

personal authority. Pharisaic teaching, although not anonymously presented, is always careful to offer a Biblical and therefore authoritative proof text for a statement of opinion. It does not rely on the charisma or authority of an individual rabbi or teacher. Jewish law is much too precious a commodity to bandy around without careful referral to Scriptural authority. It is here that the Jew must depart from the Christian with perfect goodwill. There is no one in Judaism, not even Moses, who carries the personal authority that Jesus inevitably carries. To reiterate Montefiore, the Christian does not separate Jesus' teaching from the figure of Jesus. Though Jews may find much of their tradition in the Sermon on the Mount, at the end of the day, it is the figure of Jesus and two thousand years of history that will separate them from those teachings, so that they are recognisable as belonging to a different tradition; no less noble, no less idealistic, but different.

What Kind of Relativism?

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In his 1976 book *New Testament Interpretation in an Historical Age*, Denis Nineham advanced the thesis of cultural relativism in theology this way:

While the events of Jesus' career were such as to demand interpretation in terms of a unique—indeed literally final—divine intervention, *given the presuppositions of certain circles in first century Jewish culture*, they might not have seemed to demand such an interpretation given different cultural assumptions, for example to a modern western observer if such a one—twentieth century presuppositions and all—could be carried back to first century Palestine on some magic carpet or infernal time machine.¹

Broadly speaking this is the theory that the relation between facts on the one hand and language and interpretation on the other is perpetually shifting. Facts that will demand one kind of description in one cultural context will require a quite different kind in another and conversely a

given term or description will mean different things in different contexts.

Some of Nineham's examples of this are homely enough. Where strange human behaviour merited the description 'demon-possessed' in Jesus' cultural context, for example, in our context the description 'schizophrenic' might be the appropriate one.² But the above example shows that Nineham saw relativism as having profound implications not just for exegesis but for theology generally. Our ideas of divine intervention, incarnation, and even God himself are at stake. For, as Don Cupitt put in an essay on Nineham,

When we use biblical signifiers such as 'God' or 'the Son of God', nothing can guarantee, and there are many reasons for doubting, the truth of the assumption that the signified must be identically the same for us as it was for them.³

I am here to explore how deep these theological implications of relativism may be, and I shall argue that it all depends on what is understood by relativism. For the thesis of relativism as expounded by Nineham has a deep ambiguity between a tame version that has relatively shallow implications, and a fierce version that is altogether shattering. Does relativism mean a doubt as to whether terms like 'the Son of God' can *mean* the same *for us* as it did *for them*? Or does it mean a doubt as to whether the object or person referred to by the expression 'the Son of God' can *be the same* in our day as it was in theirs? The trouble for Nineham is that the first—semantic—kind of relativism looks too tame and incontestible for what he wants to say, while the second—ontological—relativism takes us far beyond what he seems to be arguing: even beyond the waters charted by Cupitt himself. So we ask, is there some third possibility somewhere in between? I shall argue that there is an epistemological relativism, harder to articulate, but with a strong case to be made for it. But this too leads off in a direction different from what Nineham leads us to expect.

a) Semantic Relativism.

It will help if we broaden the example beyond the theological, so that we can see the latter in proper context. So let us add to Cupitt's sample terms, 'God' and 'the Son of God' (which have problems enough of their own quite apart from the relativism issue) some others, like 'Venus', 'kangaroo', 'Ashtoreth' and 'circle'. Semantic relativism only means the obvious truth that terms change their connotation. 'Venus' for the Romans carried connotations of the divine that are lacking when we refer to the planet; 'kangaroo' had no meaning for the Jews of biblical times, 'Ashtoreth' little meaning for the man in the street today. Terms change meaning because of any number of associations that may be present in one society and lacking when another uses the same term; also, because of what a society believes about the world, and what it knows about the world. We know about things—quarks and kangaroos—which they did

not; unless we are arrogant we will expect that they knew things about the world that we have forgotten (Ashtoreth? the Son of God?). But so long as we can get some idea of the 'ontological commitment' of their society—what they believed and knew—we can begin to latch onto their meaning.

The task here is not always easy. It is probably easier to take into account the items of 'our world' that were lacking in 'their world' than to do the converse, and enter imaginatively into beliefs—perhaps knowledge—of theirs we cannot fit into our world-view. In the latter case it is often hard to be sure—did 'Ashtoreth' for the writer of the Book of Kings refer to some reality we cannot now grasp, or something the writer thought to be a real, alien god, or what the writer held to be an illusion falsely worshipped in place of the true and living Yahweh? Nevertheless the unfolding of terms in their context is no more than the normal task of exegesis.

And it is something we do informally all the time. Were it discovered, for instance, that *King Lear* were not the work of Shakespeare after all, but had been smuggled out of a Soviet concentration camp in the 'thirties, we would read it altogether differently.⁴ Old questions, like the relation of *Lear* to English folk tales, would be replaced by new ones—whether *Lear* is a figure for Stalin, and how strong is the manifest influence of Dostoyevsky? And that only shows how far when we do read Shakespeare's *Lear* we read it as a work of its time, with errors no doubt, but errors corrigible by research into what, in the Elizabethan world, was taken for granted, what was entertained as possible, what left ambiguous and unresolved, and what ruled out as inconceivable.

Relativism in this semantic sense is not bad news; in fact it is not news at all, only common-sense. There are times when Nineham does try to persuade us that he is merely making this 'common-sense' point. For example, he comments on how often the words of St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 are taken out of context and used, in funeral homilies, as if they referred to the departed, when Paul's context was the imminent expectation of the Parousia, and his prime concern was what, in the resurrection, would happen to those living at the time.⁵ The change in context has changed the meaning of 'resurrection'—the point is informative but uncontroversial. But thinkers in the tradition of English scepticism, from Hume onwards, are apt to use 'common-sense' as a smokescreen for activities more radical and subversive. Nineham, one suspects, is very much in this tradition. For, given a subtle change of gear, relativism lurches us rapidly into areas very strange to common-sense.

b) Ontological Relativism

Semantic relativism was tame because it kept to the common-sense view that the objective world referred to by our different world-views keeps substantially the same. In philosophical terms, the connotation of words varies, but the denotation—or reference—does not vary with it. The ancient Jews had no concept of kangaroo, but there were kangaroos in those days nonetheless. ‘Venus’ changed meaning, but Venus has not changed—certainly not out of recognition. ‘God’ alters from the warrior-leader to the Ground of Being, but God, necessarily, changes not.... And it is the dependability of the objective world that we use to lever our way into the realm of subjective connotations. It is because ‘death’ denotes the same objective fact for Jews, Greeks and us, that we can ask what did death mean for Jew and Greek, and how different is this from what it means for us. It is because we can make some sense of the terms ‘fertility’ and ‘goddess’ that we can gain some understanding of what the ‘fertility goddess’ Ashtoreth mean for those who worshipped her. Semantic relativism and a lively grasp of the otherness of other cultures rest on the assumption of the essential sameness of ‘their’ world and ours.

However, we noted that unless we take our own beliefs, arrogantly, as the exclusive standard of knowledge, it is possible that other civilisations have had not just different beliefs, but different knowledge from our own. This is what effects the disturbing ‘change of gear’. The question of whether the Jewish writer *believed* in Ashtoreth or not is in many ways for us an academic issue; the possibility that he may have *known* her in a way that we cannot, so disturbs us, and offends our intellectual pride, that our first temptation is to dismiss it out of hand. It is the same with the suggestion that, whereas our conceptual world is such that we are not quite sure what we mean by saying ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ and hence whether we can believe it, the conceptual world of the first Christians may have been such that they not only knew what they meant, but knew it to be true.

Once we grasp this possibility, we are almost launched into the far more biting and perplexing relativism that speaks with Kuhn⁶ of the *incommensurability* of different conceptual worlds. This—if anything—must be what Nineham means when he claims that ‘contemporary Western men, by and large, live in a world vastly different from any preceding one’.⁷ The possibility seems to be assured when we note that historically it is not only the connotation of terms that varies, but often the denotation too. An ancient may point to what I call ‘Venus’ and say the same word. But I do not know if he is referring just to what I term the ‘evening star’ (as opposed to the ‘morning star’, which for him is something different).⁸ For all I know, he may be referring to that planet in that particular configuration with certain other stars, so that ‘Venus’ for him is something that ‘happens’, say, just once every

five years. Again, I do not know if for him 'Venus' here denotes a planet, as opposed to the goddess who goes by the same name, or a planet that is also the goddess of love. All I can be reasonably sure of is that he is not referring to quite what I understand by 'Venus', which is a planet like the earth circling the sun according to not quite Newtonian laws. These theories, and the knowledge they encode, are possessions of my culture inaccessible to him in his. But exactly what he is referring to—an evanescent constellation, or a strangely wandering star, a deity, or the inhabitant of the second heaven—I cannot be sure. These theories, and the knowledge they may encode, are possessions of his culture inaccessible to me in mine. What he says about the Venus of his theories is incommensurable with what I say about the Venus of mine, because, except in this single bit of sky pointed to at this specific instant, we cannot know how far what we refer to as 'Venus' coincides.

This line of argument, which has been developed philosophically by Kuhn, Quine⁹ and others, tends to show the weakness of reference as a basis of meaning, and suggests that connotation is all we have to go on. In other words, our world does not come pre-packed full of objects out there for us to refer to. It is for us to assemble experience into a coherent picture of reality, and different societies with their different languages and beliefs assemble it in different ways. So some philosophers speak of the 'social construction of reality'.¹⁰

It is here that we seem to have come via 'the merest common-sense' to something quite strange to common-sense: namely, a philosophical idealism for which the 'world' is, if not my own, at any rate a society's collective 'idea'. From a sense of the difficulties of interpreting alien cultures, we have come through to a feeling of the impossibility of doing so, because we cannot be sure what they are referring to even by terms that seem on the face of it to translate readily and smoothly. And there are times at least when this seems to be the relativism Nineham is arguing for—as when, at the end of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, he casts a shadow on all the interpretation so far offered by asking whether, even if Jesus appeared alongside us today and spoke to us in our own language, he would be intelligible to us; or whether (one might add) it is intelligible even to consider this possibility, and lift Jesus out of his own time.¹¹

Idealism has its problems. Notably, if the unsureness about reference means that I cannot be sure of the conceptual world a man of an alien culture inhabits, and hence cannot be sure just what he means by terms like 'Venus' and 'God', can I be any surer of the conceptual world my present-day neighbour inhabits, and what construction he puts on those terms? Can I even be sure that the world I inhabit today is the same as I inhabited yesterday and that I mean the same now as I did then by the terms 'Venus' and 'chair'? Idealism tends to collapse into solipsism, and beyond.... But this is not the place to pursue these arguments, which lead into one of the fiercest battlegrounds of modern philosophy.¹² For

our purposes it suffices to show that the idealism of ontological relativism has consequences that would be uncongenial to Nineham.

The point here is that ontological relativism of the kind we have been describing abolishes the distinction between the literal and the mythical. And a great deal of Nineham's excellent exegesis relies on this distinction. He is often at pains to argue that such and such a biblical statement, which we are tempted to take literally, is meant mythically and conveys truth after the manner in which myth can convey it. The 'common-sense' view is that all truth is literal truth, and Nineham has had to urge against this. But the idealist position is in effect that all truth is mythical truth, and that is equally uncongenial to his case. For it too would mean taking statements like 'Jesus is the Son of God' as operating on the same level as 'Jamie is my kangaroo'.

For consider. On the face of it, we distinguish literal statements from mythical ones on the basis that the referents of the former are universally accessible. These referents are 'out there' to refer to, and we can test the truth of the statement by experience, that is, by taking a look at this referent and seeing if the statement describes it adequately or not. The referents of mythical statements, on the other hand, are what we are tempted to term 'nonexistent'—in polite terms, they are inaccessible outside of a given mythological context. They—Ashtoreth, the goddess Venus—are the constructions of a given society, and the truth of statements about them (like 'Venus and Mars made love') is settled by looking at what the mythological corpus has to say about Venus and Mars.

Now, the view that reality is 'socially constructed' can be restated very simply as the view that all reality is mythical, all truth mythological. For on this view there are no universally accessible referents, so that all questions of truth have to be settled in the mythological way.

There is, then, a case for arguing a strong, ontological interpretation of Cupitt's statement, that nothing can guarantee that what we signify by 'the Son of God' must be the same for us as for the early Christians. But on that interpretation, statements about the Son of God—and God too—are mythical; there is no abiding referent corresponding to those terms. One might draw from that the conclusion that God and the Son of God do not exist. That is Cupitt's position, I think, though it is probably one from which Nineham would draw short. And rightly. The proper conclusion is that the question of their existence can only be settled within a given context of ideas.

The truth of mythical statements is decided, we said, not by looking at reality but by looking at the mythological corpus. One can only decide the truth of the statement 'Jesus is the Son of God' within the context of the society that constructs it. Indeed, only within that society can one know what it means, for the Christian world-picture is incommensurable with all others. So we look at what that society—the Church—has

decreed. The only area of doubt concerns who or what has authority to decree the beliefs of this society; to explore the matter outside the official circles of canonical scripture, creed and council would be as ridiculous as to try to conduct an independent inquiry into the question of whether Mars and Venus made love! We would find, whether by bible, creed or pope, that within Christianity, the statement 'Jesus is the Son of God' is incontestably true. And outside the charmed circle of the Church, it is not false, but meaningless. The heathen cannot be expected to understand, and apologetic would be beside the point. End of story.

Ideas have a habit, when pushed to their logical conclusion, of flipping over and showing their obverse face. So ontological relativism brings us full circle, back to a very rigid fundamentalism indeed. I do not think this can be what Nineham intends.

c) Epistemological Relativism

One interpretation of Nineham's relativism is too tame, the other has implications that would be anathema to him. Can we escape the horns of this dilemma? It is appropriate to look for a false move; to see just where, in our attempt to advance on the first position, we began sliding down the slippery slope.

I suggest Nineham does often seem to be striding towards an understanding of relativism that is stronger than the semantic but weaker than the ontological versions. He argues, for instance, that

People of different periods and cultures differ very widely, in some cases so widely that accounts of the nature and relations of God, men and the world put forward in one culture may be unacceptable, as they stand, in a different culture, *even though they may have expressed profound truth in their time.*¹³

Here Nineham is clearly saying more than that the meaning of the term God has changed its subjective connotations, but he is not claiming an objective change in God; he is claiming a change in what is known as true of God—the change is epistemological.

I suggest the false and unnecessary move is the one that takes us from the kind of epistemological relativism expressed here, to ontological relativism of the kind suggested by the quotation above from *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, 'contemporary western man, by and large, live in a world vastly different from any preceding one'. In other words, from the idea that knowledge is socially embodied to the idea that reality is socially constructed. Different societies have different knowledge, different wisdom, but not access to different worlds, inaccessible to others. We all inhabit the same world, and if claims to truth are to count as knowledge, they must in principle be accessible to the probing of all. For, short of such probing, there is no way of distinguishing the wisdom of a society from its corporate illusions, the

ideologies that no member of the society knows how to question.

That fundamentalist incapacity to question is the danger, we noted, in the notion of 'incommensurability'. Statements like 'Jesus is the Son of God' may be almost universally held by Christians, and almost universally mystifying to the 'outsider'. But I suggest that unless there is some way of explaining what is meant to the outsider, it cannot be said to count as knowledge for the Christian. In that event it must be taken merely as an ideological rallying cry, or a shared illusion which it needs outside influence to dispel.

Take the hypothetical tribesman for whom 'Venus' denotes a constellation of planet and stars that recurs every five years. It will doubtless be very hard for me to latch on to the patterns that are clear to his way of thinking, still harder for me to grasp the place patterns hold in his whole mythological scheme. But unless he can explain it to me, so that I too can operate with his concepts, there is no way of knowing whether he is using consistent terms or describing anything real at all. Conversely, if I cannot teach him my roughly Newtonian concept of Venus—given time, intelligence and imagination on both our parts—then I must doubt whether I really understand it myself. And it counts heavily against 'incommensurability' that there is not—to my knowledge—a single society whose members have been prevented by their 'conceptual scheme' from assimilating the theories of modern science, contrary as these must first appear to their 'common-sense' even more than to ours....

So through a dialogue across cultures there can take place an interillumination of world-views, which shows that we are not referring, by 'Venus', to distinct worlds but to distinct views of the same world. We do not have numerous 'cultural worlds' but one world in many, perhaps an infinity of, possible aspects. Through the dialogue, perceptions fuse and give us a new depth, like the depth imparted to our visual field by the second eye.

Imagine two cultures. One has the concept of a circle as a geometric construction, a locus of points equidistant from a centre; but, like the Aztecs, it has not discovered the wheel; its coins are oblong, and it regards the circle as a purely theoretical idea never instanced in the real world. The other is more practical; it has no geometry, but has the idea of a circle as the shape it carves its wheels to make its vehicles run smoothly. Here seems a clear case of 'incommensurability' between different concepts of circle. But along comes the latter culture in its smooth-wheeled chariots and 'discovers' the former. When the battles subside, it learns from the conquered civilisation the reason why its wheels run smooth—because the circumference stays equidistant to the axle at the 'centre'. And the other culture learns that its geometrical constructions have technological applications. Each society has learned something, and has to stretch its concept of circle to do so.

The example is banal, perhaps, but it enables us to see essentially what needs to happen in any creative meeting between cultures, including that which takes place when we study the scriptures. We need to stretch the perceptions embodied in the biblical passage without doing violence to them, and stretch our conception of the world without doing violence to it, until the concepts meet in a synthesis in which something new is discovered, beyond what either the writer or myself had envisaged, but not contrary to what each of us had genuinely grasped. For two to meet and understand there needs to be a third term: a common searching after truth.

To me this seems the 'merest common-sense', but the exegesis that emerges is radically different from exegesis as often conceived, in its fundamental objective. For the objective of that exegesis tends to be *meaning*—conceived as the answer to the question, 'What was in the mind of the author when he wrote that?' Whereas we are urging that the primary objective is *truth*—more like the question Nineham himself quotes from Hodgson, 'What must the truth be, and have been, if it appeared like that to men who thought and wrote as they did?' If we take this seriously, it brings exegesis closer than I think Nineham anticipates to other forms of theologising; such as preaching, systematic theology, and liberation theology.

In preaching we are not so much trying to get at the mind of the author, as trying to create just the kind of creative interillumination between ancient text and modern life which I have been describing. Sometimes we wonder if we are stretching the text too far; as when in a parish magazine I use the saying about 'new skins for new wine' to say things about the relation between the renewal of Christian life and the renewal of the church building. That application cannot have been in the mind of the author, but does that fact alone render it inappropriate? I wonder if religious sayings like these were ever intended to be tied down to a single precise meaning, or whether they rather function as open-ended springboards to the imagination. Knowledge of the social context of such sayings helps insofar as it renders the imagination more precise and opens up new features for it to work on; but it is unlikely to single out any unambiguous meaning. It is of course true that our interpretations can stretch things too far. We can be sure we are doing so when we find that our own concepts and priorities are no longer being stretched and challenged by what is before us. But the only test of whether we are on the right lines is whether we are being led to something new and strange.

Systematic theology represents precisely the attempt to create, out of the meeting between the Biblical perspective and others, some new vision that takes in as much as possible of them both, and so renews our understanding of God. So the Fathers worked at the interface of the Scriptures and Platonism, Aquinas at the interface with Aristotelianism,

Bultmann at the interface with existentialism, liberation theology at the interface with Marxism. In each case systematic theology does on the large scale what exegesis does on the small; and as systematics must draw on sound exegesis, so exegesis will rely, explicitly or implicitly, on the background of systematics.

Now all that we have just said could suggest that what we are striving for is some purely intellectual spark of insight that is struck from the glancing together of two cultures. But deeper reflection on the kind of relativism we are propounding shows that this cannot be so. For we have agreed with relativism, that different societies structure their experience in considerably different ways. But we have held, against ontological relativism, that there is one world inhabited by us all, not a plurality of 'cultural worlds'. But this opens up the likelihood that some societies' structurings will catch or mirror reality fairly well, others will bend or distort it systematically. Some may share in insightful harmony with the world, others flee from it in corporate deception. After the question of whether Jesus' society was taken up with the idea of cosmic battle between good and evil in a way that ours is not, there arises the question which Nineham does not ask: what truths did this world-view grasp to which ours is systematically blind, and, conversely, what deceptions and oppressions did it perpetrate, from which we are now free?

The groping for truth at this level—not within a given cultural framework, but at the interface between frameworks—is fraught with risk. In the attempt to gain a perspective from which both systems can be impartially viewed, we often find that we have taken our own cultural baggage with us up the mountain after all. Thus the only coherent attempt to attain a 'perspective on the perspectives' so far—Marxism—certainly took on board a lot of the perspective of deterministic nineteenth-century science. But Marxism grasped one point hitherto missed: the groping for truth at the interface of cultures makes sense only if it is a search for liberation. I can only let the interaction with the Gospel perspective shake my mind out of its preconceptions if I also let it shake my life out of the corporate lies with which my society enslaves or seduces me to itself.

So true exegesis has a subversive element, without which the Gospel it studies ceases to be Gospel. And a theological relativism that is powerful enough to bite, and moderate enough not to stupefy, demands completion in a theology of liberation. Is this what Nineham intends?

- 1 *New Testament Interpretation in an Historical Age* (Athlone Press, 1976), p. 20. His italics.
- 2 *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (Macmillan, 1976), pp. 33ff.
- 3 Don Cupitt, 'A Sense of History' *Theology*, September 1986, p. 365. This edition of *Theology* contained a number of articles commemorating the retirement of Denis Nineham.

- 4 This slightly eccentric example was suggested by Luis Borges' story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* (in *Labyrinths*, Penguin Modern Classics, 1970). In this, Menard, a twentieth century French poet, writes (without copying) the ninth and thirty eighth chapters of Don Quixote. The story consists of a comparison between Menard's work and Quixote's; though verbally identical, the different historical contexts make them vastly different works!
- 5 *Use and Abuse*, p. 29.
- 6 Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago, 1962) which introduces this concept, is a fundamental work on relativism in science. Nineham uses Kuhn on pp. 19ff. of *Use and Abuse*.
- 7 *Use and Abuse*, p. 2.
- 8 Frege's *Sense and Reference* (translated by Geach and Black in *Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Oxford, Blackwell 1960) explores the terms 'the morning star' and 'the evening star' to show the contrast between sense and reference—or, in our terms, connotation and denotation. The terms have the same reference (the planet) but different senses.
- 9 W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object*, Chapter 2, 'Translation and Meaning' (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1960). Quine shows how if a native points and says 'Gavigai' as a rabbit leaps past, we cannot be sure whether whether Gavigai means 'rabbit' or 'rabbit part' or 'temporal occurrence of rabbitness' or what. Reference leaves us in the dark as to the metaphysical background of our utterance.
- 10 P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London, Allen Lane, 1967). A work much cited by Nineham, e.g. p. 4 of *Use and Abuse*.
- 11 'Epilogue' in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London, SCM 1977). Nineham says that 'Anyone who walked into a room now as a twentieth century man would not be the historical Jesus, and if Jesus walked into the room now, it would not be as a twentieth century man' (p. 192).
- 12 The 'Private Language Argument'. Wittgenstein argues that an isolated individual could not construct his own language because he could not check his references to the world. A.J. Ayer, amongst others, contests this. Cf. *The Private Language Argument*, ed. O.R. Jones (London, Macmillan 1971).
- 13 *Use and Abuse*, p. 1 (my italics).