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VIEWPOINT

On Being Hindu-Christian

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TEACHING COURSES IN religious studies, I am often asked whether I myself profess allegiance to some faith tradition – that is whether I am myself a "believer" of some kind. I must confess that I get some mischievous pleasure in responding that I am a "Hindu-Christian". This answer usually gets one of two kinds of responses: either my questioner is somewhat intrigued, in which case we might have an interesting discussion;[1] or they smile with polite indifference and promptly change the topic. Both of these kinds of responses, however, can betray that my answer has called something into question: the nature of religious self-definition. Being a Hindu-Christian is inherently unsettling in this sense. It casts suspicion on the processes by which we label ourselves Christian, Buddhist, Jew, Daoist, or whatever.

Now by claiming that being Hindu-Christian is inherently unsettling, I do not wish to imply a judgment, either positive or negative. Nor do I want to suggest that having a hyphenated identity is something unique, special, or remarkable. As I hope will be evident from what follows, the kinds of issues that affect me as a Hindu-Christian are only a particular case of the kinds of issues that affect us all, whether we are religious or not. We are all "works in progress" – the products of negotiations between many competing spheres of influence or narratives, and thus we are all hybrids of a kind. Similarly we all both

create ourselves, through the choices we make, and are created by the people, events, and circumstances of our lives. What is interesting about being Hindu-Christian, however, is that hyphenated identities of this sort often put the processes of *autopoesis* into sharp contrast, allowing (or perhaps forcing) us to reflect on them further.

Obviously I cannot, in the short space provided, delve into these processes in great detail. What I would like to do instead is to outline some of the principles illuminated from my own experience and reflection into being hyphenated and then sketch a model for how we might creatively put these principles into practice. Before I begin, however, I should mention (perhaps stating the obvious) that in the context of "a work in progress", this piece is itself a part of the process of skilful negotiation comprising my own highly particular self-construction. It cannot therefore be the "final instalment" and any intimation of arriving at solid answers can only be interpreted ironically. With that caveat out of the way, let me present what has come to light in my own "experiment".

We might begin by construing both Hinduism and Christianity variously as fields of existence, horizons of meaning, ritual and discourse practices, or (and) ways of being. I am being vague on purpose here since it is notoriously difficult to define religions, and I cannot enter into that debate now. Of course, neither "Hinduism" nor

"Christianity" exist as reified entities, but rather as umbrella terms for a diverse host of inter-linked texts, rituals, beliefs, prescriptions, and institutions, all organized into equally diverse and numerous historical traditions. This fact alone makes the business of defining religions a sisyphean task, and the constructs suggested above are merely temporary structures erected for our purposes. The important question is how these fields and horizons interact. I suggest that the key to an answer is found in the process of metaphor.

Paul Ricoeur is usually admitted as having provided the most satisfactory account of the process of metaphor. In his definitive work on the topic, *The Rule of Metaphor*,[2] Ricoeur presents an "interactionist"[3] theory of how metaphors work. After stretching the scope of metaphor to the level of the sentence or statement as opposed to the level of just the word, Ricoeur explains that the "metaphorical twist" of metaphors is the product of the interaction between two interpretations of a statement, a literal one and a figurative one. On the literal interpretation, a logical incoherence bordering on nonsense arises which in turn pushes the "poet" to a work of imagination, a leap to a figurative interpretation whereby the elements of the metaphor redescribe one another in a tense, inventive dialectic. Metaphors are thus semantic generators in that by bringing together what seem to be incompatible elements, each integrally related to their own horizons of meaning, into the close and mutually transformative reactor of a statement, a new meaning can come to light which extends the polysemy of the terms of the metaphor and creates a novel reference.

An example will illustrate this rather technical description. Take the metaphor, "a pool does this visage make". A literal interpretation would give us what verges on nonsense, for how would a face *make* a pool? Faces and pools are very different things and to combine them in such a statement is, at the *prima facie* level,

illogical. The tension created by this illogicality pushes us to search for some figurative interpretation whereby sense can be brought out of nonsense. This is effected through a semantic dialectic whereby resemblance between aspects of pools and faces are linked. In this way both terms of the metaphor are redescribed by the other, each becoming more like the other yet always remaining themselves – for metaphorical statements cannot be identity statements. A novel common reference for each term is thus generated: one which requires the interaction of its "parent terms" to sustain it.

This process of metaphor is, I suggest, what is at work in the construction of hyphenated religious identities. Through the metaphor "Hindu-Christian", at least two semantic horizons are brought, as if tagged onto each term, into mutually transformative interaction. When a person is described, for example, as a Hindu-Christian or a Daoist-Jew, it might appear to be a simple category mistake, a logically inconsistent expression. But at that very moment the dialectic of metaphor pushes the interpreter to look for a way of relieving the erupting semantic stress by forging a new figurative interpretation. In the process both (the) "Hindu" and "Christian" are redescribed, each by the other, so that a third, new reference is built up in the shaky, liminal space between the two traditions – which indeed might have been thought until then to be incommensurable. In the interstice a new reference is established, but this is not an archimedean point standing above the gap, rather it is a dynamic point of intersection, an area of overlap or interaction, onto which the hyphenated individual can hold. As a process and not a location, this interstitial perspective[4] bears, in the beginning, only a relative reality, dependent always on the sustaining dialectic of its generating metaphor. But as more such interstitial references are charted and correlated, a more substantial reality is built up. What begins as a shaky, liminal point slowly

collects more like points and together they gain volume and mass until they form a home.

The metaphorical nature of being a Hindu-Christian means that such a state is highly particular, open-ended, and creative. The specificity comes from the way in which the poles or terms of a metaphor interact. The horizons of meaning (semantic contexts) brought into play in a metaphor connect with and redescribe one another in unique ways depending on the particular complement of references contained in each horizon, as well as the eclectic connections made by the poet. These connections between the semantic horizons follow no intrinsic rules, can be revised at any time and are forged for the purposes of their time. This makes them entirely fluid and pragmatic. They can be forged, tested, and dismantled at will, thus being Hindu-Christian can take almost limitless forms.[5] The only real limitations of the process is the poet's own imagination and courage.[6]

This last point brings us to a model by which we can use the insights of metaphorical construction of hyphenated identities to further our own autopoesis. A *bricoleur*[7] is one who eclecticly chooses elements out from a diverse, received collection – with the rest temporarily bracketed off – and arranges them into a whole with the aim of tackling a problem at hand. The metaphorical poet is, I suggest, a kind of bricoleur. Taking various elements from the disparate cultural palettes bequeathed to them, they construct a product - their lives - to solve a particular set of problems. As new problems or desires arise the product is altered, by addition, subtraction, rearrangement, or combinations of all three. The product is never completed and always alterable, though its aim is always to be serviceable. Bricollage thus relies on, or perhaps is, a kind of phronesis which is learned only by participating in the metaphorical process itself. Moreover, bricollage capitalizes on the inherent fluidity of life and the unique particularities of circumstance and talent in

order, at the very least, to get by – but ideally to create art. And if we reflect on our own diverse histories and contexts, it becomes clear that bricollage is something all can participate in, be they hyphenated or not, religious or not. By being a bricoleur of sorts, we can all use the metaphoricity inherent in our lives, as they already are, to further a more critical and self-aware autopoesis.

While my analysis of being a Hindu-Christian might be couched in rather theoretical terms, the reality obviously is not. The principles I have tried to isolate do, however, help me to narrate my experience and thus cobble together some meaning and hope. I end by returning to my response to questioners after my religious affiliations. After I tell them that "I am a Hindu-Christian", I sometimes add, after a pause, " ... whatever that is". Hopefully my remarks above throw light onto the second rather agnostic part of my answer. The jury is, and must remain, out.

Notes

1. A small segment of those who are intrigued by my answer are those, usually evangelical Christians, who express some discomfort or even hostility to the notion of such hyphenated religious identity.
2. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello SJ, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University press, 1976).
3. "Interactionist" is itself a metaphor, which Ricoeur admits when he says, "there is no non-metaphorical standpoint from which one could look upon metaphor, and all the other [rhetorical] figures for that matter, as if they were a game played before one's eyes." (*Rule of Metaphor,* p. 18)]
4. This perspective might be thought of as a kind of "centre of perception", not unlike

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one of Leibniz's monads.

5. The pragmatic component of Hindu-Christianity ties the construction of the religious self to the community of the Hindu-Christian.

6. There can be a number of significant obstacles in the process of metaphorical production of hyphenated religious identities, and I do not wish to suggest that doing so is a solitary or easy endeavour. Forging a hyphenated identity can sometimes be a very painful and arduous practice requiring not a little steadfast determination.

7. I borrow this idea from Jeffrey Stout's *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1988) p. 293-4. Stout himself relates *bricollage* to the writings of Derrida, distinguishing it from Claude Levi-Strauss's application of the term as a means of contrasting "primitives" from ourselves.