in Chicago in 1993, demands the adoption of a “Global Ethic” especially by “religious and spiritual persons [who] base [their] lives on an Ultimate Reality”.<sup>19</sup> In his Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion, W. C. Smith called upon “intellectuals” concerned with the study of religious traditions to progress towards

12. Hick and Knitter, “Preface” to *The myth of Christian uniqueness*, p. viii.

13. G. D. Kaufman, “Religious diversity, historical consciousness, and Christian theology”, in Hick and Knitter, *The myth of Christian uniqueness*, 10.

14. Kaufman, “Religious diversity, historical consciousness, and Christian theology”, 14.

15. W. C. Smith, “Idolatry”, in Hick and Knitter, *The myth of Christian uniqueness*, 59.

16. N. Smart, “Forword” to A. Wilson (ed.), *World Scripture: a comparative anthology of sacred texts* (New York: Paragon House, 1995) p. xi. Smart elaborates upon this in his most recent book, *Dimensions of the Sacred: an anatomy of the world’s beliefs* (London: Harper Collins, 1996) especially Chapter 8.

17. A. Wilson, “Introduction” to *World Scripture*, 1.

18. H. Küng, *Christianity: its essence and history* (London: SCM, 1995) pp. ii and 783 (emphasis added).

19. H. Küng and K-J. Kuschel (eds.), *A global ethic: the declaration of the parliament of the world’s religions* (London: SCM, 1993) Section B.I.

what he called "world theology", "to move *forwards* – towards a *truer* next phase, and in principle now a *converging* phase for all. For *truth is one*, while each of us can...in theory *approximate* gradually more closely – both to it and therefore *over time* to each other."<sup>20</sup> In this passage we find explicit statement of key elements of the dominant paradigm: the "forward" movement of "world history" towards the "true"; of the "convergence" of societies in a "world civilization" on a "shrinking planet"; of the notion of "truth" as "one" to which the concrete world can only "approximate"; of God as an "Ultimate Reality" common to all religions.

Thinkers such as those cited above have registered major scholarly achievements; nevertheless, they give expression to a range of presuppositions that are coming under increasingly sustained criticism where they appear in other fields, where the sensitivity to the imperative to protect the ultimate integrity of difference and otherness – especially in its cultural, racial, ethnic and gendered forms – is extremely pronounced. These problematic presuppositions found in the works of those quoted above include a faith in the progressive nature of a shared global history; in the role and efficacy of scientific and scholarly expertise to unite and yet liberate humanity; in the accumulation of knowledge as an unproblematic end in itself; in the constructive role of scholars, not only of religions but of other forms of cultural identification; and in the power of reason to ascend in an evolutionary and necessarily convergent fashion towards the unchanging "Truth". There is a particular concern with the implications of the latter notion, which, as we shall see below, has great potential as an oppressive force. This may be especially the case in the theology of religions where this "Truth" is abstracted from the concrete world of religious experience and conceptualised in ontotheological terms as necessarily self-identical and singular and as that Ultimate Reality in respect of which the actual religious traditions of the world must remain only phenomenal manifestations.

## 2. FROM ABSTRACTIONS TO OTHERNESS

It is the objective of this paper to contest these forms of abstraction and to elaborate elements of an alternative paradigm for the analysis of religious difference, one which properly valorises otherness – the particularity, uniqueness and integrity of the religious traditions of the world, and which therefore offers an alternative perspective on their inter-relations, their role in the unfolding of world history, and their

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20. Quoted in S. R. Isenberg, "Comparative religion as an ecumenical process: Wilfred Cantwell Smith's world theology", in the *Journal of ecumenical studies* 24:4 (Fall 1987) 618 (emphasis added).

theological significance. This alternative paradigm proposes a view of the terrain of the world's religious traditions that is radically "decentered", away from a defining concern with the presuppositions and preoccupations of Western theism and ontotheology and towards a view that recognises the limitations imposed upon thought in this area by a respect for the ultimate, perhaps even irreducible otherness of these great traditions. It is informed by the stream of postmetaphysical thought pre-eminently exemplified by Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, and expressed also through poststructuralism and certain variants of hermeneutics. It shares something with the non-cognitivist approach in the philosophy of religion, influenced by Heidegger, Wittgenstein and versions of contemporary pragmatism. It proposes that practice and ethics, rather than metaphysics should be predominant in the new outlook, emphasising the role of culture, language, community and narrative in religious life and thought, and bracketing the question of the existence of any non-linguistic, unmediated universal realm of human religious experience to focus instead on what might be called particularist communities of experience grounded not in atemporal universals but rather in historically located life-worlds and traditions. At a more general level, it reflects the relatively specific concerns of a broad current of contemporary thought that is best loosely characterised as the postmodern *Zeitgeist* encompassing various tendencies including postcolonial thought, the politics of identity, as well as the new cultural politics of difference.

How may this alternative paradigm for the theology of religions be characterised? The emerging perspective has been described as "postphilosophy", emphasising the "closure" or culmination of certain central concerns and pre-occupations in philosophy, theology and cognate fields.<sup>21</sup> It appears we have entered upon "an epochal change... at once subtle and all-pervasive", and involving a shift in concern from knowledge and epistemology to the question of meaning: "we don't have to *know* the meaning, we have to *do* the meaning."<sup>22</sup> This shift was heralded by Heidegger and Wittgenstein and entails new insights into the embodiment of mind, the immediacy of language and action, the role of ritual, and the gradual eclipse of metaphysics as previously pursued. The alternative paradigm is also informed by the contemporary critique of foundationalism:

from phenomenology to deconstruction, one encounters the persuasion that the old foundationalist arguments no longer suffice. Meaning is not some metaphysical essence or substance; it is a task of intersubjective and intertextual relations. Truth cannot be

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21. K. Baynes et al. (eds.) "General introduction" to *After philosophy: end or transformation?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989) 1ff.

22. H. L. Finch, *Wittgenstein* (Brisbane: Element, 1995) 6, 12.

grounded on a given system of being (realism) or mind (idealism); it must be radically rethought as an interplay of differences (perspectives, *Abshattungen*, intentionalities, situations, structures, signifiers, etc.).<sup>23</sup>

Foundationalism arises directly from the inherently ontotheological tendencies of metaphysics, especially the belief that it is possible to "trace everything back to one", which since Plato has "presented itself in its definitive forms as the doctrine of universal unity [in accordance with which] theory is directed toward the one as the origin and ground of everything".<sup>24</sup> The notion of a universally present "underlying" or "overarching" or "noumenal" "Reality" is quite characteristic (although not exclusively) of the ontotheology of the West, which is dominated by what are deeply embedded spatial metaphors ("under", "over", "behind", "beyond", etc.). Indeed, the very thought that other religions are concerned (even unknowingly) with the world in this particular fashion is *itself thought* within this ontotheology.

In reaction to this foundationalism a powerful current of cultural and intellectual resistance has emerged which "attributes responsibility for the crises of the present to the metaphysical legacy left by unitary thinking within the philosophy of the subject and the philosophy of history". This resistance "invokes plural histories and forms of life in opposition to a singular world history and life-world, the alterity of language games and discourses in opposition to the identity of language and dialogue, and scintillating contexts in opposition to univocally fixed meanings".<sup>25</sup> In the theology of religions this means that the various "divine" terms or religious concepts that are frequently invoked should not be considered to relate to each other as (relatively) interchangeable terms within a single discourse or set of discourses on a shared discursive terrain. Rather, they are to be seen as semantically anchored in the different life-worlds from which they have emerged and it is only in terms of their own traditions that they possess any "true" meaning. In terms of the politics of culture, interest is now increasingly upon "how people define themselves – through categories such as race, class, gender or ethnicity".<sup>26</sup> Focussing on the theology of religions, this paper seeks to re-valorise the actual "real world" plurality and particularity of concrete historical religious life-worlds and traditions, proposing a number of ways in which we might more appropriately think theologically about the true nature and implications of religious difference as that which in itself encapsulates the true

23. R. Kearney, "Introduction" to R. Kearney (ed.), *Twentieth century continental philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994) 2.

24. J. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical thinking* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992) 115.

25. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical thinking*, 115.

26. K. J. Winkler, "Scholars mark the beginning of the age of 'Post-Theory'", *The chronicle of higher education* (October 13 1993) A9.

religious experience, aspirations, achievements and ultimately the religious integrity of humanity.

### 3. ROSENZWEIG AND LEVINAS AND EX-CCEEDENCE

Central to the contemporary movements of thought discussed above are the cognate concepts of alterity and the Other,<sup>27</sup> notions that also underlie fundamentally the theory of religious difference being developed here. Explorations of the themes of difference and the Other have been carried out with often enlightening results in various areas including feminist, literary, and cultural studies, and philosophy. For the purposes of the present discussion however, we shall focus our discussion around certain themes in the work of Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas, where, in their reading of the philosophical and theological tradition of the West, the notion of “the Other” emerges in resistance to the incorporating and engulfing tendencies of Western metaphysics identified above as central to the dominant paradigm in the philosophy and theology of religions. As we proceed to develop these themes, it will become apparent that the vital characteristic of these authors is their intense commitment to a strongly particularised religious tradition – that is, their philosophy and theology are fundamentally informed by the experience of being Jewish, in the twentieth century, in the heart of European civilisation as it plunged into the Nazi catastrophe that revealed, precisely in its treatment of the Jews and other “alien” races and groups, the depth of aversion and hatred of the Other that existed (and may still exist!) in the European heritage.

A key to the type of thought represented in their own ways by Rosenzweig and Levinas is an awareness of the Other as that which “exceeds” thought, an awareness of the Other as that which in itself is a measure of the limitations of conceptual thought:

This relation to the Other is the “meta” of metaphysics, which Levinas makes prior (rather than subordinate) to ontology. “Meta”

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27. “Alterity” will be used here as a general synonym for “otherness”, although it has various nuances. It has been defined in connection with poststructuralism as “a form of otherness irreducible to and unable to be modelled on any form of projection of or identification with the subject. The term refers to a notion of the other outside the binary opposition between self and other, an independent and autonomous other with its own qualities and attributes. The other is outside of, unpredictable by and ontologically prior to the subject.” E. Grosz, *Sexual subversions: three French feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) p. xiv. Handelman distinguishes the position of Emmanuel Levinas from poststructuralism, suggesting that the latter tends to “accept and draw upon the Hegelian notion of the negation at the heart of desire, of desire-as-lack and need to overcome the other,” while “Levinas is unique in postulating a desire that is not a lack but an independent positivity. Levinas’s alterity is not the negative of identity but its positive surplus, and overflow of the structures of thought.” See S. A. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption: Jewish thought and literary theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 182. The significance of this will be further discussed below.

as what is “behind” or “beyond” is redefined as the desire for this Other, a non-nostalgic desire for that which overflows or is “outside” thought. “Thought” connotes here the phenomenological adequation of idea and thing, or reason and being, ie., what can be “re-presented”, brought to light, disclosed, reabsorbed, and possessed in the knowledge of the knower, an act which Levinas criticizes for reducing otherness to what is the same.<sup>28</sup>

This notion of “ex-ceedence”<sup>29</sup> can be contrasted to previous notions which otherwise dominated the Kantian and neo-Kantian tradition, such as “transcendence” or “negation” which – traditionally understood – may locate the Other outside the immediate grasp of thought but nevertheless place it within the overall economy of the system of reason where it can be eventually accessed through thought itself – through, for example, the application of the dialectic, as we find in Hegel with his vision of philosophy penetrating even “into the nature of things, of man, and into the nature of God, unveiling its depth for us [and delivering] to us the treasure of the highest knowledge”.<sup>30</sup>

The denial that thought has this ultimate penetrative capacity, and the recognition of the ex-ceedence of reality over thought have fundamental implications for the philosophy and theology of religions which must deal overwhelmingly with concepts – primarily of a spiritual or religious nature – and not just those embedded in the Christian tradition and addressing the Christian spiritual reality, but also those embedded in other religious traditions and addressing other spiritual realities. Given that scholars must already deal with the limitations imposed by the translation of concepts between languages, ex-ceedence entails a double separation from the spiritual realities which they seek to comprehend and reconcile. For example, the Buddhist concept of “*dukkha*” is frequently translated as “suffering” but this does little justice to the profound insight into the nature of things signified in the original discourse of Buddhist doctrine. Consequently, scholars anxious to communicate this full meaning are required to elaborate, often quite expansively. Carrithers, for example, states explicitly that “*dukkha*” “covers all that is meant in English by “suffering” but more as

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28. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 181.

29. This term is introduced here to signify “that which is beyond thought”, in the sense that there is always an aspect of reality that exceeds the capacity of conceptual thought to comprehend or grasp. It is used here advisedly in distinction from “transcendence”, which has a number of similar but ultimately fundamentally different meanings within philosophy and theology. An awareness of this limitation on conceptual thought was an important component in such post-Kantian philosophies as those of Schopenhauer – who noted that “Concepts always remain universal, and so do not reach down to the particular; yet it is precisely the particular that has to be dealt with in life” – and Kierkegaard, who found such insights highly compatible with his own. See B. Magee, *The philosophy of Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) 42.

30. G. W. F. Hegel, quoted in W. Kaufmann, *Hegel* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 280.

well, and this wider sphere of meaning must be borne in mind".<sup>31</sup> In the first instance then, the term involves "suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief, and despair". More deeply, it signifies consciousness of failure, frustration, unfulfilled yearning, missed opportunities, dissatisfaction, and so on. Ultimately however, "*dukkha*" has an even more profound meaning, which leads, in Carrither's view "to the heart of what is original in the Buddha's teaching", and accepted within Buddhism "as a dispassionate description of the human plight".

Here suffering is seen as being woven most finely into the texture of human experience; here experience is considered on the smallest time-scale, from second to second.... Under this microscope *dukkha* falls within another range of meanings, such as imperfection, impermanence, evanescence, inadequacy, insubstantiality, incompleteness, uncontrollability.<sup>32</sup>

In this manner "*dukkha*" comes to signify "the fundamental imperfection-cum-impermanence – suffering – which is inherent in all experience".<sup>33</sup> As this discussion indicates, the concept "*dukkha*" seeks to signify a profound, complex and comprehensive view of the nature of things, and even within the original discourse embedded within the life-world of Buddhism – which is a tradition extremely alert to the limitations of conceptual thought – its efficacy must be supported by alert and attentive teaching and study if the reality beyond the concept is to be properly apprehended. Consequently, the scholar who approaches the concept with a view to establishing similarities, congruences, or indeed differences with comparably central concepts of (say) the Christian faith is confronted by the fact that "suffering" not only signifies something different but also something vastly more delimited than that signified by "*dukkha*", which, above all, has to do with the very nature of reality. If this situation is not properly recognised and dealt with, then any theology that emerges is going to be fundamentally compromised. To avoid such an outcome, the notion of "ex-ceedence" invites us to recognise that such concepts must inevitably fall short of fully grasping and comprehending reality, and that therefore there exists a realm of otherness and particularity which lies beyond and athwart the totalising powers of conceptual thought.

#### 4. HERMANN COHEN

In connection with our discussion of Rosenzweig and Levinas, the proximate source for this perspective on the limitations of conceptual thought appears to have been a leading German Neo-Kantian, Hermann

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31. M. Carrithers, "The Buddha", in *Founders of faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 51 (all subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from this source pp. 51-3).

32. Carrithers, "The Buddha", 53.

33. Carrithers, "The Buddha", 53.

Cohen (1842-1918), a professor at Marburg who had a tremendous impact upon Rosenzweig, and more indirectly upon Levinas and Heidegger.<sup>34</sup> Cohen brought to realisation a long-term tendency amongst members of the German-Jewish intelligentsia systematically to ground Judaism as they experienced it in an ethico-theological reading of Kant. Indeed, Cohen's "understanding of the basic principles of religion is unconditionally dependent upon the fundamental extension which he gives to the Kantian transcendental philosophy".<sup>35</sup> The transformation of Kantianism that Cohen effected and that fundamentally informed the stream of thought of concern here was quite profound. For Cohen:

The world of experience is not a manifestation of a metaphysical reality which is beyond knowledge, as it is for Kant, but consists simply of that which is. There is no reality beyond and exclusive of the being of experienced objects which are grounded in the objectivity of knowledge. One cannot speak of the thing-in-itself in terms of a contradiction-ridden absolute reality [as found in Hegelianism]. Rather, this concept symbolizes the unending task of knowledge, for which any materialization of the ideal of knowledge, any level of knowledge already reached, must be understood only as an "appearance" of the true reality which is still to be constructed.<sup>36</sup>

As an historian of this movement notes, "this critique of the concept of transcendence strikes deeply into religious representations".<sup>37</sup> In particular, it makes both possible and perhaps obligatory the shift in "first philosophy" from ontology to ethics, or in Kantian terms, from theoretical to practical reason, which alone "has the power to make accessible that absolute reality which is beyond the grasp of our knowledge".<sup>38</sup> Such a conception also serves to achieve a further important result: "an immediate connection is made to the Jewish idea of God. What Cohen formulated...within the context of his system is the Jewish faith in the divine-grounded moral order of being".<sup>39</sup> This emerged in one of the various controversies that Cohen engaged in, when he launched a counter-attack on von Treitschke's anti-Semitic denunciation of the Jews as anti-German and anti-Christian: The Germans, Cohen argued, "are the nation of Kant. The Jews are a nation

34. See R. Gibbs, "Height and nearness: Jewish dimensions of radical ethics", in A. T. Peperzak (ed.), *Ethics as first philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1995) Chapter 2. John van Buren, *The young Heidegger: rumor of the hidden king* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) 60, notes Cohen's influence on the formation of Heidegger's early thought.

35. J. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism: a history of Jewish philosophy from biblical times to Franz Rosenzweig* (New York: Schocken, 1973) 400.

36. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 400-401.

37. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 401.

38. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 401.

39. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 404.

whose creed has been purified by the prophets. The teachings of the prophets...were identical with Kant's ethical idealism," therefore the place of the Jew within German culture could not be more integral.<sup>40</sup> Cohen's controversial writings of the Jewish tradition were later collected and published in three volumes, with an introduction by Rosenzweig.

##### 5. FRANZ ROSENZWEIG

In the fields of religion and philosophy a number of themes that have become central to the intellectual history of the twentieth century emerged in the work of Rosenzweig before being mediated, developed, complemented, and contested by Heidegger, Levinas and other later thinkers. His philosophy has been described as a "religious existentialism" which, in its "affirmation of the concrete person in his particularity...resumed the anti-Hegelian revolt of Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche".<sup>41</sup> Most importantly however for the development of an alternative model for the theology of religions is the fashion in which Rosenzweig, as a Jewish intellectual confronting the immense power of an entrenched Christian civilisation, applied this perspective in his own life and writings. This can be illustrated in connection with the fundamental choice Rosenzweig confronted in 1913 over whether to convert from Judaism to Christianity. Like his family, Rosenzweig strongly identified with German culture and the sense of Jewishness was not strong. Family members and friends had already converted and matters came to a head one night after much discussion and soul-searching. Despite the apparent weight of argument, and to the surprise of his interlocutors, Rosenzweig refrained from converting and instead committed himself to a more authentically lived Judaism.

Pivotal to this decision to embrace Judaism was his recognition of the power of particularity, of community and tradition in religion and of the continuity he felt through these with his Jewish heritage. He came to see the desire of Christians to convert Jews as "an attempt to remove the identity of Jews as human persons," Judaism is a destiny "he has been chosen for...how can he abandon it to be converted?"<sup>42</sup> In face of the aggressive Christian self-image confronting him, Rosenzweig asserted his own view of Judaism's place: "(1) we have the truth, (2) we

40. J. Ebbinghaus, "Hermann Cohen", in P. Edwards (ed.), *The encyclopedia of philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) Vol. 2, 127.

41. N. N. Glatzer, "Franz Rosenzweig", in Edwards, *The encyclopedia of philosophy*, Vol. 7, 212.

42. P. J. Griffiths, "Introduction", to F. Rosenzweig, "Extracts from the eleventh letter to Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy", in P. J. Griffiths (ed.), *Christianity through non-Christian eyes* (New York: Orbis, 1990) 19-20.

are at the goal, (3) any and every Jew feels in the depth of his soul that the Christian relation to God, and so in a sense their religion, is particularly and extremely pitiful, poverty-stricken, and ceremonious".<sup>43</sup> Such an assertion of identity by such a sophisticated and articulate thinker as Rosenzweig highlights the difficulties faced by any theology or philosophy of religions that would seek to collapse the traditional faiths of great religions into any unitary system based on de-traditionalised notions like "the Real", or a "World Theology", or "Global Ethic". It is also an early precursor of the contemporary emergence of the politics of religious difference and the cultural politics of difference. Later Rosenzweig was to join with many other Jewish intellectuals, including Gershom Scholem, Hans Kohn, Erich Fromm and in particular Martin Buber, in seeking to reclaim for the modern world the wealth of the Judaic tradition. As part of this project Rosenzweig and Buber developed a theory concerning the nature of translation, language and textuality at the centre of which is a recognition that the meaning of a text (and in particular a sacred text) emerges not from some intrinsic quality but from its reception by each new generation of readers over time. It follows from this that a translator's task is not to manipulate the text to assimilate it to each new audience and a dominant culture, but rather to ensure that the reader is confronted with the absolute particularity of the text and the challenges it entails. Overall, in this aspect of Rosenzweig's career we find an affirmation of the centrality of community, tradition, history, authenticity and difference in understanding the encounter of religions.

Another essential aspect of Rosenzweig's thought in relation to the theology of religions was his resistance to totalising systems that seek to sweep up and incorporate the particular, the individual and the unique. Writing in the looming shadow of the Third Reich, he emphasised the priority of individuals and communities in opposition to the all-encompassing pretensions of totalising philosophical systems and conceptions of the state represented pre-eminently for him by Hegelianism. For Rosenzweig, it is necessary to oppose a model of philosophy conceived in such terms of totalisation (present in the tradition all the way from Thales' "All is water" through to Hegel's Absolute Spirit) with a particularist vision of Jewish existence as "an essential event of Being", a "category of Being", "in which God, man, and world are untotalised, their relationship being a function of their intrinsic, independent motions rather than of a System to which they belong".<sup>44</sup>

43. Rosenzweig, "Extracts from the eleventh letter to Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy", 23. "Ceremonious" differs from "ceremonial" in meaning "addicted or showing addiction to ceremony, punctilious" (S.O.E.D.)

44. Quoted in S. G. Smith, *The argument to the other: reason beyond reason in the thought of Karl Barth and Emmanuel Levinas* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983) 264.

It was in resistance to such totalising tendencies that Rosenzweig developed a critique of what he saw to be a primordial drive within the Western metaphysical tradition to grasp and appropriate the particularity of phenomena within “the All” of conceptual thought, climaxing in the totalism of Hegelianism which saw itself as the epitome and realisation of Western metaphysics, indeed as the culmination of the history of Spirit in the world:

This project culminates in the Hegelian idealism where philosophy seeks to construct out of itself a completely autonomous totality, identifying the self-fulfillment of thought with the very consummation of world history. This purported apotheosis brought all things, including God and theology, into the unified totality of the autonomous philosophical system, finally uniting thought and being.... The meaning of phenomena thus comes from their inclusion in this whole...[encompassing and judging] all states, all thought, all beings.<sup>45</sup>

As a soldier surrounded by mass slaughter in World War One, Rosenzweig saw the impetus for such tendencies in the human fear of death, as, in effect, defence mechanisms constructed to deal with the threat, and ultimate certainty, of individual mortality: “All cognition of the All originates in death, in the fear of death.”<sup>46</sup> By sweeping up the contingency of existence in the world into the concepts and categories of total systems of thought founded on some ultimate, universal Reality this fear of death is suppressed, driven back and denied: contingency and death become merely conditional aspects of one eternal, unconditioned, necessary Reality.

As one who resisted the powerful call to submit to the all-encompassing religion of European Christendom, it is not surprising that Rosenzweig developed an alternative way of conceiving the relationship of unity and difference. In opposition to the integral, self-identical *totality* of Western metaphysics, Rosenzweig proposed the notion of *constellation*, according to which reality is not totalised as a fully integrated system but preserved in its variegated and irreducible multiplicity and plurality against the imperialistic incorporating grasp of Reason. Applying the principle of the ex-ceedence of reality over thought, it is possible to see within this constellar structure the cognitively “indigestible actuality [of the real world] outside the great intellectually mastered factual wealth of the cognitive world”.<sup>47</sup> The

45. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 184.

46. F. Rosenzweig, *The star of redemption* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1985) 3. These are the opening words of a work begun while Rosenzweig was a soldier on the Balkan front in World War I and mailed home in fragments on postcards. See Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 183.

47. F. Rosenzweig, *The star of redemption*, 11. It follows that “Constellation” is opposed not only to the Hegelian “Totality” but also to the Greek “Cosmos”.

“irreducible realities” which give form to this actuality-as-constellation are God, humanity and world, bound together through the concepts of creation, revelation, and redemption, all of which are related in the following fashion: “creation denotes the action of God upon the world; revelation, the encounter of God and man; and redemption, the relation of man to the world”.<sup>48</sup> This conception allows the invocation of such “this-worldly” forms of knowing as linguistic and sociological analyses in the pursuit of a concrete form of “truth” defined not “by the illusions of timeless self-enclosed, self-absorbed, self-generated idealist thought”, but “generated out of a relation with the Other in language, life, and time...a relation *with* and *for* someone”.<sup>49</sup>

This type of thought has important implications for the theology of religions. Most immediately, we might note that the religious traditions of the world can indeed be seen naturally to form a constellation, rather than being totalised, for example, as culturally mediated expressions of the one “Ultimate Reality” conceived very much as the type of totality that was the target of Rosenzweig’s critique. Moreover, the posture suggested by Rosenzweig’s philosophy towards such traditions is one that seeks *not to incorporate but rather to encounter the Other*, and even then not with any intention to overcome or eliminate difference but rather to appreciate fully how such otherness and difference are intrinsic to the very nature of those traditions and the worlds they constitute.

## 6. EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Emmanuel Levinas has been described as “one of the most significant ethical thinkers of the twentieth century”.<sup>50</sup> His great potential significance for the theology of religions lies above all in the extension to the religions of the world of the principle of respect for the Other – understood in terms of an irreducible integrity – that his philosophy demands. Levinas’s overall project was to supplant ontology with ethics as the “first philosophy” from which all thought must proceed. For him, “the crucial focus and central concern...is the priority of ‘Otherness’, a radical alterity that demands our ethical response”.<sup>51</sup>

This focus defines a vital difference which exists between Levinas and the thought of Heidegger and that must be noted. Like Heidegger, Levinas recognised the contemporary impasse in the Western tradition – “the end of metaphysical thought”. However, in contra-distinction to

48. Glatzer, “Franz Rosenzweig”, 213.

49. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 187.

50. R. Kearney and M. Rainwater (eds.), *The Continental philosophy reader* London: Routledge, 1996) 122.

51. Kearney and Rainwater, *The Continental philosophy reader*, 122.

Heidegger who sought to interrogate beings and Being, Levinas turned resolutely against any pre-occupation with ontology and instead pursued an ethical resolution: "To be or not to be – is that the question? Is it the first and final question?" or does the truly ultimate question rather concern the *right-to-be* of the Other: "This is the question of the meaning of being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice.... Not 'Why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself."<sup>52</sup> Levinas was concerned with the proper ethical posture in the face of alterity. In his major work *Totality and infinity* he offered a severe critique of Heidegger's pre-occupation with ontological questions and advanced his own case for ethics rather than ontology as "first philosophy" from which all other philosophical arguments and considerations must proceed. In particular, Levinas attacked Heidegger for "giving priority to the knowledge of Being over the ethical relation between persons...it is not the knowledge of Being, but ethics – meaning our responsibility for the other person – that is the true subject of first philosophy."<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, Levinas's thought throughout his life was dominated by his conception of otherness or alterity: "his trajectory leads...away from ontology, epistemology, or reason, to a point where alterity is confronted in all its "nakedness"... – a point where its irreducibility can be acknowledged"<sup>54</sup> This brought him into confrontation with a Western metaphysics that deployed a notion of transcendence entailing a series of interrelated functions: conceptualisation, theorisation, visualisation, objectification and universalisation. Levinas, by contrast:

uses transcendence in the sense of rupture, and opening up to the Other, as opposed to the Western tradition's reduction of the Other to the Same in its drive to objectify and universalize. The dominance of the Same makes the universal the goal of thought. The universal is, by definition, independent of any given set of circumstances. It is thus disembodied and idealist.<sup>55</sup>

We find here an invocation of "Same" and "Other" used in a technical sense as a pair of concepts in terms of which is theorised the relationship between theoretical reason – conceived as the "Same" or the "Self", that is, the subject which possesses the unity of self-identity – and that which lies presently outside reason's grasp – conceived as "the Other", that is, the object ("abject") which has not yet been brought into the unity of identity with the Self, and which can be known only in terms of an alterity which reason is driven by its own dynamism to overcome

52. S. Hand (ed.), *The Levinas reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 86 (emphasis added).

53. R. J. S. Manning, *Interpreting otherwise than Heidegger* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1993) 8.

54. See J. Lechte, "Emmanuel Levinas", in *Fifty key contemporary thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1994) 117.

55. Lechte, "Emmanuel Levinas", 117.

and incorporate. Levinas stands as the pre-eminent contemporary theorist of the Other, attacking the drive of reason to encompass all, to operate ontotheologically as the sole source – indeed “fount” – of all intelligibility, and to make everything part of its own project and subject to its sole control. He was, he declared, concerned with the Other, “prior to any act”.<sup>56</sup> In an argument directly relevant to the critique of the philosophy and theology of religions, he attacked the ontotheology of the West as the tyrannical domination of the Self over the Other, as an attempt by the familiar to engulf the different: “a reduction of the Other to the Same”.<sup>57</sup> While Levinas accepts that Western metaphysics maintains a distinction between the Self and the Other, he argues that this has been achieved on the presumption of the one all-embracing terrain, that of Reason, which serves as the *a priori* universal and necessary structure of human knowledge, which makes possible this very distinction, and within the boundaries of which both the Self and the Other are contained.

Following Rosenzweig and the principle of the “ex-ceedence” of being over thought, Levinas reformulated metaphysics: “the realm of the “meta” [became] the space of the *non-identity* of being and reason”.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, “meta” for Levinas came to refer not to that which is “beyond” or “behind” the phenomenal (“physical”) world but rather to the “surplus” or “excess” that is apprehended as “outside” thought considered as the process by which an adequation is established between the categories of reason and this phenomenal world. “Knowledge”, so conceived, is merely an attempt to reduce the actually irreducible alienness and “excess” of the Other to the security and self-identity of the Same. In fact, the surplus which overflows the processes and structures of conceptualisation – and which therefore eludes “knowledge” – constitutes an exteriority, an infinity, an ex-ceedence over that which thought is capable of grasping and which looms outside the cognising activity of reason as an “absolute Other” towards which the subject is nevertheless impelled by what Levinas identifies as desire: “metaphysical desire aims toward *something else entirely*, toward the absolutely Other”.<sup>59</sup>

In *Totality and infinity* Levinas undertook an analysis that was analogous to, but quite distinct from that of Heidegger, whose works he had translated into French and interpreted. He identified two main tendencies in the tradition of Western philosophy and theology, one dominant and the other subaltern. The first proceeds from the Socratic injunction to “know oneself!” Within this stream, philosophy seeks to

56. E. Levinas, “Ethics and politics”, in *The Levinas reader*, 290.

57. E. Levinas, *Totality and infinity: an essay on exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 43.

58. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 184 (emphasis added).

59. Quoted in Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 181.

provide the autonomous self with the capacity to possess, through the power of thought, fundamental insights not only into the ground and meaning of its own freedom and being, but into the veritable ground of Being as such, ultimately encompassing the world through reason. Critically for our present discussion, Levinas argued that while this stream of thought initially appeared to recognise the realm of the Other confronting the self, it ultimately maintained that both the self and this realm of alterity could and must be eventually subsumed within the all-encompassing and absolute realm of Being. Consequently, according to this dominant tendency, any philosophy can only be considered adequate according to the extent to which it is able to accomplish this annihilation of otherness through the reduction of plurality to unity (or totality, to use Levinas's own preferred term). As one scholar has recently put it:

The self measures everything by itself and denies that anything is fundamentally alien to itself. It follows that the self will, in the end, only allow criticism from itself. This is what its ideal of autonomy prescribes, and this is what commits it to a project of reducing all otherness to sameness, ie., to a rejection of ultimate plurality in favour of intelligible unity.<sup>60</sup>

The alternative – and hitherto subaltern – stream within the tradition recognises a limit upon the all-encompassing grasp of totalising reason. This gives expression to a spirit of desire for the absolutely Other, but a desire that is nevertheless not a drive to incorporate or penetrate the Other.<sup>61</sup> In an argument that has obvious implications for the understanding of religious difference, an awareness of the potential for a final, irreducible plurality arises from a recognition that something may be present that is ultimately Other, that exceeds the capacity of the reason-endowed self to grasp and comprehend, and so remains ultimately unknown and un-encompassed by the self. An example of this latter relationship “would be the Platonic formula locating the Good beyond Being: we do not measure the Good, because it measures us”.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the self is decentred and no longer occupies the subject position; rather it stands as object before an Other who is subject. In more general terms, Levinas believed that this stream of thought facilitated an understanding of the Other, not in terms of its final subsumption under the total category of Being, but rather in terms of its own final exteriority or alterity understood as a demand for the recognition of integrity and objectivity utterly beyond the fiat of the self to bestow or withdraw. The consequences of this style of thinking are both clear and momentous: “To do justice to this exteriority...we must

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60. Smith, *The argument to the other*, 3.

61. Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, 33.

62. Smith, *The argument to the other*, 3.

adopt and hold to a pluralistic way of thinking, even if it requires us to renounce the priority of the intelligible idea or the finite discourse.”<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the “first philosophy” must be ethics: “The priority will belong instead to my moral relation with the Other, in which the Other has a kind of moral eminence which I address, not by knowing him or choosing him, but by being subject to his claim.”<sup>64</sup> The model for this type of thought “will be *like* Plato’s idea of the Good or the Cartesian idea of the Infinite, the “thought that thinks more than it can think”, a self-overflowing thought that makes a unique demand for an eminent status”.<sup>65</sup>

The implications for the philosophy and theology of religions of this change in perspective are profound: the only words the self can apply to the Other must “take their place in a discourse without closure, ie., a conversation in which the Other is free to unsay and resay. Philosophy is ethically transformed by allowing the idea of the Other to work upon it and within it”<sup>66</sup>. An understanding of religious difference based on such principles would eschew attempts to unify or reconcile (that is, totalise) religions in favour of more honestly and openly encountering them in full appreciation of their otherness and difference.

The intensity of this encountering must be underlined and can be gauged by the profound concept invoked by Levinas to make this point. In an emphatic affirmation of the principle of presence, Levinas sees the utter alterity of the Other as being represented above all by the “Face” – a complex notion that has, as its initial exemplar, the “face” of the other person – and which signifies for Levinas the complete exposure of the Other in its absolute vulnerability: “Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions...there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself.” Levinas then continues in words which reflect frightful personal experiences of the West’s confrontation with the Other in its midst: “This extreme exposure – prior to any human aim – is like a shot “at point blank range”.... From the beginning there is a face to face steadfast in its exposure to invisible death, to a mysterious forsakenness...mortality lies in the Other.”<sup>67</sup> The encounter with the face of the Other calls forth “the ultimate summons to validate the existence of another human being who cannot be totalized or recuperated into one’s self”.<sup>68</sup> It reveals an underlying potential for violence that can only be confounded by the most absolute of ethical injunctions.

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63. Smith, *The argument to the other*, 4.

64. Smith, *The argument to the other*, 4.

65. Smith, *The argument to the other*, 4 (emphasis added).

66. Smith, *The argument to the other*, 4.

67. Levinas, “Ethics as first philosophy”, 130.

68. Kearney and Rainwater, *The Continental philosophy reader*, 123.

In this manner, the encounter with the face of the Other is revealed as the occasion for the realisation of the injunction to respect – as an irreducible absolute – the life and the integrity of the Other. Consequently, “this radical alterity is the call of the Infinite, a transcendence that already inhabits all human encounters”. It is in this fashion that Levinas rebels against “the purely “ontological” relationship with the world that philosophy traditionally has with its exclusive concern for Being-as-totality, with human being as merely one cog in that machine”. In contrast, Levinas believes that “only the primacy of ethical philosophy can reveal and foster the infinite transcendence of our relation to the Other”.<sup>69</sup> The evocation of the “Face” becomes in Levinas “another category of understanding, a ‘mode of intelligibility’, a way of indicating a subject/object relation beyond/ before the formal relations of logic, or of concepts which reduce the other to the same.”<sup>70</sup> In contrast to the Heideggerean concept of “disclosure”, “Levinas wants to insist upon a relation between the same and other that is not reducible to *knowledge* of other by the same.”<sup>71</sup> Levinas is here also following Rosenzweig, “for whom the primal philosophical *error* is to begin philosophy with the question of ‘essence’, to reduce the essence of one thing back to the essence of another, whether in materialism, mysticism, ontology, or subjectivism”.<sup>72</sup>

Moving away from the theology of religions for a moment, a recent essay on the ethical significance of Levinas’s thought explores the practical theological implications of this perspective in a manner which illuminates the theme of the encounter of the self with the Face of the Other. Discussing personhood in connection with various issues of medical ethics, the question is posed: what constitutes a “person”, is there an essential “personhood”? Is the foetus to be considered a person? The severely mentally handicapped child? The badly brain-damaged car accident victim? The spouse of half a century, now lost to Alzheimers? “Is there still someone there who, in their very wordlessness beckons us to responsibility?”<sup>73</sup> Such questions appear to cry out for the re-assurance of cognitive mastery of the situation, for objective criteria of some kind, for some definitive definition of “person”, for some conceptualisation of person that leaves “no remainder”, no “excess” of existence over essence that might linger on after the terminal decision as an indictment of what, in the end, are revealed as the limits of our knowledge and our judgement. However, following Levinas’s lead, “perhaps the question needs to be asked in a

69. Kearney and Rainwater, *The Continental philosophy reader*, 123.

70. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 209.

71. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 209.

72. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 209 (emphasis added).

73. M. Purcell, “The ethical significance of illeity (Emmanuel Levinas)”, *The Heythrop journal* 37 (1996) 125.

more radical manner. When we relate to others, what is it we are actually relating to?"<sup>74</sup> Clearly, we are not relating to a "concept", to some "thing" that can be exhaustively defined and known in terms of reason. Indeed, the relationship that we have with the Other – apprehended in this case in the person we encounter – "has its origin in, and is constituted and sustained by", something that goes beyond/before/behind reason, and with respect to which "knowledge, understood as comprehensive mastery, is an inadequate first tool to moderate the relationship and the response we make within the relationship, for the relationship is straightaway ethical".<sup>75</sup> Consequently, in Levinas's words, the task for philosophy is not to pursue knowledge in the traditional sense, but rather to exercise "the wisdom of love at the service of love".<sup>76</sup> While this perspective has distinct overtones of existentialism, the analysis does not terminate there, because "the aim is not to revel in the glories of free subjectivity", rather it is open up the self and to overcome its alienation from the ethical grounds upon which alone the Other can be truly encountered. Indeed, the self is to be "bound over to the Other in ethics and love and obligation". Consequently, "the idea of the subject who is defined by the Other yet also unique and singular distinguishes Levinas and Rosenzweig from traditional humanist and existentialist notions of the individual self".<sup>77</sup>

In the theology of religions this train of thought must alert us to the fact that when we encounter other religious traditions we encounter them in a vital sense in *people* – in *other* people, or, more strongly, in *people of otherness* – people whose religious identities (the most fundamental of all identities) are embedded in life-worlds that are, at one and the same time, ultimately intractable to the universalising power of reason, and perhaps fundamentally different to those we inhabit and from which we seek to grasp and comprehend these othernesses. Proceeding from Levinas's principle of the irreducibility of alterity it would appear that we must attend to the Face of other gods as that which does *not* invite incorporation into some totality (invariably ontotheologically conceived) which we have constructed and may even share with "like-minded" people. In this encounter, "the first move is the protection of the singular self from the impersonal totality", whatever theological or philosophical form that totality might take.<sup>78</sup> It demands a primal ethical response of recognition of the right-to-be-as-it-is of the other's faith and to be so in its irreducible integrity. This

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74. Purcell, "The ethical significance of illeity", 125.

75. Purcell, "The ethical significance of illeity", 126.

76. E. Levinas, *Otherwise than being or beyond essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) 162.

77. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 185.

78. Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 185.

does not entail a state of alienation-from-the-Other but rather a situation of being-with-the-Other, that suggests that the most appropriate occasions for encountering religious difference in the fullness of its meaning may be those shared – but always ultimately ineffable – moments of existential eventfulness, such as birth, death, grief, love, loss and friendship that all human beings qua human beings experience.

#### 7. THE TRAGIC DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE

In addition to these insights into how religious difference may be encountered at the level of the person, Levinas also provides insights into how the tragic dimensions of religious difference can become manifest at the level of civilisations. As we have noted, he shared with Rosenzweig a Judaic heritage which he similarly embraced and explored in profound depth in the century of the Holocaust, an event that is steadily assuming a central place in contemporary Jewish theology as the “Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption”, and of which it has recently been said:

The Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption speaks of exclusion and bigotry, hatred and contempt; it asks Jews to imagine themselves in gas chambers. This provides a rationale for “being Jewish”, for being essentially separate from others. Why so? The logic is that no Jew can imagine himself or herself to be utterly like “everyone else”, because the beginning of being a Jew is, by definition, to be different because one is a Jew – whatever the difference may mean.<sup>79</sup>

This is a quintessential assertion of difference. For both Rosenzweig and Levinas the task for the Jewish person in the present century is to avoid cultural and spiritual incorporation and even physical annihilation within the vast “civilizing machine”<sup>80</sup> of European Christendom that increased relentlessly in malevolence from the time Cohen confronted the intellectual anti-Semitism of Treitschke until it finally found concrete expression in the darkest passions and lusts for destruction. Throughout this century of the Holocaust the powers of the West have been “sustained in their activity by the certainty of being in possession of Reason, of locating themselves in accord with the calculable forces that actually move things in the direction of history”.<sup>81</sup>

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79. J. Neusner, “Judaism”, in A. Sharma (ed.), *Our religions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) 336-7.

80. N. Elias, *The civilizing process*, Vol.1, *The history of manners*, and Vol. 2, *State formation and civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978, 1982).

81. E. Levinas, “Judaism and the present time”, quoted in A. Megill, *Prophets of extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 308-9 (translation modified).

Under the conditions of modernity and the global reach of technological power, "Reason has risen like a fantastic sun that renders transparent the opacity of creatures. Men who have lost their shadows! Nothing is capable any longer either of absorbing or of reflecting this light, which abolishes the very core of beings."<sup>82</sup> For Levinas, who proceeds from a mystically informed Judaism, this hegemony of Reason represents a threat to all religions which seek to maintain an interior life. In response therefore they must resolutely assert their utter alterity: "the Other is the Other only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible, that is, infinitely irreducible; and the infinitely Other can only be Infinity", that is, God.<sup>83</sup>

God makes his appearance in Levinas's vision in this fashion because of the latter's conviction that the inherent violence of Western metaphysics may erupt at any time "in the conflict of irreconcilable alterities".<sup>84</sup> No greater conflict could be imagined than the actual one that rendered problematic the entire Enlightenment Project and thereby fundamentally informed the emergence of the postmodernist sensibility: the onslaught of the *totalitarian* Nazi State against the *particularised* "non-Aryan" Other, represented by the Jews, and also communists, Slavs, gypsies, the mentally ill, and homosexuals. The West witnessed within its heartlands the Holocaust as the ultimate technological-industrial solution to the "problem" of the Other – a solution which emerged from the apparently exterminist tendencies of the Western metaphysical tradition noted by various thinkers.<sup>85</sup> For Levinas, "political totalitarianism and violence...were inseparable from the 'ontological totalitarianism' of Western philosophy". Indeed "ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power [and] as a first philosophy which does not call into question the Same, a philosophy of injustice".<sup>86</sup> In a manoeuvre that is intrinsic to its very nature, Reason reduces Difference to the Same, Otherness to the Self, Plurality to Unity. At best we are left with a simulacrum of plurality, an ersatz "Other". Whether it be Reason, John Hick's notion of "the Real", or some other all-encompassing notion, any such totalising conception necessitates the betrayal and exclusion of the Other in its true alterity. In fact,

whether one likes it or not, the Other of the universal...is inevitably the Other of Western thought itself, an Other waiting to be put into

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82. E. Levinas, "Judaism and the present time", quoted in Megill, *Prophets of extremity*, 308-9 (translation modified). The reference to men who have lost their shadows perhaps recalls the ancient superstition that men who entered into a pact with the devil forfeited their shadows.

83. J. Derrida, quoted in Megill, *Prophets of extremity*, 309.

84. Megill, *Prophets of extremity*, 309.

85. See, for example, Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

86. Quoted in Handelman, *Fragments of redemption*, 189 (translation modified). Handelman stresses that this connection was made by Levinas and Rosenzweig "long before it became a tenet of contemporary literary theory".

conceptual form and universalized, an Other which Western thought needs. This Other of Western thought would be inescapably another version of the Same – ultimately [merely] a formal Other (the Other of negation) and not true alterity at all.<sup>87</sup>

Such schemes, which remain on the terrain of Reason in its ontotheological form, “compromise the alterity of the Other, enclosing it within an Other-denying totality”.<sup>88</sup> This latter constitutes an “anti-alterity”, that is, an ersatz alterity that cannot be thought in its own terms, but that can be apprehended by reason and is therefore not an alterity at all.

Similar dynamics operate in connection with Christianity and its posture towards other religions – a relationship that not too long ago was viewed in terms of “the One True Faith” and “heathenism”. Missionary activity and theological thought of necessity reach out to “convert” (incorporate or engulf) the Other, unaware that the Other is generated in irreconcilability by the very dynamics of the ontotheology deployed in the exercise from the outset. Where incorporation (“conversion”) cannot be achieved, there may emerge bewilderment, even resentment, and the tendency also arises to devalorise the Other for its disparity, contingency and difference. In previous periods this devalorisation was phrased in terms of the heathen’s diabolism but in the period of modernity it is more usually expressed in evolutionary terms which sees religious difference as merely provisional. Kaufman, for example, writes approvingly of “the eroding away and ultimate destruction of *outmoded* [religious] values and institutions.... We should seek the overcoming of *outmoded* religious and cultural institutions and beliefs in other cultures.”<sup>89</sup> It is *the* crucial and defining feature of the postmodern *Zeitgeist* that such presumptions are now subject to relentless and rigorous critique.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the thought of Rosenzweig and Levinas suggests that we should seek to understand the relationship which exists between the Self (Christian theology) and that which is Other (non-Christian religions) not in terms of a totalising Reason or the abstracted theism of ontotheology. Rather, any such relationship must be recognised as exhaustively *ethical* in nature: the Self being understood not as a cognising agent incorporating the Other through the imperialism of Reason, but as the “for-the-Other”, for which the Other in its condition

87. Lechte, “Emmanuel Levinas”, 117.

88. Megill, *Prophets of extremity*, 309-311.

89. G. D. Kaufman *The theological imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 197 (emphases added). It is precisely the concern of this paper to problematise such notions as that religious traditions can be “out-moded”.

of exteriority retains an "invisible" ex-ceedent that must not only be accepted but valorised in its ineffability. Rosenzweig and Levinas reveal the possibilities that exist if the perspective from which we address the question of religious difference shifts from the onto-theological to the ethical and from the universal to the particular. They prompt us to ask why it is that we presume the encounter between religions should be analysed in terms of ontotheological presuppositions, especially when the outcome has frequently been sterile or even disastrous. And they alert us to the possibilities that emerge if the first philosophy is made ethics, the primary duty becomes justice, and the primary concern is the flourishing of the Other. These are possibilities with fundamental relevance to the theology of religions as it grapples with the massive facticity of religious difference. Instead of an engulfment and incorporation which eliminates the Otherness of religions and establishes the One Religion in grandiose singular pre-eminence, the path is open to encounter the Face of other gods within a theological space that affirms the irreducible integrity of the Other and is committed to its flourishing.