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Missionary Views of Hinduism

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SINCE the beginning of the modern missionary movement, Christian missionary views of Hinduism have changed significantly, partly as a result of linguistic developments (to which some missionaries contributed in important ways) and partly as a result of theological shifts (themselves also at times inspired by missionary insights and experiences). The views of an eighteenth century Christian missionary thus differ radically from those of missionaries able to profit from the translation efforts of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship, and the views of a contemporary Roman Catholic missionary may bear little resemblance to that of an Evangelical Protestant.¹

While it is therefore impossible to speak of "the" missionary view of Hinduism, one may point to certain characteristics which distinguish missionary approaches from purely historical or social scientific ones. First, missionaries approach other religions from an unabashedly normative perspective or from a clearly defined confessional stance. Rather than historical interest or intellectual curiosity, it is the question of religious truth which inspires missionary encounter with other religions. For traditional missionaries, this truth was believed to be fully expressed within Christian teachings and practices, and the study of the other religion was thus mainly inspired by a desire to more effectively communicate the Christian truth and/or to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity. For more contemporary missionaries, interest in Hinduism may also be grounded in a desire to discover elements of truth within Hinduism itself and to enter into a genuine dialogue with the tradition. But in each case, the study of Hinduism is guided by a

religious concern with the truth. This expresses itself in a somewhat selective engagement with the Hindu tradition and in the presence of explicit or implicit value judgments. While traditional missionaries often expressed their personal (and sometimes negative) judgment of the teachings and practices of Hinduism openly and without reservation, modern missionaries might express it more implicitly in the particular focus that their interests and engagements display. A good number of modern missionaries (Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, Sara Grant, etc.) have focused almost exclusively on the tradition of Advaita Vedanta, mainly out of a genuine respect for and admiration of its teachings and practices.

As such, missionary approaches to Hinduism may seem far removed from the ideals of pure objectivity and neutrality that have come to dominate the scientific study of religion. Missionary views are rarely part of standard textbooks on Hinduism, as they are a priori regarded as tainted and suspect. This begs the question of whether religious bias necessarily leads to a distortion of the other religion? While it is certainly true that religious prejudice often impeded genuine understanding of Hinduism, one cannot deny the fact that some missionaries were able to capture the religious life of the Hindus with remarkable detail and accuracy. This is the case, for example, with the famous work *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1817) allegedly written by the Abbé Jean-Antoine Dubois. While permeated with critical judgments and haughty denunciations of particular teachings and practices, this work has been hailed (even by some Hindus) as a model of "shrewd common sense, clear-sightedness, and

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perfect candor.”² And in a prefatory note to the third edition of the book, Max Muller states that it “has always continued to be read and to be quoted with respect, as containing the views of an eye-witness, of a man singularly free from prejudice and of a scholar with a sufficient knowledge, if not of Sanskrit, yet of Tamil, both literary and spoken, to be able to enter into the views of the natives, to understand their manners and customs, and to make allowance for many of their superstitious opinions and practices, as mere corruptions of an originally far more rational and intelligent form of religion and philosophy.”³ While one may be amazed or amused by the reference to Dubois as “a man singularly free from prejudice” the text does reflect a concerted attempt to understand the religious life of the Hindus from within and thus represents a unique example of a missionary view of Hinduism. The work is also of interest in so far as it was written prior to the major translation efforts of the nineteenth century so that it is based almost exclusively on participant observation, rather than on textual knowledge. We shall here point to some of its more distinctive characterizations of Hinduism.

The Author

The question of the authorship of *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* has become the object of intriguing scholarly detective work. The claimed author of the text is the French priest Jean-Antoine Dubois (1765-1848) who lived and worked in South India between 1792 and 1823. He was ordained in 1792 and immediately left for India under the auspices of the Missions Étrangères, fleeing the French Revolution. In 1806, he sold a manuscript to the East India Company, whereupon it was widely distributed in both English and French and became one of the most reputed sources of knowledge of Hinduism in early 19th century Europe. In subsequent years, the original manuscript seems to have been thoroughly revised by Dubois, edited by Beauchamp, and published in 1906 (and frequently reprinted). In studying the original manuscript, however, the French researcher Sylvia Murr discovered the existence of a version of the manuscript, dated 1777 (many years prior to Dubois’ arrival in

India) and attributed to a certain Nicholas Jacques Desvaulx who was an officer in the French army and stationed in Pondichery.⁴ Upon further investigation, and thorough text-criticism, Murr concludes that both Desvaulx and Dubois copied their own respective texts from a third and original “ur-text” which she attributes to the Jesuit Father Gaston-Laurent Coeurdoux (1691-1779) who worked as a missionary in Pondichery.⁵ Murr argues that Dubois copied his text directly from the manuscript of Coeurdoux, rather than from that of Desvaulx (which explains some of the divergences between the two extant texts).⁶ Since he later thoroughly reworked the text on the basis of his own insights and experiences, one may conclude that the text *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Dubois and Beauchamp, 1906) contains the reflection of missionary studies of Hinduism spanning two centuries and two (or three, if Beauchamp is included) authors.

Hinduism as Brahmanism

One of the first striking features of the book is the distinction between “The Four States of Brahmanical Life” (part II) and “Religion” (part III). This distinction, according to Murr, is one of the characteristic marks of Coeurdoux and reflective of the Jesuit Malabar mission’s attitude toward Hinduism (going back to Roberto de Nobili). However, the focus on Brahmanism typifies more broadly the Christian missionary attitude toward Hinduism until the middle of the nineteenth century. The informants of Christian missionaries often belonged to the higher castes, which led to what Geoffrey Oddie calls a “top down understanding of Hinduism.”⁷ The attempt to understand Hinduism in analogy with Christianity also naturally resulted in attention to the priestly caste. However, attitudes toward Brahmanism differed radically among Protestant and Catholic missionaries. Whereas Protestants generally viewed it as a form of tyranny and slavery, Catholics tended to look upon it in more favorable terms, and often believed (as did de Nobili) that conversion of the Brahmans would bring about a general conversion of the people of India. While Coeurdoux also mentions

numerous advantages to the caste system, Dubois seems to praise it in his own words:

For my part, having lived many years on friendly terms with the Hindus, I have been able to study their national life and character closely, and I have arrived at a quite opposite decision on the subject of caste. I believe caste division to be in many respects the chef d'oeuvre, the happiest effort of Hindu legislation. I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse in the state of barbarism, and that she preserved and perfected the arts and sciences of civilization whilst most other nations of the earth remained in a state of barbarism.⁸

Part II of *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* deals with the life and practices of Brahmans with impeccable attention to detail and with a relative absence of value judgments.

Hinduism as Religion

By contrast, when the actual religious beliefs and practices are described, the author or authors do not refrain from using such derogatory adjectives as “the disgusting lingam,”⁹ the “most contemptible and ridiculous stories concerning the fanciful penances to which the hermits subjected themselves” or “silly beliefs in astrology.”¹⁰ Such negative value judgments are known to be the rule rather than the exception in eighteenth and nineteenth century missionary tracts. They color particular observations as well as general statements of both Protestant and Catholic missionaries. In pretending an objective description of Hinduism, Alexander Duff, for example writes that “Our present purpose not being to expose, but simply to exhibit the system of Hinduism, it has all along been taken for granted that in the eye of the intelligent Christian, its best confutation must be the extravagance and absurdity of its tenets.”¹¹ These pejorative comments on Hindu beliefs and practices are of course part of traditional Christian claims to exclusive truth which ruled out any recognition of value and truth in other religious beliefs and practices.

But what is more remarkable is the fact that these pejorative judgments did not seem to preclude careful attention to the religious rituals of the other, and detailed recording of those rituals. In a chapter describing Brahman funeral rituals, a paragraph may start by stating that “The closing moments of a Brahmin’s life are associated with a number of ridiculous ceremonies,”¹² and then proceed with a concrete description of the rituals in terms fitting the highest standards of anthropological observation. Missionary records such as those collected in *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* indeed contain an irreplaceable source of information on the religious life of eighteenth and nineteenth century Hindus in a particular region.

While missionary attitudes toward the religious life of the Hindus was undeniably colored by religious prejudices and presuppositions, concrete engagement with Hinduism at times also led to shifts or changes within these religious presuppositions. It is for example through encounter with Hinduism that the notion of Christianity as the fulfillment of other religions and the old Patristic notion of other religions as “preparatio evangelica” were reinstated. Oddie argues that this more accepting view of the other emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century out of a need for new tactics of persuasion, old confrontational approaches having proved themselves ineffective.¹³ However, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this new approach to Hinduism was based on a more genuine respect for the tradition largely inspired by a deeper understanding of the sacred texts and philosophical traditions.¹⁴ In the course of the twentieth century, this led to an increasing recognition among Christian missionaries of the value and truth of the Hindu tradition, or at least of certain traditions within Hinduism, and to a more open and receptive dialogue with the tradition. And these developments, in turn, also came to affect the official Christian attitudes toward other religions, which in the second half of the twentieth century moved from exclusivism to inclusivism, and to a greater recognition of other religions as “possessing rays of truth which enlightens all men” (*Nostra Aetate*).¹⁵

Conclusion

This brief sketch of *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* illustrates the general characteristics and the commonly held presumptions about missionary views of Hinduism. The text is permeated with (mostly negative) value judgments about the religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus and the representation of Hinduism itself is shaped to serve missionary purposes. However, what is more remarkable about the text is the commitment of its author or authors to a correct and detailed representation of the practices observed. This description clearly exceeds purely missionary interests and demonstrates a spirit of inquiry which merits the designation of such missionaries as proto-anthropologists. Their observations indeed constitute a unique source of knowledge about the religious practices of Hindus between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and thus continue to be of interest and importance beyond that of purely missionary history.

While missionaries were and are undeniably influenced by their particular religious worldview and by the theological presuppositions (regarding other religions) of their day, missionaries also often possess an independent spirit rendering them unafraid of differing from their established tradition. Going against the grain of his time, Dubois, for example, believed that all missionary efforts to convert India to Christianity were in vain.¹⁶ And in our day, Christian missionaries and Indian Christian theologians are at the origins of some of the most radical and at times controversial theological positions regarding other religions.¹⁷ As such, one may say that in the course of time, Hinduism has modified and shaped Christian views about the religious other as much as Christian preconceptions have shaped the missionary view of Hinduism. It would thus be unfair to dismiss missionary views of Hinduism out of hand as biased or tainted by religious presuppositions. To be sure, missionaries are inspired by more than a purely factual or historical curiosity. Their search for truth may lead to a selective focus on certain specific strands or traditions within Hinduism. But this does not preclude a profound understanding of

these particular traditions, deserving recognition alongside purely historical, ethnographic, and social scientific views.

Notes

¹ For a thorough account of Protestant missionary attitudes toward Hinduism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism. British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900*. Sage Publications, 2006.

² *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, p. xxii. This Hindu was "the Honourable Dewan Bahadur Srinavasa Raghava Iyengar" who was Inspector-General of Registration in Madras and himself author of a book on "the moral and material progress of Southern India under British rule" (and in that sense himself probably not unbiased.)

³ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁴ Sylvia Murr published an annotated edition of the text accompanied by a study of the thought of Coeurdoux in two volumes: *L'Inde philosophique entre Bossuet et Voltaire*: Volume I: *Moeurs et coutumes des Indiens (1777)* and Volume II: *l'Indologie du père Coeurdoux. Stratégies, Apologétique et Scientificité*. Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, 1987.

⁵ Murr develops a detailed case based on historical references in the text, literary analysis (comparison of the texts with extant letters of Coeurdoux) and logical inference from known religious and historical opinions of the author. One of Coeurdoux' interests was to show the common Noachite origins of the people of the Book and the people of India, as well as the relationship between Sanskrit and other Indo-European languages.

⁶ *L'Indologie du père Coeurdoux*, p. 40.

⁷ Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*, p. 130.

⁸ *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 28.

⁹ *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

¹¹ *India and Indian Missions*, 1840. Quoted by Geoffrey Oddie in *Imagined Hinduism*, p. 199.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 482.

¹³ Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism*, p. 305.

¹⁴ The first text to express this genuinely changed attitude toward Hinduism is J.N. Fraquhar's, *The Crown of Hinduism*, 1913.

¹⁵ Even though a direct influence of Christian missionaries in India upon Council fathers has not (yet) been demonstrated, it is well known that a theologian such as Henri de Lubac, who exercised great influence on the Second Vatican Council, was friendly with Jules Monchanin, one of the early pioneers of a genuine inculturation of Christianity in

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India. The latter's receptivity to the presence of truth in Hinduism may thus have indirectly exercised some influence on the development of a more open attitude toward other religions. This is similarly the case with the work of Karl Rahner, which was undoubtedly influenced by the work and thought of the numerous missionary Jesuits who left their mark on the Jesuit intellectual tradition.

¹⁶ This, clearly, was Dubois' own position, and not one taken over from Coeurdoux. It figures also prominently in his letters, which stirred considerably controversy in the early nineteenth century. Dubois had already come to recognize the high social toll which came with conversion and the negative images which colonial history had left upon Hindus: "Having witnessed the immoral and disorderly conduct of the Europeans who then overran the whole country, the Hindus would hear no more of a religion which appeared to have so little influence over the behavior of those professing it, and who had been brought up on its tenets". . . "A respectable Hindu who was asked to embrace the Christian religion would look upon such suggestion as either a joke, or else an insult of the deepest dye." In *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 301.

¹⁷ Henri Le Saux, Bede Griffiths, Sara Grant, Michael Amaladoss, Felix Wilfred, Stanley Samartha, M.M. Thomas, Michael Amaladoss, Raimundo Panikkar, Jacques Dupuis, Francis Clooney, etc.