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Hindu Occidentalism

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ON A RESEARCH trip through India one of my goals was to talk to Hindu scholars about their views of Christianity and in particular Hindu-Christian dialogue. Though I visited numerous Universities, Colleges, and *maths*, I found very few Hindus who took any interest at all in the doctrinal conversation between religions then characteristic of interreligious dialogue. Time and again I was told by these distinguished and erudite academics that they were not interested in Hindu-Christian dialogue. While this may have been due to a failure on my part to ask the right sorts of questions, or simply my bad luck in not having found willing academics, later discussions with colleagues – Indian, European, and North American – echoed this experience and supported the view, held by my Indian “informants”, that interreligious dialogue is a rather Christian habit.¹

This experience begs the question of why Hindus (at least the ones to whom I spoke) are not interested in discussing with Christians their respective views of God and the transcendent. In such a religiously soaked and pluralist context, one might expect Hindus, of all people, to be most keen to debate the finer points of theology with any and all people of faith.² Now, for some it may be that interreligious dialogue *per se* carries unfortunate connotations.³ More likely, however, is the possibility that interreligious dialogue with particular faith traditions is, for many Hindus, redolent with the history of empire. Recent nationalist Hindu political rhetoric and indeed interreligious violence seem to reflect deep-seated attitudes towards the non-Hindu Other in India. To enter into interreligious dialogue with Christians may thus be to

open the door to an imperial history many Hindus wish to leave behind.⁴ Just how much this explains Hindu reticence to partake in dialogue with Christians may be debated. However the legacy of imperialism cannot be ignored by those interested in Hindu-Christian studies, and the concept of Orientalism is key, I suggest, to understanding this legacy. In what follows I shall, therefore, focus on the Orientalist critique.

Edward Said's pivotal 1978 work, *Orientalism*⁵ brought the political implications of Western academic study of the East into sharp focus, and in so doing did much to instigate a new reflexivity in comparative studies of religion. While the orientalist critique has been applied with much rigour to Western treatments of the East, less has been done the other way, that is on Eastern negotiations with the West. This paper aims to subject Hindu understandings of Christianity to some of the hermeneutics of suspicion found in the orientalist critique. What I hope to show are the outlines of “Hindu Occidentalism”.⁶

Immediately the question arises: does not “Hindu Occidentalism” imply a false Indian political advantage in its dealings with the West? If Orientalism is to be understood according to Said's three central characterizations of it – namely that studies of the Orient have been conducted by “experts” (primarily in the humanities disciplines); that it is predicated on an epistemological and ontological distinction between Orient and Occident; and most importantly that it is a “corporate” phenomenon, in that Orientalism represents a conglomeration of attitudes, presuppositions, practices, structures, bureaucracies, mythology, literature and, crucially,

academic disciplines, corralled for the *manipulation and control* of the oriental Other⁷ – then how is it that the colonized Hindu traditions can exercise the kind of epistemological control over the Christian West implied by the term Occidentalism? In other words is “Occidentalism” necessarily linked, as Orientalism seems to be, with imperial power? My response to this must be negative. However, the question does serve to distinguish at the outset what Occidentalism might mean in the Hindu context.

A key point to note is that the Oriental/Occidental distinction works for both sides of its imposed divide: each polar opposite serves to reflect the other. Said argues that the Orient served (and to some extent still serves) as the rhetorical or imaginative alter-ego⁸ of Western man, but surely the same can be said for Hindus. Just as the Orient is, in V. G. Kiernan’s characterization, “Europe’s collective daydream,”⁹ the Occident also plays a rhetorical role in the imagination and rhetoric of Hindus. Hindu responses to the foreign, and particularly Christian, *mleccha* are reflective of their own taxonomies, identities, myths, and social structures – indeed, how could they not be so? Moreover, I suggest that such responses arise from a position of relative strength and autonomy unallied with imperial domination. Hindu views of “other religions” will naturally work to organize the Other into manageable categories of their own design since, as Said admits, this domestication of the exotic occurs between all societies.¹⁰ By and large, in the case of the Hindu colonized such management in response to their Christian colonizers has of course not been conducted from a position of political strength.¹¹ Nevertheless, by necessity, there is a relative, non-coercive power implicit in the act of categorizing, such that the categorist has discursive control over the categorized. Such control can clearly be seen in the texts of the reformers in what is called the Hindu Renaissance of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² It is the power of systematicians and theorists, and it is

thoroughly modernist.

This kind of discursive control or power acts independently of imperial domination since it is primarily an act of autochthonous interpretation. However, this does not mean that it is not affected by imperial power. The Hindu reformers and apologists were, of course, responding to a perceived threat and did so in terms understandable to their rulers. In this sense the basic “ground rules” or criteria of relevance were Western and Christian, and thus the discourse of the imperialists forcibly transformed,¹³ at least to some extent, that of the subjugated. Still, one cannot deny that Hindu responses to Western, Christian domination are legitimate responses, nor should one make the mistake of imagining that these responses were not forms of resistance – a point made very forcefully by the subaltern collective.¹⁴ These responses created, I suggest, an “interstitial discourse”, or what Said calls a median category.¹⁵ Hindu responses to Christian or other foreign traditions might thus be understood as both interpretations or negotiations of the Other, as well as redescriptions of their own traditions in the light of the Other. It is on these interpretations and redescriptions that Occidentalism presuppositions bear. Like Orientalism, Hindu Occidentalism applies a conglomeration of attitudes, practices, presuppositions, and social and academic structures on its object for the purposes of controlling or manipulating it. In so doing it effects the redescription of both its object and itself. It is to these specific beliefs and practices that we now turn.

What were the categories Hindus used in negotiating Christianity? Mention has already been made of the term *mleccha*, generally used to refer to the foreign as such, which Halbfass defines as pertaining to “the violation of fundamental norms, as deficiency, deviation and lack of value”.¹⁶ Other terms, such as *yavana*, *purasxka*, and *raumaka* may have referred to particular groups or peoples, the Ionians, Persians, and Romans respectively.¹⁷ These were generally terms of opprobrium and served to

maintain the attitude of silence and evasion characteristic of classical Hindu attitudes to the alien, which Paul Hacker described as "passive intolerance".¹⁸ More interesting for our purposes is the Hinduization of extrinsic religious concepts and identities. This is where Hindu Occidentalism is most apparent in its homogenizing inclusivism and eclecticism, which we shall consider in turn.

The universalizing and accommodating nature of Hinduism, its inherent flexibility and multiperspectivalism can be praised and criticized in almost equal measure. Julius Lipner construes this multi-perspectival polycentrism, what he calls *Hindutta*, in terms of a positive, dynamic tension.¹⁹ In Radhakrishnan's hands, however, the same inclusivist nature is valorized as *sanatana dharma*, the Hindu *philosophia perennis* and essence of all religion. Radhakrishnan's construal of *sanatana dharma* rhetorically validates Hinduism's "swallowing up" of its competitors. In my analysis Radhakrishnan's "median categories" are merely disguised Hindu genera and thus openly available to control and manipulation. As a tool for dealing with the Other, sanatani Hinduism clearly vitiates the alterity of Christian traditions, and this seems to have been the dominant mode of negotiation with the Other in modern times.²⁰ The negative aspects of what I am calling Hindu Occidentalism here become apparent: if Orientalism constructed a mythical East in order to ease and justify its political and economic subjugation by the colonial powers, the image of an inclusivist, universalized Hinduism raised in apologetic response, and which still holds sway not least in India, made possible the view of the West as morally and spiritually bankrupt and in need of India's greater religious wisdom to birth its own spiritual epiphany. In being colonized, Hinduism is ironically the Christian West's saviour.

This attitude is nowhere better exemplified than in the writing and preaching of Vivekananda. Like Keshab Chandra Sen before him, Vivekananda sees it as Hindu India's mission to be the corrective and complement of the Christian West. Where

Europe is politically mighty and materially wealthy, it is poor in spirit. Vivekananda held that Hindus, of all people, are spiritual experts and it is thus their "duty" to enter into a transaction with the West:

Therefore it is fitting that whenever there is spiritual adjustment, it should come from the Orient. It is also fitting that when the Oriental wants to learn about machine-making, he should sit at the feet of the Occidental and learn from him. When the Occident wants to learn about the spirit, about god, about the soul, about the meaning and the mystery of the universe, then he must sit at the feet of the Orient and learn.²¹

The fact that Vivekananda saw this as a transaction – a deal – points to the second characteristic of Hindu Occidentalism: its eclecticism. While clearly most Hindu responses to Christianity rejected wholesale acceptance, there did seem to be an admission that the religion of the Europeans could be of benefit to India. The primary interest seemed to lie in realm of social ethics, though this is not to say that Hindus did not have their own moral systems. Rather the kind of ethics for which Hindus looked to European Christianity was one suitable for modernity. In this sense the Hindu *bricoleur* collected from Christianity that which could remake his/her Hinduism into a *modern* religion.²² This eclectic borrowing is, however, already a sign of modernity. The decontextualization required for picking and choosing certain religious elements from their proper homes presupposes that such a process does no harm to the element extracted, implying that these elements have an intrinsic, free-floating meaning. Writ large this view is crucial to the fragmentation of discourses characteristic of modernity.²³

So we have two main Occidental attitudes apparent in modern Hindu responses to the Christian West. The homogenizing inclusivism of *sanatana dharma* allows Hindus to incorporate alterior religious traditions into their own highly developed hierarchical tropologies, thus eviscerating them of any threatening power.

Eclecticism, on the other hand, temporarily postpones inclusion in order to identify and extract specific elements of the foreign religion or culture for its own use. These modes of negotiation are cloaked in the rhetoric of religious tolerance and universality, allied to an attitude of almost messianic duty to guide, instruct, and encourage the spiritually moribund West. Surely these are worthy Occidentalists counterparts to their Orientalist modes of manipulation and subjugation.

Now lest it be thought that Hindu responses to the Christian Other are through and through Occidentalists, let me suggest, very briefly, how it might be transformed into the starting point of a much more open and mutually beneficial process.

The eclecticism and inclusivism revealed in the sanatani response to the Christian West highlights the malleability of its median categories. Being universalist there are potentially no aspects of the Other which cannot be accommodated, and being re-interpretative in character, the categories can be fashioned to whichever ends are required. This shows a deep pragmatism running through Hindu attitudes towards Christians and others. The specific contours of Hindu responses were geared towards the needs of the day, be that nation building, theological apologetics, or passive intolerance. In all cases there exists manipulation and control of the categories of negotiation for the benefit of the Hindu. This is, in the end, the crux of Hindu Occidentalism. However it also allows for a rapprochement. The very malleability of median categories allows for a pragmatic redirection of the Orientalist/Occidentalists methodology. If we take the pragmatism of such negotiations seriously we can mould our median categories to another end.

These median categories can, I suggest, form the truly interstitial locus for the mutual transformations inherent in Orientalism and Occidentalism. If these categories are manipulated not specifically for the interests of one religion or the other but rather, through the use of metaphorical predication, allowed to remain fundamental-

ly open-ended and thus indeterminate, a space can be formed for mutual transformation which is non-coercive and non-exploitative.²⁴ What I am proposing is that those interested in Hindu-Christian dialogue pragmatically and imaginatively reconstruct the categories through which the Other is approached by the full use of novel metaphors. The interstitial space in which these median categories are to be reconstructed can thus become a kind of poetic "hybridization laboratory" where religious traditions can transform and be transformed by the Other. The "laboratory technicians" for these hybridizations will be men and women of good will, who risk imaginative experiments with their own traditions in the face of an Other, in a search for greater understanding of their own tradition or the partial creation of a novel one. Their success can be measured according to the criteria of the communities of which they are already a part, or of those which they help through their experiments to forge. This method holds, I suggest, the possibility of communication across cultural boundaries which avoids the pitfalls of Orientalism and Occidentalism and the promise of greater success in the search for truth wherever it may be found.

Notes

1. Indeed, when I visited scholars and teachers at various Christian institutions in India, discussion of these questions proved much more fruitful.
2. My claim here applies primarily to the modern situation, as historically the primary Hindu attitude towards foreigners was silence and evasion. See Wilhelm Halbfass's *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, (Albany NY: SUNY, 1988), p. 182.
3. For arguments against interreligious dialogue per se, see John Milbank's "The End of Dialogue" in Gavin D'Costa (ed.) *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1990).
4. Interestingly I did not encounter the same

- reticence to discuss issues arising from Hindu-Muslim relations. This may simply be due to the larger number of Muslims in India, but it also might reflect the greater historical and mnemonic distance from Muslim domination of India. The reality of Mogul imperialism is, despite its many legacies, relegated to history in a way that the scarcely 50-year-old departure of the British Raj cannot be. Moreover the Indianization of Muslim culture has arguably been far more successful than for European culture.
5. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage books, 1979).
 6. While "Occidentalism" may not be the most appropriate nor the most elegant of monikers, it does serve to highlight the bi-directionality of Orientalism. As suggested in many responses to Said's work, the Western study of the orient was not merely one-way, assuming an altogether passive Eastern recipient, but is better understood as a conversation, albeit by politically unequal partners. See J. J. Clarke's *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, (London: Routledge, 1997) for an illuminating analysis of this "conversation".
 7. *Orientalism*, pp. 2-3.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 58
 9. V. G. Kiernan, *Lords of Human Kind: Black Man, Yellow Man, and White Man in an Age of Empire*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1969), p. 151. As quoted by Said, *Orientalism*, p. 52. Elements of this daydream include the supposed mystic, inscrutable, backward, hedonistic, irrational, and recidivist qualities imputed of the oriental.
 10. *Orientalism*, p. 60.
 11. This is not to say that Hindu societies have from the outset been "on the back foot" in their relations with Christian societies. As noted above, Wilhelm Halbfass, in tracing traditional Indian "xenology", begins with the comment that traditional Hinduism has not reached out for the West, implying that wilful ignorance has been the dominant Indian attitude toward others. This has been punctuated by periods where Hindus, exercising greater power than the foreigners, positively discriminated against them, though by relatively passive means. He goes on to say, however, that by 1800 the foreign presence in India coupled with the establishment of the field of orientalism conspired to elicit an (Hindu) Indian response to (Christian) Europe in Western philosophical terms which partially instigated the Hindu renaissance. See Halbfass's *India and Europe*, chapter 11.
 12. Ram Mohan Roy and Sarvepali Radhakrishnan are two among many Hindu apologists to exercise this control. Using Western philosophical and religious terms and categories, often very much indebted to the Hegelian tradition and German romanticism, they reinterpreted their own traditions for Western and indigenous consumption, and in the process mapped both Hinduism and Christianity onto their own map of faiths. Radhakrishnan might thus, in his *Hindu View of Life* and *An Idealist View of Life*, be seen as an early theologian of religions.
 13. See Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Transformation in British Social Anthropology", in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 157-8.
 14. This collective was largely made up of Indian academics who sought consciously to rewrite Indian historiography from the point of view of the marginalized. See Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (ed.) *Selected Subaltern Studies*, (Oxford: OUP, 1988).
 15. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 58. I have developed the idea of an interstitial discourse in "A Methodology for Interreligious Theologizing: Toward an Interstitial Theology", ARC 23 (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1995) and more fully in my forthcoming *Dialogue and Hybridity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).
 16. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 176.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
 18. Paul Hacker, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. L. Schmithausen, (Wiesbaden: Glasenapp-Stiftung, 1978), p. 380. As quoted by Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 181.
 19. Julius Lipner, "Ancient Banyan: An Inquiry into the Meaning of 'Hindu-ness'", *Religious Studies*, March 1996, p. 28
 20. Halbfass *India and Europe*, chapter 11. Richard King argues similarly in his *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 136.
 21. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, vol. IV.,

- (Calcutta: Mayavati Memorial edition), 1970-73), p. 156. As quoted by Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 233.
22. But even this was not a real borrowing from extrinsic sources, since for the sanataniist Hindu all religious ideals are already present, in potential form, in Hindu *dharma*. To make a Christian notion Hindu was thus really only to remember what Hinduism already possesses.
23. See Weber's introduction to his Collected Essays on the Sociology of World Religions, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons, (London: Unwin, 1930)
24. While I cannot present this proposal fully in the remaining space, a full elaboration and example of it will appear in a forthcoming publication.