The Ethics of Cross-Cultural Dialogue

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Abstract

From the 'Socratic dialogues' to present day politics, the word dialogue has served many purposes and accommodated a plurality of meanings. My aim in this paper is both to assess the use of dialogue in two diverse but related fields - missionary activity and anthropological enquiry - and to re-propose its ethical standing, which goes beyond its validity as an analytical tool. Our case study for reflection is an ethnographic research conducted among the *Muchi-Rishi* of South West Bangladesh - an ex-Untouchable group who in part converted to Christianity. Their interaction over time (1856-1999) with different Catholic missionary institutions highlights the more general theme discussed in the paper: the ethics of cross-cultural encounter. On a more theoretical level, a 'return' to philosophies of dialogue postulates the need for ethics as an indispensable move towards a meaningful dialogue, both inter and cross-cultural, encompassing tensions and 'political' implications. The works of Gadamer, Bakhtin, Levinas, Derrida and Gramsci, provide useful insights, but are also put to the test by the 'dialogues' in the field.

'Dialogue,' a recurrent term in the history of western thought, has increasingly become part of our daily vocabulary. Its original meaning, referring to the orality of conversation, has expanded to include communication, exchange, polyvocality, relationship, negotiation and their synonyms, revealing a multipurpose concept accommodating open and hidden intentionalities. This gives, as a result, a multi-layered word, almost a theme, hardly useful - it would seem - to assist analytical enquiry. This ambiguity, however, as part of the dynamics of dialogue, reflects the complexity of human relations. If it is true that "human cultural experience is coming to be viewed as a dialogue between partial truths" (Mumford 1989:11), it should also be pointed out that questions of truth often embody questions of power. This can be the case when dialogue is utilised by those in power to protest their willingness to serve a good cause. My aim here is both to unmask a certain deception in the use of dialogue and to re-affirm its validity within two different but related fields: missionary activity and anthropological enquiry. In both fields, in fact, when matters have come to a crisis, 'dialogue' has been invoked to solve a perennial problem. This manipulation of dialogue, however, does not take account of various factors: firstly, the openness and uncertainty of the outcome that surround dialogue itself, independent of the intentions of the participants; secondly, the resourcefulness and ability of the counterpart to reply (and, for that matter, their freedom to ignore being called into dialogue); and thirdly, the

variety of interpretations of dialogue greeted by both missionaries and anthropologists with a combination of eagerness and suspicion. As a result, instead of solving the crisis, missionary activity and anthropological enquiry are often left on even more uncertain and problematic grounds. No easy solution can come from a 'nice' word (dialogue) used as a camouflage to continue the same game of invading the space of the Other, with the intention of either converting or representing him, unless the Self goes through a 'real' crisis, which implies a growth towards the discovery of the Other's proximity. In what follows I propose to challenge and re-affirm the use of dialogue in the field of missionary activity, since this represents an extreme instance of sophistry, but without neglecting the position of anthropology since both missionaries and anthropologists fail to justify the 'violence' of their invasion.

When 'dialogue' is invoked at any particular historic juncture to establish a renewed approach to the Other, the suspicion arises that the power of the sword (or that of money, or of 'academic discourse') has failed to obtain the desired results. This picture becomes more complicated, but also more interesting from our point of view, when some missionaries, decide to take dialogue seriously and, contravening the authority of the Church, challenge, at least in part, their own vocation and identity, as these are understood at an official level. In re-addressing their own activity and way of being, they risk subverting the image of the missionary as one who goes abroad to make new 'converts' to Christianity. As we shall see, for many missionaries and theologians who have being shaken by the encounter with the Other, dialogue represents an alternative approach to missionary activity itself. The fear that the original message has lost its purity, can be compared with the absence of 'objectivity' in social anthropology when the discipline becomes too entangled with the Other. In addition to recognising the impact they have on societies they study, the anthropologists "in turn find themselves transformed internally by their informants" (Mumford 1989:11). It is this level of uncomfortable and disquieting dialogue, as opposed to a dialogic genre of ethnographic writing or a general notion of missionary dialogue as *alibi*, that most interests me. For just as in the case of anthropological investigation, intent to go beyond positivism and scientism, "it is not enough to cast the 'results' into a dialogic form" (Fabian 1990:765), so for missionary activity there is a need to face the internal upheaval of taking the Other seriously.

In this paper I propose to refer, as an example, to the Christianisation of a group of ex-Untouchables, the (Muchi)-Rishi of South-West Bangladesh - leather-workers and musicians - and their interaction with various Catholic missionary groups over the period 1856-1999. The importance given to dialogue both in missionary circles[1] and the introduction of this term in anthropology[2] has led me to concentrate on dialogue both as

the place where new missionary trends can be tested, and as a need felt by social anthropologists for a different approach to Otherness.

Dialogue in the Field

My first visit to the field (Catholic Diocese of Khulna) in 1982-83 was at a time when mission theology had developed many ideas already present in Vatican II, concerning renewal, inculturation, and adaptation. At the same time, the phenomenon of secularisation that informed western Christianity was reaching the mission field: the crisis of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the emergence of local churches and local theologies, the failure of developmentism and the role of local governments, were putting under pressure a missionary identity which in the past had been oriented, through the idiom of 'saving souls', to imposing Christian western values on others. Khulna Diocese reflected this general disposition for renewal, where old and new missionary ideologies were opposing each other. The Rishi, who totalled almost sixty per cent of the Catholic population, were often taken as a testing-ground for the new approach and they were made the object of concern through 'New Paths' of missionary activity. Since 1980 some missionaries have abandoned the parish structure to live among the Hindu Rishi (Chuknagar-Tala) with the purpose of serving them in their needs and sharing life with them, without seeking their conversion. This 'paradox' was inspired by the new idiom of 'dialogue' which was becoming the key-word for a different missionary approach.

If dialogue for some missionaries represents a camouflage of the old idiom of 'saving souls', still centred on conversion, it also announces a move away from this position towards a more open encounter. Furthermore, if dialogue initially concerned the activity of the Church in the so-called 'mission territories,' it has now become a widely spread idiom for addressing religious pluralism in western societies (Barnes 1989; Rizzi 1991). My intention here is not to discuss the relationship between anthropologists and missionaries (cf. Bonsen, Marks, Miedema: 1990) but to assess their common experience of dialogue and encounter with the Other, for both Christianity and anthropology went hand in hand with colonisation and both rest on the same metaphysics.[3]

Fieldwork was conducted between October 1988 and September 1989 and I spent my first period among the Hindu Rishi of the Chuknagar-Tala-Dumuria area, this being also the place of the most recent missionary involvement with the Rishi. Given the Rishis' recent encounter with Christianity, it was vital to address their experience as Hindus and 'Untouchables', and to highlight in particular their understanding and

implementation of 'Hindu *dharma*', in order to understand the real nature of their conversion/aggregation to Christianity. Though returning periodically to Chuknagar, I moved, in fact, to the Baradal Christian community, the most recent (1937) among the Rishi Christians. Subsequently, I stayed in Satkhira parish where missionary presence was first established in c. 1917 and later in Simulia where the Rishi had been missionised since 1856. My territorial movement was soon followed by a journey into the past: in the parishes I gathered historical data in the form of missionary diaries and reports, leading to further research in archives both in Bangladesh and Europe, sufficient to retrace the early history of the Rishi mission (1856-1952).

Soon after the Partition of India (1947), mission territories were reshaped and, though the Rishi were divided as well, the majority of them came under the newly created Khulna Diocese which, from 1952, has been entrusted to the Xaverians, an Italian missionary institute. They are still present in considerable numbers there, but the direction of the Diocese has been transferred, since 1970, to a local Bangladeshi bishop.

The presence of a number of missionary institutions among the Rishi until 1952, their open or latent competition, the varying styles of individual missionaries vis-a-vis the Rishi, and the interaction of both missionaries and Rishi with the wider society, generated a multiplicity of dialogues which were most of the time destined to remain frustrated. In the most recent phase, from 1952 onwards, ambiguities and perplexities have not diminished and, despite a more serious missionary commitment towards the Rishi, the Xaverians feel all the burden of past history and present choices.

Dialogue and Missionary Ideology

Ten years after the Xaverians entered East Pakistan, the Catholic Church began the celebration of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was to revolutionise mission theology: a desire for 'dialogue' with cultures and other religious ways was replacing the old 'conversion of the unfaithful.' Furthermore, the missionaries, in daily contact with peoples, their cultures and their religions, were themselves very much part of this process and strongly encouraged its development. By the end of the seventies, a missionary magazine with contributions from the field, *Fede e Civiltà* (Faith and Civilisation), changed its name to *Missione Oggi* (Mission Today), as if to symbolise the changed reality both in the field and at home. The contributions from the mission presented less a representation of the Other, more a self-presentation of the missionary's role and identity (Zene 1993). It is argued here that, if the theoretical basis for missionary 'dialogue' found its ground in the West, it was in the field that this

'dialogue' was tested and became either a camouflage for the same aim as before, i.e. conversions, or a basis for a different kind of encounter with the Other. This second stance gives us the opportunity to analyse not only a change in missionary position, dictated by a different mission theology, but also, at a deeper level, a change of relationship between what we could label the Self of the western missionaries and the Other of Bangladeshi Christians, Hindus and Muslims. Following Levinas, I will suggest that it is the desire to meet this Other in his own 'alterity,' to establish a 'dialogue of life' with him, which motivated the Self to go beyond its obstinate search for the 'conversion' of the Other. As a result some missionaries, who understood conversion not as a change of faith but as a change of heart, felt the need to realise their own conversion to the Other. Completely subverting established positions, it is the Other, the Rishi, the poor, the Untouchable, the 'unfaithful', the Tribal, the Hindu, the Muslim.... who asks the missionary to convert himself. Natural disasters such as cyclones, droughts and famines, and political events such as the creation of Pakistan, the War of Liberation of 1971 and the Independence of Bangladesh in 1972, have been important moments for missionaries and Bangladeshis to renegotiate their relationship and to destabilise conventional understandings of 'conversion'. Though interested in a localised dialogue, we can afford to ignore, neither the multiplicity of dialogues in which this particular dialogue is embedded, nor a more general ideology of dialogue which has informed mission activity in recent years.

Dialogue and Anthropology

Returning from the field I needed to readjust my perspective to understand 'dialogue' not simply as a restricted phenomenon of mission theology and practice, but as a perception so extensive that it has informed Western thought, including social anthropology. The initial usage of dialogue in anthropology, however, seemed to be restricted to reproducing the communicative nature of fieldwork in the final presentation of ethnographic texts. As Fabian says: "a reification of genre .... may result in the degeneration of critical epistemological diagnosis into the literary 'therapy' of ethnography." (Fabian 1990:762) Indeed, this sort of 'functional dialogue,' adopted to solve contingent issues, is destined to repeat the errors of the past, given that it seems centred on self-justification, that the 'fragmented subject' is still in command, and that economic and political power relations tend to be dismissed as irrelevant. Having reminded us that when dialogue made its appearance during this century it was as part of 'soft existentialism' (Buber) and of 'hard critical theory' (Habermas), Fabian disqualifies its emergence in anthropology:

Anthropologists began to think seriously about dialogue at a time when, in general usage, the term had reached a low in signification. It acquired a nonspecific ethical bonhomie, oozing good will, apparently lacking any cutting edge that would be required for critical work (Fabian: 1990: 763).

He points out that dialogue was first introduced "not to signal an ethical attitude.... but to serve as a reflection about the nature of anthropological fieldwork"(ibid.). This was later extended to the dialogical form of ethnographic writing, but without solving a complex epistemological dilemma, given that the crisis of the authoring subject, its representation of reality and its othering role did not originate in anthropology, although anthropology epitomised the crisis better than other disciplines.

The experience of 'fieldwork' using the technique of 'participant observation' has played an important role in establishing anthropology as a discipline in its own right, but the dialogue conducted in the field did not necessarily modify the anthropologist's dialogue pursued at home, since achievements in the field acquired meaning only when validated by a dialogue at home in terms of the 'ruling' trends of thought (cf. Appadurai 1988a:16-17). This restrictive interpretation of western anthropology can also be applied to the so-called 'native' anthropologist, whose professionalism is exhibited through his dialogue either with the community of anthropologists at home or with anthropologists at large. In both cases, the anthropologist did not set off for the field 'empty-headed' but well equipped with social theories, research strategies and hypotheses to be tested. Even the unexpected findings or 'surprises' that emerged in the course of fieldwork would be diluted or 'adjusted' in order to satisfy the western reader or to fit 'academic requirements'. The very 'language' the anthropologist was asked to produce was necessarily conditioned by the rules of this 'internal dialogue' with the 'near Other' about ' distant Others' (cf. Asad 1986:159).

The post-modern debate which dominates contemporary philosophy and informs contemporary social anthropology, has shown a powerful reaction against this state of affairs and has taken different directions in an attempt to solve this impasse. A strange situation has evolved in relation to the relevance of dialogue as part of an ideal solution: on the one hand, dialogue, invoked by post-modernity in order to eliminate authorial hegemony, seems ineffective in exposing other hegemonies;[4] on the other, dialogue appears unable to save anthropology from the present circumstances of a fragmented reality.

Those who deny social anthropology the likelihood of surviving its present crisis are also those who deny the possibility of dialogue in anthropology, and while the 'anthropological present' - "capturing" the other in his time - is exorcised as the actual

evil, anthropology is denied a future to redeem itself. There is no doubt that

> ... insofar as 'participant observation' is really interested in observing rather than participating ... it is epistemologically committed to the sovereignty of observation and its monologue about the Other rather than the democracy of genuine participation and its dialogue with the Other" (McGrane 1989: 124).

On the other hand, it seems there is no escape for anthropology, whose " 'scientific method' is the decay of dialogue, the sustained, cultivated, and epistemologically enforced atrophy of dialogue" (ibid.: 127), given that too much participation spoils the method. Thus, paraphrasing Foucault, as psychiatry has been the West's monologue about madness, so anthropology has been the monologue about the Other (ibid.). When today anthropology has adopted an implicit cultural relativism, this becomes a subtle way for 'redomestication and annihilation of difference', given that anthropology, made strong by its relativist consciousness, "sees how the alien is imprisoned in his cultural absolutism" and superiority over him is re-established. The anthropologist has either to continue his solipsistic play, where "this intercourse or dialogue is a fantasy, a mask, covering over and hiding his analytic monologue or masturbation," or following Castaneda's example, to become a native, and destroy what is left of anthropology (ibid.: 125-26).

Curiously enough, McGrane bases part of his critique of dialogue on Fabian (1983), while the latter, on the contrary, recognises the importance of "continued exploration of the dialogical nature of ethnographic research" (Fabian 1990:764).

> To preserve the dialogue with our interlocutors, to assure the Other's presence against the distancing devices of anthropological discourse, is to continue conversing with the Other at all levels of writing, not just to reproduce dialogues. In fact, I have gone as far as saying precisely that if fieldwork is conducted dialogically, problems with writing will not be resolved by adopting the dialogical form (ibid.:766).

Moreover, Fabian is opposed to the radical form of 'graphic silence', since "to stop writing about the Other will not bring liberation" (ibid.:760), but he advocates the position whereby 'not-writing is a moment of writing', in the sense that he dissociates ethnographic data from the process of producing monographs. For this reason he proposes to "transform ethnography into a praxis capable of making the Other present (rather than making representations predicated on the Other's absence)..." (ibid.:771).

With this in mind, I propose to extend the discussion to the field of philosophy, to be discussed later on, for two reasons: firstly, social anthropology would benefit from a more extensive understanding of dialogue itself and, secondly, anthropology could contribute to the empirical testing of philosophical hypotheses, given the very concrete nature of its Other. Furthermore, as will become apparent from our case study, the Self

does not dictate the rules of dialogue and very often it is the Other who teaches the Self faithfulness to pursue dialogue in spite of misunderstandings and failures. This becomes for the anthropologist an ongoing learning process which destabilises his certainties and decontextualises his foreignness (or exteriority).

For this very reason, writing about dialogue raises a series of problematic issues connected with orality and literacy, conversation and textualization, speech and translation. In order to clarify my own understanding of dialogue, I need firstly to recognise that I am not the main agent (or subject) of the dialogue I have witnessed in the field between the Rishi and the missionaries. My own dialogue with them is only partial, fleeting and far from exhaustive. Nevertheless, a dialogue observed and witnessed can be taken to include the observer, following Bakhtin's idea of 'inclusion': "One who does not participate in the dialogue but understands it" (Bakhtin 1990:125). In addition, it is a parameter for a different level of dialogue, which takes place after the field experience, with those who were not present at my "primary dialogue" or the past "primary dialogue" between the Rishi and the missionaries.

Secondly, I distinguish the oral and literary genres, in which dialogue *per se* is embedded, from a 'dialogical principle' which informs my reading of existence. The application of this 'dialogical principle' overcomes the limitations of a reductionist definition of dialogue, which can be understood not only as a 'conversation', but also as its absence. Only in this way can we accept that dialogue, following its etymology, is "... a speech across, between, through two people. It is a passing through and a going apart. There is both a transformational dimension to dialogue and an oppositional one - an agonistic one. It is a relationship of considerable tension" (Crapanzano 1990:276). The dialogical tension present in dialogue comprehends the many modes of human communication so that what has been seen as distinct from dialogue (at least in anthropological circles), such as the 'monograph'(Crapanzano 1990:276), can be reinterpreted as a dialogical product. On the other hand, many pseudo-dialogical writings can be stripped of their pretence of being in dialogue (Tyler 1990:293).

Eurocentrism during its long history has delivered to the non-European Other a 'message of salvation', firstly through Christian truths (Renaissance), then the power of reason (Enlightenment), and cultural evolution (nineteenth century), attaining lately a final message in relativism, which continues, however, to represent a new form of superiority over the Other, for only we are aware of it. Nevertheless, even relativism is the result of tensions present within a supposedly unitary European history in relation to its Other, and the idea of a single domineering logos does not account for the diverse and often contradictory relation of Europe to its Other.

When anthropology is translated to the realm of dialogue, a multiplicity of

dialogues, to be sure, anthropological 'knowledge' does not belong to a corpus and is not a personal possession of the individual anthropologist, since this 'knowledge' is subordinate to the Other with whom dialogue is never ended and never ending. This is something more than and something different from cultural relativism, for it does not originate from truth claims. Only when truth is suspended and the Other welcomed is there a chance to discover the intensity of a project-discipline called *anthropos-logia*, where the *logos* is not the violent *reductio ad unum* of Greek philosophy but takes into account the diversity of positions even within European thought vis-a-vis Otherness, as well as the presence of 'Others' within Europe itself. This different understanding of a 'weak *logos*' anticipates the interpretation of knowledge-learning through suffering (*pathei-mathos*), and is closer to the Levinasian idea of empathy (suffering with), thus "learning the truth of man through the perception of his absence in the Other" (Rizzi 1991:202). Perhaps the equation of truth with com-passion opens up new possibilities "to find a reconciliation between the need to evaluate and a desirable will for dialogue" (ibid.:196).

Fictional Dialogues, or the 'Framing' of the Other

The use of 'dialogue', or better of fictional and apparent dialogues (cf. Murray 1991) in the mission field has a long history in Bengali Christianity. In 1599, the Jesuit Fr. De Souza translated into Bengali a Christian treatise confuting the 'errors' of other religions. To this he attached a short catechism written in the form of 'dialogue', but the book has been lost (J. Sarkar 1973:369). Some eighty years later, a Bengali convert, Don Antonio de Rosario, wrote another 'dialogue' between a Christian and a Hindu Brahmin, in order to show the falsity of Hinduism and the truthfulness of Christianity. In the following century, the then superior of the Augustinians in Bengal, Fr. Manoel D'Assumpcao, translated Don Antonio's book into Portuguese, the object being to make it easy for the missionaries to hold discussions in the Bengali language with the Hindus.[5] The work was printed in Lisbon in 1743 and gives the Bengali and Portuguese texts in parallel columns (Silva-Rego 1955/XI: 673-4). In 1836, Fr. Guerin, vicar at Chandernagar, published a new edition of this book (Hosten 1914b).

Another related episode was the controversy which originated among the Augustinians in Bengal when, following the visit there in c. 1712 of Laynes, the Bishop of Mylapore (Josson 1921/1:109-110), Fr. Jorze da Presentacao and Fr. Eugenio Trigueiros were sent to Bengal. While the former "finds difficulty in the fact that his European studies of theology had not properly prepared him for the many situations that confronted him in India" (Hartmann 1978:125), the latter had difficulties

collaborating with his Portuguese confreres born in India. These, in fact, used the Portuguese language to teach their native Christians with the result that these Christians would not accept being taught in Bengali.[6] When Trigueiros tried to persuade them to accept the catechism in their native language, many resisted and the clashes over the language question lasted several years. He even wrote some treatises in Bengali but his opponents reported back to Goa that he was teaching in Sanskrit like the Brahmins (Hartmann 1978:196).

These events which pre-date the missionary-Rishi encounter are, nonetheless, useful in situating our enquiry within a broader framework. On the one hand, they contrast with the sources presented by Murray (1991), and on the other, they offer a clear counterpart to the North American Indian-white relations. Murray's study is of great importance to our line of enquiry since it concentrates and analyses in depth many themes that are only touched upon in this paper. After dealing at great length with problems concerning the translation of the Christian message, stressing the inequality of power and knowledge between cultures and languages, Murray deals with the representation and textualization of Indian speech and speeches, "speaking in a Christian voice" (35). Similarly to the Bengali scene, 'apparent dialogues' are created where "the Indians are presented as having an independent voice", but serving the power of the ruling discourse. Moving beyond Foucault who foresees a resistance to power 'in silence rather than discourse' (52), Murray presents the figures of two literate Christian Indians, Occom and Apes, who were highly polemical against the whites but, at the same time, offer 'an olive branch'. Indeed,

> As a way of avoiding what threatens to become the dead ends of theories of closed epistemes and discourses, which are good at explaining how we are locked into systems but offer no way out, the idea of dialogue and even of presence has been seen as having special relevance to those groups denied any specific identity within the dominant discourses.... (Murray 1991:52).

Issues of orality and literacy are further discussed in relation to Indian autobiographies. In spite of being a genre suited to satisfying white sensibilities, autobiographies remain an ambiguous response to white culture, since "... in their bicultural hybrid form ... the different registers of language sometimes combine and sometimes struggle for dominance". In the case of Black Elk, for instance, his genius "lay in organising Lakota religion according to a Christian framework, emphasising characteristics amenable to expression in symbols reminiscent of Christian symbols, yet keeping a Lakota essence" (Kehoe 1989:69; see de Certeau 1988). Another successful, 'civilised' Indian, Eastman, 'becomes an Indian spokesman, increasingly critical of white policies', to the point of questioning the validity of his 'conversion' to Christianity,

given that "white society does not embody those values of Christianity for which he has been made to renounce his past" (Murray 1991:78).

The discussion on *Indian Dialogues*, published by the missionary John Eliot in 1671, becomes an invitation for Murray to conclude his study by concentrating on 'dialogues and dialogics' as a central theme of anthropological debate. If power records other voices to be subjugated, it cannot escape registering a subversive presence in these voices which undermine the discourse of power itself (see de Certeau 1988; 1992). It may also be true that "we locate as 'subversive' in the past precisely those things that are not subversive to ourselves, that pose no threat to the order by which we live" (Greenblatt 1981:52), and that "cultural spaces of possible resistance" (Porter 1988:767) can be re-absorbed and nullified by the dominant discourse, but this is not the whole answer. Unfortunately Murray's discussion of anthropologists working with the Zuni (Cushing, Ruth Benedict and Tedlock), leads him to equate reflexive with dialogical anthropology (Murray 1991: 134), which results in a most ambiguous position. While on the one hand, he recognises that "dialogical and dialectical approaches... challenge the whole opposing categories of subjective and objective and the rhetorical forms that accompany them" (ibid.:133), on the other, he points "to a very real question about whether dialogue is really an epistemological and methodological as much as a political and moral issue" (ibid.:146). However, given the 'slipperiness of terms like dialogue', the decision must be whether dialogue is "an end in itself or a means to a different end" (ibid.). The example of Cushing, discussed at length by Murray, shows that his 'going native' was only meant to acquire knowledge of the Zuni ('They love me and I learn'). But Cushing's becoming an Indian "ultimately skirts the question of the loss of self" (ibid.:140). This result is to be expected when epistemology and methodology take over the moral and political, which, in my view, are not only the real issues concerning dialogue, but provide the basis for unmasking 'fictive and deceitful dialogues'.

The 'Topoi' of Multiple Dialogues

A study of vernacular Rishi Christianity must take into account the complex environment in which the Rishi experience being Christians: thus, their Hindu background, their Untouchability, their relationship with the Hindu Rishi, with other Hindus and with the Muslim majority, their association with other local Christians and with the foreign missionaries, are all important elements of a composite mosaic which enter into their choices as Christians. The ability and shrewdness of the Hindu Rishi in establishing a dialogue/negotiation with society in order to affirm their identity and

dignity, are transposed by the Christian Rishi into the new environment and, despite ambiguities and perplexities which paralyse both Hindu and Christian Rishi, their perseverance has enabled them to achieve some results.

This multiplicity of dialogues can be further analysed from the perspective of 'place' in addition to that of 'voice', for "the problem of voice ('speaking for' and 'speaking to') intersects with the problem of place (speaking 'from', and speaking 'of')" (Appadurai 1988a:17). The displacement imposed on the Rishi by their status as 'Untouchables', is contrasted with the voluntary displacement of the missionary (and the anthropologist)[7]. Thus, "the circumstantial encounter of the voluntarily displaced anthropologist and the involuntarily localized 'other' " (ibid.:16), is marked by the former's power to 'locate and locute'. The Rishi, indeed, appear as framed in a double displacement, firstly by their society and secondly by those who "bound [them] ... to the circumstanciality of place" (Appadurai 1988b:38). The recurrent contrast between centres of production and peripheries of imposed images in recent anthropological literature seems to give much attention to the power of 'voices' coming from the centres disregarding the potentiality of peripheral voices. For this reason, "the dialogical situation becomes far more complicated - more productive of selves in the encounter" (Crapanzano 1991:442), given that these selves are not fixed in time and space. In fact, to the real and physical place occupied by the Rishi (both in society and that ascribed to them by the ethnographer) there is also an 'imagined place', which is not only imagined by others (other *jatis*, the missionary, the anthropologist...), but by the Rishi themselves. It is at this stage that, moving from location to locution, the Rishi negotiate and re-negotiate their placement and dis-placement. This is shown in their ability to ignore missionary discourse, to re-interpret it to their own advantage and to make use of those means, such as trials (*bicar*), to impose their reading of events.

Although some missionaries, as we have seen, accept a further displacement vis-a-vis the Church structure and discourse, this is not enough to guarantee an egalitarian dialogue with the Rishi, since missionaries still retain the power to place themselves where they like, while this is denied to the Rishi. However, missionary choice made at the nodality of the Rishis' social life, creates peripheralness for the missionaries, which results in a new nodality for missionary identity (Soja 1989:149). The Rishi, in turn, take advantage of missionary involvement at the periphery without renouncing the advantages of those Christians who are at the centre of missionary attention. In either case, and although much depends on the 'good will' (intentionality) of the missionaries at the periphery, the Rishis' capability to engage in a fruitful negotiation results from their multi-peripheral position which is able to destabilise the centre, with dialogue creating tension rather than mere agreement. If one semantic root

of dialogue as con-versation points to 'conversion' (*conversare, convergere, conversio -* converse, convergence, conversion), another one points to di-version, inversion and refraction, which are 'not bound necessarily to echo the voice of metropolitan fantasy' (Dresch 1988).[8]

Thus, the multiple displacement of the localised Rishi does not prevent them from attaining some results through which Christianity is for them something more and something different from the 'salvation' proposed in missionary discourse. In fact, their understanding of Christianity has come to include total salvation, even in everyday life. In this sense, although I share Appadurai's concern that "the problem of place and voice is ultimately a problem of power", I would not underestimate the power of 'localised others', and I would be careful not to quantify dialogue as relevant only when "there are as many persons in Papua New Guinea studying Philadelphia" (1988a:20). This would imply capitulating to the theory that the 'mobile outsiders and observers .... are the movers, the seers, the knowers' (Appadurai 1988b:37), be they from Philadelphia or Papua New Guinea.

In sum, on the one hand, I suggest paying more attention to the inventiveness of the 'localised other' in displacing discourses of power and, on the other, I foresee for both the missionary and the anthropologist, a further displacement which is irreducible to comprehension and signification, given that their place is to be constantly displaced (u-topos) and the voice is that of the Other saying "Thou shall not kill!".

'Philosophies of Dialogue' Reconsidered

The works of Bakhtin, Gadamer, Levinas, Derrida and to some extent of Gramsci, will help us to clarify both the Rishi-missionary encounter and anthropological enquiry. Apart from the obvious theme of dialogue, all seem to highlight the need for the Self to assume its responsibilities, to renounce a 'murderous freedom', and to become, in a word, an ethical Self. This 'ethical dialogue', disrupting the *status quo* from its very foundations, addresses questions of power and politics and nullifies the false pretensions of a functional, fictional and innocuous dialogue. The implications of ethics vis-a-vis politics and the space it provides for a meaningful anthropological enquiry, will be further reflected upon in the final part of our essay.

Bakhtin's Dialogism

Bakhtin's literary criticism has inspired the work of many anthropologists,[9] one of the latest and most consistent being Mumford (1989). His reading of Bakhtin

discloses how 'interpenetrating consciousnesses and interacting subjectivities emerge historically' as part of 'unbounded and layered cultures' in which dialogue occurs. His analysis of dialogic process in Asia "illuminates Bakhtin's Western example, eroding the outdated boundary between East and West" (ibid.: 20).[10] Reflecting upon the movement from 'inner subjectivity' to 'intersubjectivity', Mumford underlines how "Bakhtin's writings are preoccupied with hierarchy in language styles and the manner in which hegemonic, 'authoritative' utterances situated in a locus of power come to be undermined by counter-hegemonic voices in the periphery.... Hegemonic discourse, having become 'internally persuasive,' is later 'laughed out of existence' ...." (ibid.: 15).

Bakhtin's 'philosophical anthropology' is rooted in dialogism, understood as the basis of language, society and the self. For Bakhtin the uniqueness of the self is not an absolute but can exist only dialogically in relation to other selves (Clark-Holquist 1984: 65).

> ".... I achieve self-consciousness; I become myself only by revealing myself to another, through another and with another's help. The most important acts, constitutive of self-consciousness, are determined by the relation to another consciousness (a thou). Cutting oneself off, isolating oneself off, those are the basic reasons for the loss of self..." (Bakhtin, M. 1979, quoted in Todorov 1984b: 96).

The Rishi too understand that, as a group, they need the others to achieve self-consciousness and, in their long struggle to be recognised as 'humans', they make use of the language and signs of those from whom they seek to extract this recognition. Thus against the Hindu myths recounting the Rishi's low status they counterpose other myths inspired by a different understanding of 'history'.[11] They observe, as best they can, Hindu rites and festivals, though often in a spirit of 'carnival', and they are served by their own 'Brahman' priests. They make repeated efforts to abandon their profitable occupation of skinning which renders them 'dirty' in the eyes of other *jatis*. Thus they seek to pass from being no-body, no-person, no-other to being somebody, a person and an 'other' a 'Thou' (see Zene 1994 and 2000 forthcoming).

The Rishi are continually conditioned by an other-ascribed identity, which is in conflict with how they would wish to perceive themselves, causing a sort of individual and collective schizophrenia. As non-Muslims, non-accepted Hindus, it is difficult for them, as well as for other minority groups, to be Bangladeshis. Furthermore, the Muslim majority, at least on a mass level, has seen its identity repeatedly imposed from above by those who need to justify monologism under the hegemony of a unified national Islamic identity. This results in the alienation of those who do not belong to this majority, for Islamization of the country has often been conceived as the means to create a unique national consciousness, with no place for 'plurality of consciounesses' at

any level.

One response to their isolation has been the creation of *Thare* or *Thar Basa* (Rishi language). *Thare* is a corruption of Bengali, in which Bengali words and sounds are used with a different meaning and often combined with a 'sign language'. Not being listened to, both on a ritual and everyday speech level, the Rishi felt the need to create a language by which they could communicate excluding the others, in the way they had previously been excluded, thus establishing unity and community, at least among themselves. In a more Bakhtinian spirit we could say that

> .... If my "I" is so ineluctably a product of the particular values dominating my community at the particular point in its history when I coexist with it, the question must arise, "Where is there any space, and what would the time be like, in which I might define myself against an otherness that is other from that which has been 'given' to me?"

One space found by the Rishi is at the very heart of dialogue and communication, i.e. language. In this sense they are close to other minority groups in Bangladesh who struggle to keep their language and themselves alive. They represent the 'centrifugal forces', not as opposed to, but as coexistent with the 'centripetal force', as long as coexistence is possible and accepted (Todorov 1984b: 57).

Another space is provided by Christianity. The peculiar situation of the Rishi who 'converted', which cannot be explained only in terms of 'indigence' (since, were this the case, many more would have converted), can be explained in dialogic terms as the acquisition of a self-consciousness stemming from the Rishis' aspiration to be treated as 'others', as persons. If, on the one hand, their hope has been partially fulfilled, on the other, they still struggle to achieve an integration with the human community at large. The division within the group, between those who converted and those who did not, betrays a deeper inherent division: either to be accepted as persons renouncing the totality of the community, or to stay and struggle from within the Hindu Rishi community, waiting to be recognised as 'persons'. Furthermore, the partial realisation of the Christian Rishis' aspiration is doubly endangered: not only are they not recognised as part of the whole Christian community, since as soon as their Rishi origin is disclosed they will be labelled '*Muchi Khristan*', but they are also discriminated against within the Catholic community as '*Nuton Khristan*' (newly converted Christians), with all the implications that this sarcasm entails. Nevertheless, their capacity to patiently establish dialogue even at this level is reaping its rewards. The number of priests belonging to the group is growing and the self-confidence this has engendered raises the possibility that in the near future a Rishi might guide the community as bishop, without having to depend on the 'old Catholics' of Dhaka.

The 'theological' bases from which Bakhtin moves on to affirm dialogism, are

not very dissimilar from those invoked by Catholic theology to support interreligious dialogue. Despite the many labels attached to Bakhtin's thought, which has received a variety of interpretations (cf. Morson & Emerson 1990), he does not cease to inspire new reflections, including theological ones (Lindsey 1993). Furthermore, the idea of kenosis, so vital in the Bakhtinian search for integration of spirituality and corporeality, is what motivated in recent years a missionary shift from an interest in 'saving souls' to an interest in the totality of the human being, providing thus a theoretical justification ('evangelization') for the commitment of the Church in those areas normally considered as belonging to so-called 'Christian charity'. *Kenosis* also provided support for the 'incarnation theory' in missionary activity, according to which the transmission of the Christian message has to be realised by means of 'acculturation'. By this is intended not only the appropriation of cultural local values into Christianity, but also the personal commitment of the missionary to 'incarnate' him or herself in a given situation. All this, however, is not sufficient to guarantee a perception of the other free from the intention of assimilating the other to the self. The certainty of possessing the truth, and the 'logic' of dispensing this truth to others, is what in the past caused, and to some extent still causes, the proclamation of Christianity in monologic terms. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of missionary positions reveals that monologism is no longer the only option in missionary activity.

If Bakhtin's intuition motivates a postmodern trend, given that "traditions can no longer be grasped within finalized boundaries [and].... the unbounded self and the unfinished culture emerge as an identity of betweenness..." (Mumford 1989: 17), it does not, however, favour quietism in the face of oppression and exploitation. If history is unfinished, it is because those at the periphery have been excluded, and inclusion does not seem to be a priority of liberal pluralism, which, like it or not, is a pupil of Judeo-Christian tradition (see McGrane 1989:14-20;43-68). Certainly the missionaries who had most impact on the Rishi are those, both past and present, who had the capacity to listen to the Rishis' utterance (Amrao je manus! We too are Humans!) and to develop with them the meaning of what they uttered in accordance with the contribution of their listeners. To them, the Rishi made the gift of teaching their *Thare* language as a sign of belonging to one and the same community.

Gadamer's "Conversation that We Ourselves Are".

The contribution of Gadamer to our dialogue springs from his need to re-vindicate the originality of dialogue and orality as a solid foundation for hermeneutics, understood by him as a 'conversation with the text'. Through the proposed method of

question and answer one achieves "the knowledge of not knowing" (Gadamer 1975: 325), real learning is reached through suffering (*pathei mathos*), experience becomes experience of human finitude, and thus open to other experiences, and thinking is 'being able to go on asking questions' (Ibid.: 330), for "asking it opens up possibilities of meaning" (Ibid.: 341). In this sense, Gadamer's discussion can serve as a challenge to both Rishi-missionary dialogue and anthropological research.

If we consider the importance of questioning in anthropology, primarily in the field, but also in the writing and reading of ethnography, we discover a close relation between Gadamer's hermeneutics and the 'primary dialogue' which takes place in the field. For, since hermeneutics has its roots in the 'I-Thou' relationship, and finds an explanation of understanding in the dialogue with the Other, so does an enquiring anthropology, which accepts the finitude of the Self-Other conversation as "infinite openness ... from the conversation that we ourselves are" (Gadamer 1975:340).

> ...To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self expression and the successful assertion of one's own point of view, but a *transformation* into a communion, in which *we do not remain what we were* (Gadamer 1975:341, emphasis added).

The 'transformation' which occurs in the participants of a dialogue, the novelty of conversation, is marked, according to Gadamer, "in situations in which understanding is disrupted or made difficult". The mutuality of understanding in conversation is thus compared to the work of the translator in his attempt "to bridge the gap between languages". In this sense he attains a 'fusion of horizons': "the full realization of conversation, in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my author's, but common"(Thompson 1981:349). His discussion is particularly informative if we compare what has been said in anthropology under 'Cultural Translation'(Asad 1986:159), with the situation analysed in our study, where we can distinguish between different levels of 'translation' which have occurred in the Rishi-missionary dialogue.

a) The most evident 'translation' in our case study is that carried out by the missionaries who from their language translate the Christian message into the language of the Rishi, which is Bengali plus something more (Rishi 'cosmology'). We can note here that the way of translating follows not only the original language of the missionaries in question (Italians and Belgians), but also their 'traditions', often informed by their regional background (and 'prejudices'). Furthermore, there is always the 'personal touch' of individual missionaries, and even though the message's 'main core' remains the same, the implementation differs, since the understanding of it also differs.

b) There is an 'interpretation' of the message by missionary collaborators, such

as catechists, teachers and Rishi leaders, who 'appropriate' (see de Certeau 1988) the message, adding their own particular way of implementing it. Lately this has been elaborated and expanded by the presence of local priests, both Rishi and non-Rishi, with further interpretations. At both levels of 'translation' and 'interpretation' not only are there issues concerning understanding and communication, which do not escape power-relations, but also issues associated with 'transformation'. If we take for instance the word '*dharma*', used by the missionaries to translate 'religion', we can see how this word has significantly changed for the Rishi who converted to Christianity and who now associate it with '*Khristan dharma*'. The transformation, however, is by no means uni-directional, since for the missionaries too, 'religion', reinterpreted according to their own experience within the Rishi community and their daily contact with Muslims and Hindus, has undergone a remarkable and critical change. I certainly would not label this common transformation as a 'communion' or a 'fusion of horizons', since it is difficult to separate activity from individual 'intentionality', but I would agree with Gadamer that this "reveals something which henceforth exists" and that "we do not remain what we were".

c) Given the changed and changing missionary view on 'religion', there is a re-translation of the message by the missionaries upon return to their home countries. Far from retaining the same qualities, this message takes on a new perception and interpretation. The encounter with the Other has certainly modified the original message, and even though, strictly speaking, the 'Dogmas of the Faith' have not changed, the way of understanding and implementing them has certainly been transformed. This feed-back, which re-establishes the old and new tension between the universality of the Christian message and the particular-local-vernacular way in which it is carried out, reveals not only an external change in missionary policy, but affects missionary identity as well. The choice of some missionaries, back home, to share their life with poor rural communities or with the people of inner-city slums, and their sensitivity towards 'relevant Others' such as the 'foreigners' and refugees in their own countries, demonstrates, if not a complete change of identity, at least a change of viewpoint destined to challenge the passivity or aggressiveness of western Christian communities. Moreover, missionary 'charisma' as a theological locus is not restricted geographically to Third World countries, but is applied to wherever they find themselves.

d) Very similar to this last instance of 'translation', even though the aims and content are different, is the 'translation' conducted by the ethnographer. In this case the anthropologist does not carry a particular message nor is the aim to 'convince' others to adhere to it, but, nevertheless, s/he still has a set of ideas and values ('tradition' and

'prejudices') with which the Other is approached. Moreover, there is, above all, the need for the anthropologist to 'translate' the message of the Other for his/her audience. Fabian's suggestion of 'non-writing as part of writing' and his replacement of 'representation' by 'praxis' "... as transformation in the conditions of relations with the Other ..." (Fabian 1990:755) seem pertinent here: "Praxis ... is not as such a remedy for what is wrong in our relations with the Other. It helps to create conditions for othering - recognition of the Other that is not limited to representation of the Other" (ibid.:771). If the encounter with the Other has not minimally changed, refined, or brought into question the ideas and values with which the anthropologist initially set off for the field, it is apparent that the Other has been used to prove ideas, values and theories, as a mirror for the Self. When the Other is 'made present rather than represented' (Fabian), or when his 'proximity' is not nullified (Levinas), the 'inequality of languages' (Asad 1986:159), which still persists, is certainly diminished, and the "authoritative textual representations" are in consequence reshuffled. The difference between the linguist and the anthropologist, as advocated by Asad, cannot be relegated to the area of 'implicit or unconscious meanings' presumed to be present in a cultural context.[12] Even though the final result of the ethnographer's 'translation' "is inevitably a textual construct", it does not necessarily follow that "as representation it cannot normally be contested by the people to whom it is attributed", or that the "social authority of [an] ethnography" cannot be challenged. Given that "the failure of dialogue [is] figured as a genetic failure in the other, rather than a problem of cultural difference" (Cheyfitz 1989:352), inequality must be addressed at a deeper level.

The difference between linguist as translator and ethnographer appears to be minimal, according to Gadamer, when both see themselves as 'interpreters' of a given 'text'. From what has been noted, Gadamer finds a strong resemblance between the interpretation of written texts and oral conversation; I would, however, prefer to distinguish the oral and the textual, following Levinas's face-to-face encounter with the Other. It is at this level that the anthropologist differs from the linguist; it is here that anthropology can offer to other disciplines a singular and original contribution, through claiming the face-to-face encounter with the Other - this 'exposure' - as its primary way of approaching Otherness. This Other is encountered and read as an 'open text' (in a Gadamerian sense), which can only be partially described/translated in a final ethnographic product. The 'textualization' of the Other as the final product of an ethnography, can never be a 'de-finition', in the sense that, encountering the Other and in dialogue with him, ethnography recognises its limitations and shortcomings, its historical finitude, its 'effective-historical consciousness', which takes into account "our many anthropological pasts" (Appadurai 1988a:16).

Critiques of Gadamer's hermeneutics of dialogue have been many and varied: concepts such as community, tradition and prejudices are, for instance, " too monolithic, too stable.... to provide a subtle enough basis for understanding the complex plays of power and desire in the production and reproduction, the representation and interpretation of dialogues" (Crapanzano 1990: 289-90), and the philological reasons which motivate this hermeneutics seem in the end to prevail over dialogue itself (Crowell 1990:342). While Habermas "criticises Gadamer's tendency to convert this historical insight ['Language is only as handed down'] into an absolutization of cultural tradition" (Thompson 1981:82), Ricoeur argues that "the ontology which forms the horizon of hermeneutics is not an independent one, but is bound to the methods of interpretation through which it is disclosed" (Thompson 1981:57). Furthermore, the ontological optimism with which Gadamer legitimates truth-claims for his hermeneutics of dialogue, both in text and orality, gives rise to the criticisms of Derrida who represents "the opposite movement of an ontological scepticism grounded in an explicit claim for the 'textuality' of dialogue" (Crowell 1990:340).

The concern of both Gadamer and Derrida with understanding, meaning and truth, and their eagerness to leave the once secure grounds of metaphysics, puts them at the forefront of current philosophical discussion (Dallmayr 1989:75-76). Their "improbable debate" (cf. Michelfelder-Palmer 1989) presents a challenge to metaphysics as well as to other interpretive disciplines, including the social sciences, since both question the metaphysical assumption that "language is at our disposal", and both 'hermeneutics and deconstruction' typify in different ways 'Socratic vigilance' and anti-foundational thinking (Risser 1989: 183-85). Gadamer, wanting to preserve the 'unity of meaning' through the 'good will' of the participants in a dialogue, sees language as the living word of conversation. For Derrida instead, the spoken word is seen as a 'disrupted sign', and reading does not point to dialogue but towards other readings since "the horizon of a text is another text", not derived from an extra textual *Sache* (issue), but from an intertextual dissemination of the sign (Crowell 1990: 351). The "good will" of the participants in dialogue proposed by Gadamer as a prerequisite for a dialogue to proceed, is attacked by Derrida as pre-eminently logo centric since it presupposes "an already existing commonality in the conditions of understanding" (Simon 1989: 172) which is beyond the power of the will. On this point Dallmayer observes:

> Gadamer's hermeneutics encourage us to venture forth and seek to comprehend alien cultures and life-worlds; however, the question remains whether, in this venture, cultural differences are not simply assimilated or absorbed into the understanding mind (which is basically a Western mind). On the other hand, by stressing rupture and radical otherness

Derrida seeks to uproot and dislodge the inquirer's self-identity; yet, his insistence on incommensurability and non-understanding tends to encourage reciprocal cultural disengagement and hence non-learning (Dallmayr 1989:91-2).

Crowell, sharing these concerns, sees in the "neglected orality" of dialogue of both Gadamer and his critics a reason to propose a return to ethics. According to him, Gadamer's focus on the ontological structure of dialogue prevents the latter from seeing "the ethically irreducible meaning of the face-to-face dimension of spoken dialogue". Thus, "in facing the Other, dialogue is our condition for a mutuality that in its asymmetry [as opposed to the 'textualist moment of symmetry'] eludes ontology" (Crowell 1990:354).

The ethical necessity of dialogue, stressed by some authors or commentators on the Gadamer/Derrida encounter, is taken to its furthest limit by Crowell. The Other for him is "the one who makes a claim on me prior to the assertion of truth claims.... who challenges my self-sufficiency and thus is encountered 'above' me - not as partner but as teacher. Such is the ethical (not ontological) asymmetry that distinguishes dialogue from the 'rhetorical strategies' that rest on it, and so also from the texts with which it may be confused" (Crowell 1990: 354). Crowell is here appealing to Levinas's insights and suggests adopting his perspective in anthropology (Crowell 1990:357).

Levinas: 'the Face of the Other'

To challenge the untenable position of a totalising, knowing subject - for it is upon the nature of knowledge that the Self founds its claims to truth - Levinas proposes a reflection upon a 'fundamental event', which is prior to all knowledge: the Face of the Other. This 'event' "does not have any systematic character. It is a notion through which man comes to me via a human act different from knowing" (Levinas 1988:171). The face of the Other is not a representation, it is not a given of knowledge, but it is an authority, which, paradoxically, originates not from 'force' but, on the contrary, from extreme frailty and destitution. It is in its nakedness and vulnerability that the face demands and commands: "Thou shalt not kill". This 'unspoken message' precedes every *a priori* condition of cognition and becomes an obligation to the Other, a responsibility. With this move, Levinas displaces the first claim of ontology, exemplified in the '*conatus essendi* ' or the effort to exist, where existence is the supreme law. Thus the command

> ... 'thou shalt not kill' emerges as a limitation of the conatus essendi. It is not a rational limit, but a moral ethical term. It is not force but authority. It is a paradox. Both authority and morality are paradoxes... (Levinas 1988:176).

It is the idea of dissymmetry, however, which destabilises the idea of equality present in the *conatus essendi* (perseverance in being) : "..... In the ethical act, in my relationship to the other, if one forgets that I am guiltier than the others, justice itself will not be able to last" (Ibid.). Equality is put in question by this dissymmetry, since, looking at the destitute face of the other, I discover that his life is more important than my own, and that "the Other is always closer to God than I" (Blanchot 1986:45). As Levinas says of himself: "I am trying to work against the identification of the divine with unification or totality. Man's relationship with the other is better as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion. The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding into sameness...." (Levinas-Kearney 1986:22). If missionary activity is challenged by this statement, so is anthropology and its critics when they rest their theories on 'knowledge and truth', which are only a camouflage to 'kill' the other. For "the ethical 'thou shalt not' dominates the economic and political 'I can'. The 'I can' and the philosophies of 'I can' are no less egocentric than the philosophies of 'I think', notwithstanding that the ego is correlated with an other" (Blanchot 1986:45).

If Levinas's thought "can make us tremble", it is also because "the complicity of theoretical objectivity and mystical communion will be Levinas's true target" (Derrida 1978:82/87). Levinas's move to destroy neither God nor the self, but their indiscriminate power, leaves him in a position both of fragility and authority. This authority, however, "lies equally ... in the absence of power, in the way it calls, commands, demands an ethical response" (Wood 1988:2). This "fragile writing", while it enters and deploys "the logocentric language of philosophy, which constantly threatens his project," is able to disturb the self of Western thought, questioning it about its others. For Levinas, God, language, the self, "being, appearance, subjectivity, and time are all topics about which disagreement is far from trivial" (Smith 1986:66-7).

Repeatedly Levinas reminds us of the "totalitarian tendencies inherent in all of Western philosophy - primacy of the ego and the reduction of everything to the same", which were also at the root of (Western) missionary theology and activity, characterised by the transmission of truths/dogmas, the imposition of new sets of values, and the transformation/conversion of the Other. Contrary to this, Levinas proposes not just a subject but a responsible subject who welcomes the other, not as a threat to my freedom "before which I shrivel" (Sartre), but as the one who teaches me to be myself in spite of myself. Thus "the awakening to responsibility is an exaltation of singularity, a deepening of interiority, a surplus of consciousness...." (De Boer 1986:110). The ethnocentric message of missionary enterprise had to come to terms with the continuous exposure to the Other, and this Other was to break through the subtle but

defiant aggressiveness of the missionary.

There is undoubtedly a paradox in recent missionary intentions which, first setting out to convert, then renounces the *raison d'etre* of its vocation - a move which finds its parallel in Levinas's "Paradox of Morality". Moreover, not only does Levinas corroborate the paradox of those missionaries who dispute 'conversion', but he also challenges the position of those who advocate 'conversion of the Other' in the name of their own God,[13] challenging at the same time the Aristotelian and scholastic definitions of God (*Ipsum Esse Substinence* or *Ens Causa Sui*) which informed mission theology and practice. Levinas opposes to this a God who "reveals himself as a trace, not as an ontological presence".[14] 'To believe' or 'not to believe' belongs to the 'Greek language of intelligibility'. It means to prove, to give evidence, to fight for the truth, and through this fighting the Other is destroyed. The ethical or biblical perspective transcends this language "as a theme of justice and concern for the other as other, as a theme of love and desire, which carries us beyond the infinite being of the world as presence....." (Levinas-Kearney 1986:20). God, for Levinas, 'is the commandment of Love', and, like the face, is beyond being and comprehension. Indeed, some missionaries have accepted undergoing a process of "conversion to the Other" or, at least, they present 'conversion' as a process of "mutual *metanoia*" in which they include themselves.[15] As in Levinas's ethical conversion, entailing a *kenosis*, a haemorrhage of the self, and a "turning of our nature inside out", missionary self-conversion is never complete, since it does not take place in the region of consciousness, unconsciousness or being, but "is an emptying of my consciousness, a kenosis commanded by the ethical word of the other which inflicts a wound that never heals" (Llewelyn 1988:144; cf. Levinas 1969:197; Levinas 1981:126). As a result, some missionaries have realised that "the enemy of the Christian poor is not the humble Muslim, but the one who is above them both and can abuse religious power to suppress every attempt to denounce facts and suffocate every desire for liberation" (Rigali 1990:9). This commitment to alterity is very close to a Levinasian understanding of 'justice'[16] and the need to "deploy the language of metaphysics" in order to obtain justice (Levinas-Kearney 1986:28).

Our case study, the Rishi-missionary dialogue, far from being a straightforward example, reveals many complexities and ambiguities, given the multiplicity of parallel dialogues in which it is embedded. The advantage the case offers is that it depicts the extreme position of a Western Self in its quest to define, dominate and absorb the Other. However, while this has been the main thrust of a powerful Self, born from a cogent Logos, a weaker Self was giving space to a different approach to the Other. A close look at the history of the mission shows that dialogue was not always the first choice and, when it occurred, it was often troubled and uncertain, involving risk-taking rather

than immediate achievements. Despite this, in some cases, the Other has awakened the Self to responsibility and, as Levinas puts it, has motivated its 'subjected subjectivity' as an ethical response, prior to the metaphysical urge for a 'will to power'.

In a recent study on Christian missions among the Tswana of South Africa, as part of a two volume enterprise, Jean and John Comaroff (1991) aim at presenting "the colonization of consciousness", by means of which a small number of Nonconformist missionaries tried to subordinate a large number of people. In their analysis the Comaroffs rely mainly on Gramsci but arrive at conclusions diametrically different from mine. Wanting to write an 'historical anthropology of colonialism', the authors, despite their claim to re-vindicate the 'real internal dynamism or agency' of the locals, seem to pay more attention to missionary representatives, since "we are told very little indeed concerning the lives, thoughts and motives of the first generations of Tswana converts" (Gray 1993:197). If this reflects, as every researcher into the history of missions has experienced, the nature of the sources available, it does not excuse the authors from reducing the Tswana to "recalcitrant objects of their [missionaries'] endeavours" (Peel 1992:328). In fact, in the 'long conversation' between missionaries and Tswana (chap. 6), the latter appear as "a fairly unindividualised mass".

> Most surprising of all is the wholesale neglect of African evangelists, catechists, teachers, church elders etc. - a body of people whom evidence from elsewhere in Africa suggests played the crucial mediating role in religious change (Peel 1992:329).

Further evidence from south India clearly shows how Christian converts to Protestantism "were by no means the passive recipients of evangelism, but, rather, active agents in assessing and acting upon missionary attempts at proselytization" (Caplan 1987:43).

This omission is even more surprising if we consider that the Comaroffs rely on Gramsci's theory of hegemony to "propose a notion of culture as process" (Schoffeleers 1993:86). Although hegemony is an open concept in Gramscian writings - and thus incorporates religious hegemony - the authors do not seem to see its relevance, given that they "virtually ignore the religious dimension" (Gray 1993:197), and that they "... evade the difficult, but cardinal, issue of just what sense the Tswana did make of religious teachings they received from the missions" (Peel 1992: 329). A more coherent Gramscian approach would have helped them to make more sense of the fact that the evangelists "....sought to recruit a free citizenry .... but filled their pews with serfs and clients" (Jean & John Comaroff 1991:261). We will return to discuss the implications of Gramsci's political thought within the more general framework of a Levinasian and Derridian 'politics of ethical difference'.

My attempt to compare the 'crisis' of anthropology with the 'crisis' of mission

has been motivated by the common ground shared by these two enterprises, given that both rest on Western metaphysics, which represents the epitome of the absorption of the Other by the Same. It is not by advocating the end of mission activity or the end of anthropology that the Western Self will cease exercising its power over the Other. On the contrary, the alternative to the recurrent mood of negativity is to promote a different approach to both mission and anthropology. Even the solution of renouncing 'the talismanic properties of Otherness,' is partial and in need of a more radical discourse and for this reason I have suggested following a Levinasian reading of alterity, whereby the Same becomes a responsible and ethical self subjected to the Other.

The difficulty we are faced with is both terminological and methodological. For instance: when Levinas uses the word 'ethics', is he not returning to the metaphysical tradition of a totalising self he wishes to abandon? What is the difference between Levinasian ethics and 'Christian ethics', as applied by the missionary, or professional ethics as observed by the anthropologist? (cf. Fluehr-Lobban 1991). I attempt to address these questions by following Critchley's suggestion of reading Levinas through Derridian deconstruction.

Derrida: *Clotural* Reading and the 'Politics of Ethical Difference'

Since "deconstruction is a double reading that operates within a double bind of both belonging to a tradition, a language, and a philosophical discourse, while at the same time being incapable of belonging to the latter.....", Critchley proposes, through clotural reading, to introduce a moment of alterity contained in deconstruction:

> Following both Levinas's account of the history of Western philosophy in terms of the primacy of an ontology which seeks to enclose all phenomena within the closure of comprehension and reduce plurality to unity and his critique of the ontological concept of history, which is always the history of the victors, never of the victims... against which Levinas speaks in tones very similar to those of Walter Benjamin when the latter opposes historical materialism to objectivist history, it will be argued that the notion of *clotural* reading allows the question of ethics to be raised within deconstruction. *Clotural* reading is history read from the standpoint of the victims of that history. It is, in a complex sense, ethical history (Critchley 1992:30).

This allows us not only to approach Levinasian ethics from a different perspective, but also to move to the centre of our study those others, the Rishi, who are the 'victims' in this case. It is, in fact, in trying to respect their alterity that it becomes problematic for us to use a logocentric, totalising language which nullifies alterity while trying to convey a message that wishes to obtain the opposite result. For this very reason, my 'thinking' the Rishi and my writing about them are called into question, for I

too use this language as I try to prove that Levinasian ethics precedes my thinking and writing.

Derrida's reading of the efforts made in Husserlian phenomenology to overcome Heideggerian metaphysical closure, is seen by Critchley "as a transgression of the metaphysical tradition and as a restoration of that tradition", which "contains within itself the trace or 'the scar' of an irreducible alterity" (Critchley 1992:75). It is in the suspension of choice - or 'undecidability'- between the metaphysical and the non-metaphysical, "a suspension provoked in, as, and through a practice of *clotural* reading" - Critchley claims - "that the ethical dimension of deconstruction is opened and maintained...." (Ibid.:192). Undecidability, however, presents a limitation in addressing the question of politics, as Critchley shows in analysing the works of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, who maintain that Heideggerian completion of philosophy results in political totalitarianism including also Western democratic liberalism, since, according to them, "there is nothing democratic about the liberal state" (Ibid.:211).

In order both to answer the question regarding the possibility of politics that does not reduce transcendence and alterity, and to overcome 'the impasse of the political in Derrida's work', Critchley turns to Levinasian ethics to disrupt every form of political totalitarianism (e.g. National Socialism) and immanentism, including Western liberal democracy (Ibid.:220).

With the move to the 'third party' - from ethics to politics - Levinas recognises a double community, "both equal and unequal, symmetrical and asymmetrical, political and ethical", which he names 'monotheism', "linking together the question of God and the question of the community". However, as we have already stated earlier, the Levinasian God,[17] being only a trace in the face of the Other,[18] presents itself as different from the God of onto-theo-logy.

This new conception of the organisation of political space, far from representing a-politicism and quietism, disrupts the logic of Heideggerian fundamental ontology for which "to die for the Other is always secondary" (ibid.:225). For Levinas, instead, 'politics begins as ethics, that is, as the possibility of sacrifice' which interrupts 'all attempts at totalization, totalitarianism, or immanentism' (ibid.). In other words, the closure of ontology already contains a break through which the 'trace' makes itself present, given that the Same is such because of the Other, the centre is centre because of periphery, and the Said is Said because it is preceded by the Saying. Whilst the Said (*le dit*) represents the power of ontology, the appropriation of time, the occupation of space "in which objectification, universalization, representation, consciousness, experience, phenomenality, givenness, and presence orient and ... dominate its thought" (Peperzak 1993:36), the Saying (*le dire*) is the primordial moment that generated our

Said and remains as a trace that cannot be remembered. This Saying, however, is not completely lost and, in its anachronism, returns as a 'surprise' to 'unsay' (*dedire*) what we have said.

There appears to be a clear relation between the Said of anthropology and the ontology of a totalizing self ready to authorise others. There is also a movement from the Said to the Saying of anthropology, with a difference in which the Saying is prior to theories and enquiries, academic requirements and positions of power within the discipline. Although a return to the Said is inevitable when writing about the Other - in ethnography - this new Said could represent a *differance* from the first one, if the encounter with and proximity of the Other is not forgotten, but awakens responsibility. From this point of view, the Other is able to open anthropology to the third party, *le tiers* in Levinasian sense, since in the face of the Other I see the suffering of others. The passage from ethics to politics in anthropology is complicated and problematic, as it is in Levinas's discourse, but nevertheless, necessary, if we do not want to run the risk of fostering a discipline which promotes a-political quietism and keeps 'a murderous silence in front of the dying face of the Other'.

I turn now to discuss some political implications of Gramsci's thought, both in its specific application of ethical politics and in support of my line of enquiry. If Gramsci's thought is closer to an 'immanent' reading of world history, his emphasis on personal commitment and responsibility for others, takes him closer to a Derridian and Levinasian ethical politics.

Gramsci: the 'Vision' of New Ethical Politics

It has been suggested that Gramsci's "fragmentary, multiple, incisive and spiral writing" is close to Derrida's deconstruction: "Crossing as he does different levels of language (philosophy, journalism, politics), mingling them in a work without end, Gramsci the writer already transgresses the traditional divisions, the ideologies of closed knowledge, a certain type of division of intellectual labour...." (Buci-Glucksmannnn 1980:9). It is difficult in this sense to successfully use one particular Gramscian theory without taking into account the magnitude of his incomplete and fragmented science of political practice. Gramsci's philosophical project, calling into question the status of philosophy, was meant to establish "a new relation between philosophy, culture and politics" (ibid.: 10). In this sense, 'he never posed abstract problems that were separate and divorced from everyday life' (Lisa 1973:77, quoted in Buci-Glucksmannn 1980:3), since he worked towards the transformation of reality through "the attainment of higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in

understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations" (Gramsci 1977:11).

The connection established by Gramsci between politics and culture enabled him, despite his segregation in a state prison, to become a philosopher of the masses. The crisis generated in Italy by a totalitarian apparatus and widespread poverty were for Gramsci more important than his misfortunes, and this struggle for freedom became a defiance of the fascists who sought 'to stop that brain from functioning'. As Germino (1990:13) puts it: "For Antonio Gramsci politics is the process of including people who had been excluded and of merging the periphery with the centre". His own experience as a hunchback and a Sardinian played an important role in developing 'a theory of politics based on including the excluded' (ibid.:12), but instead of feeling pity for himself and for the Sardinian people,[19] he rejected "closure in favour of openness and 'broadening out' " (ibid.). Since for Gramsci "the search for the Leitmotiv, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms" (Gramsci 1971: 383), it can be established that the leitmotif holding the parts of the Prison Notebooks together "is a vision of a new politics oriented towards the *emarginati* [marginalized] rather than towards the prestigious and the powerful. Nothing in the notebooks is irrelevant to this vision, because 'everything is political' " (Germino 1990: 253). The use of architectural metaphors, employed to emphasise 'the arrangement of space to accommodate the social body', gave him the opportunity to compare himself to an architect who, although prevented from building anything materially (given his imprisonment), can still work on designs. The immateriality of the metaphor is extended to his role as a political architect who "deals with the impalpable relationships that lie hidden in material things. His space is more elusive and does not respond to fixed designs" (Ibid.). In this sense, Gramscian politics "indicate a new social space in which the distinction between leaders and led has been 'attenuated.... to the point of disappearance' " (Ibid.: 254).

Although it may seem that we have come a long way from Derridian deconstruction of metaphysics and Levinasian understanding of ethical politics, in my view Gramsci represents a moment of serious reflection towards a politics where the near Other was to play an important role in opening towards *le tiers*, the third party, or 'the others' of political commitment. His 'new politics of inclusion' of marginalized people in society could not be implemented through charitable philanthropy alone: "...Gramsci makes clear that the new politics can come about only through an intellectual and moral *metanoia*, or transformation, of consciousness", but aware that the dominant sector would make only partial concessions, he maintained that "the initiative for such a transformation must come from the depressed strata themselves"

(Germino 1990:260). At the same time, he asks the intellectuals to transform themselves by abandoning their 'caste' and becoming 'organic leaders' for those at the periphery. If Gramsci's atheism puts him in 'opposition' to Levinas's theism, his transcendence of 'petrified religiousness' and of 'reductionist materialist positivism' brings the two together in a common commitment to the Other.

> The Notebooks record the action of a mind determined to continue the struggle for a new, inclusive politics, a struggle begun three decades before in Sardinia. Gramsci had empathized with the retarded boy chained in a hovel in the vacant countryside, with the workers in the mines who had to boil roots for nourishment, and with shepherds who could not afford to buy shoes... (Germino 1990: 222).

If I have followed this trajectory of presentation, moving from the Rishi-missionary dialogue, through the Derrida-Levinas encounter, searching for a viable ethical politics to a Gramscian new politics of inclusion, it is because, by following Gramsci, I wish to make "an inventory of the traces deposited by the historical process" that brought me to be who I am. I did not plan to refer to a theory of alterity before starting my reflection on the Rishi-missionary encounter, and in a way I had not planned to re-read Gramsci's writings. Gramsci's experience and my own have been quite different, since I found myself for a long time committed to a 'religious cause', but the starting point and the final destination are the same.

If anthropology has the power to discuss and unmask the power of other institutions, this can be done by making concrete choices and placing the Other in a privileged position whereby the discipline cannot escape its own responsibility, even when judging the power of others. Aware of its own power, anthropology has also become aware of its weaknesses and limitations, so that no dogmas can be imposed in the name of 'truths' to be defended. This 'finitude', far from representing the end of a discipline, allows it to 'learn through suffering' by sharing the suffering of others.

To conclude this reflection, I return to the starting-point, the Rishi-missionary encounter. The Rishi are 'Untouchables' who aspire either to be part of Hindu society, or seek refuge by converting to Christianity. In terms of Critchley's *clotural* reading' of a Derridian understanding of metaphysical closure, we can say that the Rishis' experience is a moment of 'transgression and restoration, belonging and not-belonging, break and continuation' of a tradition, revealing an alterity that cannot be reduced and that, at the same time, places them 'on the limit' of a text written by others and deconstructed by the Rishi. If the liminality is for them ambiguity, it is also a way out beyond the closure, since they tenaciously preserve a 'trace' of alterity not contained in the closure. Again, in terms of the Levinasian 'Saying and Said', we can suggest that they will need to return to the language of Greek philosophy, or the Said of their

tradition, and only after the Said has being unSaid by their Saying, will it make a difference.

However, the answer to my many questions is not to be found in a 'unifying concept', which would go against dialogue itself, but in the capability of an 'anthropological project' which, in the style of Derridian democracy, is a project that does not exist, in the sense that, starting from today, there is a responsibility - *encore un effort* - to invent it, *peutetre* a 'project' a *venir*, characterised by incompleteness and deferral.

The Rishi, for their part, though 'losers' in current socio-economic and political terms, demonstrate an aptitude to be effective partners in dialogue. They have neither place nor voice, but their plea grows louder in their search for humanity (We too are Humans! *Amrao je manus!*). The very stubbornness of their quest is an example for both the missionary and the anthropologist who, like the Rishi, are currently re-negotiating their identity. Thus, the enquiring self, even when dictating the conditions of its own ethical rules and the commitment of its own political choices, is constantly displaced and is asked to learn from those who cannot afford and/or are not permitted to be ethical or political. For even Christianity, though recurrently misused by those in power, is constantly challenged by those at the periphery and remains the history of 'lesser people'.

Conclusion

The advantage of applying an ethical-dialogic interpretation, both as a theoretical orientation and as a methodological 'tool', is that the writer can never, no matter how much he/she wishes, have the final 'concluding' word. A discourse on ethical dialogue can never be 'concluded,' for it must remain attentive to new voices that can intervene to carry on the dialogue. Even our case study, though localised in space and time, is still part of a more general idea of cross-cultural dialogue and indeed it represents a concrete occurrence of the latter and, as such, is destined to continue, in whatever manner.

At the level of reflection, there are some authors worth mentioning, though briefly, since their work obliges my own writing to continue the conversation and remain open to future dialogues. A recent work by H. H. Kogler (1996) indicates that interest in this topic is very much alive. Bringing Gadamer and Foucault together, Kogler shows that there is a sensible middle ground in debates about the effectiveness of critical resistance to social patterns of domination. On the same line of thought, Falzon (1998), offering a different reading of Foucault's work, challenges both

postmodern fragmentation and Habermasian 'communicative intersubjectivity', and affirms that "a genuine dialogue with the other implies not simply the appearance of new, different, other voices, but also that these voices are able to have real effect in the culture ... So understood, dialogue is a 'dangerous perhaps', an open, risky, endeavour...."(Falzon 1998:98).

Notes

1 Cf. Amaladoss 1990; Swidler et al. 1990.

2 Cf. Dwyer 1977; 1979; 1982; Tedlock 1979; 1983; Fabian 1983; 1990; Maranhao ed. 1990; McGrane 1989.

3 During the Renaissance "... the fundamental European response to this alien Other lies in the massive and ceaseless task of conversion..." (McGrane 1989:13-14); the other is seen "as a potential Christian.... Only after Christianity comes Anthropology...." (ibid.:18).

4 "Those leading the post-modern genre appear relatively indifferent to the material circumstances surrounding their own intellectual production. They have little to say about their locus in the United States and the relation of their academic movement to the country's global economic and political hegemony" (Peace 1990:28).

5 One copy has been kept at the Biblioteca Publica de Evora, Ms. C XVI / 1-1 Peca 11.

6 "They call this language '*Portuguez torto*,' but the Christians of Bengal take much pride in it, so that they would consider it an outrage, were they obliged to learn the catechism in Bengali. They also consider it a great shame to be called Bengali, even though they are such, for they say that only the pagans are Bengalis, and they Portuguese, though yellow or black ones... From this stems their repugnance to be catechized in Bengali" (Hartmann 1978:196).

7 See Hobart 1996.

8 See Vicente Rafael (1987) who makes a clear connection between conquest, translation and conversion in the Spanish language, as this was used to Christianize the Tagalog and the way the Tagalog 'changed the meaning of Christian missionary discourse.'

9 Among them should be mentioned Crapanzano (1980), Dwyer (1982), Tedlock (1983), Basso (1984), Bruner and Gorfain (1984), Rabinow (1977, 1986), Taussig (1987), Maranhao ed. (1990), Tedlock and Mannheim (1995) and Mayerfeld Bell and Gardiner eds. (1998).

10 On this score, Mumford suggests abandoning Weber's model of western prophetic thinkers who promoted rationalization and science, in favor of Joseph Needham's model of eastern intercasuality.

11 One set of myths of origin collected in the area (see Zene 1994, Appendix 2a) reflects the frame of mind whereby the Rishi are responsible for their own situation. In summary, one of the Rishi Muni, the compilers of the Sacred Vedas, while performing sacrifice stole some meat from the cow and as a consequence he and his offspring were 'condemned' to work as Muchi, skinners, and leatherworkers. Another set of myths are widespread among the Rishi of south-west Bangladesh (see Zene 1994, Appendix 2b), and are constructed around the figure of Ruidas and commonly found in the *Bakta Mala* and the *Bhagvana Ravidasa*. "The Rai Dasis are a Vaisnava sect of N. India, founded by Rai (or Ravi) Das, one of the twelve chief disciples of Ramananda. Its members are low caste Chamars, or leather-workers, and,

in fact, Chamars, as a caste, often call themselves, Rai Dasis ... Rai Dasa's home was at Benares, and, as a disciple of Ramananda, he probably flourished in the earlier part of the 15th century A.D. He was a fellow-disciple with Kabir, with whose teachings his doctrine regarding the uselessness of the Vedas and Brahmanical Hinduism had much in common" (Grierson 1955:560).

12 "...[T]he attribution of implicit meanings to an alien practice *regardless of whether they are acknowledged by its agents* is a characteristic form of theological exercise, with an ancient history" (Asad 1986:161).

13 " The word of God speaks through the glory of the face and calls for an *ethical conversion*, or *reversal of our nature*. .... In this respect, we could say that God is the other who *turns our nature inside out*, who calls our ontological will-to-be [*conatus essendi*] into question. . . God does indeed go against nature, for He is not of this world. God is other than being" (Levinas-Kearney 1986:25, emphasis added).

14 "The God of ethical philosophy is not God the almighty being of creation, but the persecuted God of the prophets [the Suffering Servant] who is always in relation with man and whose difference from man is never indifference" (Levinas-Kearney 1986:32).

15 "When a missionary fails to transform himself in relation to the transformation of the other, communication evaporates and there is merely an exchange of words..." (Burridge 1978:20).

16 "Justice is the way in which I respond to the face that I am not alone in the world with the other.... Justice is not the last word... we seek a better justice... there is a violence in justice... there is a place for charity after justice" (Levinas 1988:174-5).

17 "The God of Levinas is not the God of onto-theo-logy, but rather.... God 'is' an empty place, the anarchy of an absence at the heart of the community" (Critchley 1992:228).

18 "... The passage to *le tiers*, to justice and humanity as a whole, is also a passage to the prophetic word, the commonness of the divine father in a community of brothers...." (Ibid.:227-8).

19 Being particularly sensitive to theories of Sardinians "as biologically inferior to the Italians on the mainland", for Gramsci "Sardinia was the laboratory in which the injustice of the larger world could be measured". This notion of 'laboratory' can be supported by the fact that although Sardinia was seen as oppressed by the mainland, its own social order reflected the same pattern "of oppression by the powerful over the weak" (Germino 1990:11). Gramsci, however, did not try to solve Sardinia's problems in a 'tribal direction' but sought "to transcend immediate, unhealthy narcissistic concern for self and to empathise with the 'prestigeless' whoever and wherever they were" (Ibid.:13).

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