

On the altar

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 17, 2000](#) issue

Missionaries' faith—the kind of faith that inspired and impelled men and women to take the gospel into all the world—seems to lie beyond poet Oliver Reynolds's ken. Reviewing Tom Hiney's *On the Missionary Trail* (Chatto & Windus), which is “the classic Georgian adventure of two Englishmen sent on a journey around the world, 1821-29,” Reynolds writes: “The actions of belief can be described, but what about belief itself? Why, and how, do we believe? Hiney's narrative is based on a given, on something inexplicable; these thousand-mile journeyings begin with a step of faith” (*Times Literary Supplement*, April 7).

Reynolds muses about that “step of faith.” He knows that the two London Missionary Society agents had a mission, and that “today, even the smallest business has its mission statement—a handy means of tricking out the profit motive as altruism—and it is tempting to see the work of bodies such as the LMS as being superior PR for the all-encompassing mercantile might of empire.”

Hiney shows, Reynolds says, that missionaries' “motives, actions, and effects” were “a complicated mixture of the quixotic and the admirable, the hard-headed and the mysterious.” Reynolds does better with the quixotic and hard-headed than with the admirable and the mysterious as he tracks the men on a journey “equivalent to a fourfold circumnavigation of the globe.” He reproduces Hiney's epigraph, words which, says Reynolds, “must have given solace more than once: ‘I am with you always, even to the end of the world.’”

Reynolds also says that “one effect of Hiney's book is to set the Christian worshipper alongside the Tahitian in front of his stone idol and the Hindu devotee suspended mid-air from a hook passing through the skin of his back.” So far, so good: we call that insight “pluralism.” Reynolds asks: “Are these three opposed to one another, or complementary?” So far, so medium good: we call that “relativism.”

Then comes Reynolds's climax, which provides us with an epigraph for our time. It should not give us solace. This epigraph epitomizes one aspect of American belief, post-Christendom, postmodernist, postcommunal style. Reynolds tells the story of

an old Chinese man who had a family altar “on which incense was burning before a gilt-framed engraving of Napoleon. When asked why he worshipped the picture as a god, the old man’s bluff answer was true to himself and—for those who see Hiney’s book as a book about Christianity, among other beliefs—to the human race as a whole: ‘Oh, we worship anything.’”