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Contribution of Harold Coward to the Study of Religions and Hindu-Christian Studies

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NO one can avoid in one's activity that flash of understanding produced either through words or through the working of one's predispositions. (*Bhartrhari*)

We all know something of Harold Coward's contribution to the Study of Religions and Hindu-Christian studies. He is the originator and long-time editor of this Bulletin, and indeed the founder of the Society itself. He was also Director of the Calgary Institute for the Humanities from 1980 to 1992, and from 1992 to the present, Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society in Victoria University in Victoria, British Columbia. In addition to editing this Bulletin, Coward has also served as an editor of the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, the SUNY Series in Religious Studies, and served on the editorial boards of numerous journals. Such duties alone might well have served to keep a professor sufficiently busy, but a glance at Prof. Coward's Curriculum Vitae considerably broadens and deepens our appreciation of his impressive array of publications: 14 personally authored books (occasionally in collaboration with a colleague or two) beginning with *Bhartrhari* (1976) and most recently *T. R. V. Murti* (2001), more than 75 journal essays, 50 book chapters, 250 book reviews, 15 lecture series, plus innumerable individual lectures, and 27 edited and co-edited volumes. A long essay would be required just to summarize his research and

writing and the projects he has facilitated. This brief essay, however, focuses on just four aspects of this large corpus: studies in the theory of language; rethinking Christian identity in light of Hinduism; contributions to the understanding of pluralism and specifically of Hindu-Christian pluralism; interdisciplinary projects.

First, there is Coward's own specific and focused research on *Bhartrhari* and the Indian philosophical/grammarians tradition: *Bhartrhari* (1976), *Sphota Theory of Language* (1980, 1986), and *The Philosophy of the Grammarians* (with K. Kunjunni Raja, 1990). In *Bhartrhari* Coward describes how his interest in the process of knowing, and specifically how we know by way of language, was facilitated by a turn to *Bhartrhari*:

In Western philosophy, psychology, and theology, I found this study very difficult to pursue because of the academic alienation that exists among these disciplines. In traditional Indian thought, however, I found that there were no brick walls between disciplines and that the question of how language conveys and reveals word meanings had a long and respected academic parentage... I found myself particularly drawn to *Bhartrhari*'s thinking because it spanned the

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diverse disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and theology, and because it had been debate right up to the present day... Although Bhartrhari lived in India many centuries ago, his writing has a universal appeal that spans the years and bridges the gulf between East and West. This very timelessness in conjunction with universality suggests that Bhartrhari as grammarian, metaphysician, and poet has come close to revealing the fundamental nature of consciousness itself." (*Bhartrhari*, p. 9)

In Coward's view, our understanding of revelation in a global human context is enriched by attention to Bhartrhari:

At a time when the sacred scriptures of all traditions are losing their depth and power as a result of being interpreted as strictly the product of the human imagination, Bhartrhari comes as a fresh breath of the Divine Spirit. Rather than trusting in the methods of science, reason, and historical analysis to take one to the essence of the Divine, Bhartrhari counsels trust in and deep meditation upon the revealed word itself. (*Bhartrhari*, p. 123)

He ends in an almost homiletic tone:

Many today who are attempting to be sincerely spiritual find that their scriptures no longer speak powerfully to them of God... Bhartrhari's teaching for the modern spiritual seeker is that the revealed words are to be meditated upon, not only with reference to surrounding historical circumstances (*vaikhari vak*) and logical rationality (*madhyama vak*) but with openness to the divine vision within (*pasyanti*

vak). When such an approach to the study of scripture is taken, and the divine spirit embodied within the words is allowed to work in one's consciousness, the result is spiritual sanctification of the highest order (*sabdapurvayoga*)." (*Bhartrhari*, p. 123)

He readily admits the genesis of his interest in Bhartrhari to the powerful influence of his teacher in Varanasi:

The greatest influence in my scholarly formation came from my Hindu teacher, Professor T.R.V. Murti of Banaras Hindu University, who supervised my Ph.D. But he was far more than just my Ph.D. supervisor in the usual Western sense. He and I had a Guru-Sisya relationship from 1971 until his death in 1986. He was like a grandfather to our children and I am still in relationship with his family through his eldest son. From 1972-74, I went to his home three afternoons a week to read texts together, traditional style, line by line, not moving to the next line until he was satisfied I fully understood the line we were on.

In a forthcoming volume on Professor Murti, Coward specifies further how Murti helped him to think across cultural and religious boundaries:

When I found myself wishing to write a Ph.D. thesis on "How Christian Scripture Functions as Revelation," it was Professor Murti's insight that enabled him to see that my fundamental quest was to understand the function of language in the revelation of truth. He then guided me away from the modern Western debate about scripture - its psychology,

philosophy and theology - back to the ancient Indian speculations on language, especially those of the Grammarians. Study of the ancient Indian philosophy of language would, he suggested, give me a solid and more critical basis from which to return to my original question of "How Christian Scripture Functions as Revelation." This insight has proven to be prophetic. After spending the first part of my academic career on Bhartrhari and the Grammarian Philosophy of Language, I am now writing not only on the Indian philosophy of language but also critical assessments of the way in which scripture functions to reveal truth in Christianity and other world religions... Thus Murti's insight that a study of the Indian philosophy of language would allow me to bring a deeper understanding to the Western experience of scriptural revelation has proven to be true to my own life. (*T. R. V. Murti*, mss. pp. 88-89)

Perhaps here is the place to mention Coward's monograph, *Derrida and Indian Thought*. Although Derrida does not advert to Indian philosophy or linguistic theory, nonetheless Coward argues that reading Derrida helped him to recover respect for written texts, and thus to reconstitute a religiously important tension between the oral and written in traditions. He explains how Derrida aided him in recovering a more balanced respect for the written as well the oral, enabling him to appreciate Indian thought in a more complex fashion, balancing his deep appreciation for the oral with a newfound respect for the written. Underlying the various chapters - Derrida and Bhartrhari on the origins of language and on speech and writing, Derrida and Sankara, Aurobindo, Nagarjuna - runs the theme of Coward's own rediscovery of aspects of the Indian and, consequently,

Christian traditions previously downplayed. Coward thus finds in Derrida not merely interesting theories of language to compare with his own, but also a resource for rethinking his presuppositions about language as he had been studying it in the Indian context. As will become clearer below when we consider the wider reaches of Coward's vision of a comprehensive interreligious dialogue in today's world, there is a commonality between Derrida's sense of productive face-to-face speech and Coward's own lifelong project of creating opportunities for transformative conversations; thus Coward cites Derrida:

Face to face with the other within a glance and a speech which both maintain distance and interrupt all totalities, this being-together as separation precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community. Levinas calls it religion. It opens ethics. The ethical relation is a religious relation. Not a religion, but the religion, the religiosity of the religious. This transcendence beyond negativity is not accomplished by an intuition of a positive presence; it 'only institutes language at the point where neither no nor yes is the first word' but an interrogation. Not a theoretical interrogation, however, but a total question... the only possible ethical imperative, the only incarnated nonviolence in that it is respect for the other.

A second feature of Coward's contribution is his extension of his early studies and experience by linking his study of Hindu scriptures with his own Christian self-understanding. In *Sacred Word and Sacred Text: Scripture in World Religions* (1988) he recalls,

Very early in life, even before I began to go to school, my mother told me Bible stories, especially the parables of Jesus. These spoken words had a deep and transforming effect upon my consciousness. For me as a young child those experiences of hearing the word of

the gospel provided the basis of my religious belief, and they remain as the fundamental grounding of my life to this day. Later in Sunday school, university, and seminary I studied the word as a written text. I learned to approach the Bible as literature, to examine its historical context, its literary sources, its structural forms, its canonization and interpretation. While intellectually stimulating and enlightening, this academic analysis of the Bible sometimes led to a dimming of the transforming power of God's word in my life. It was when I began to study the Hindu religion and its experience of Hindu scripture, the Veda, that I became resensitized to the spiritual power of my own Christian scripture. The Hindu emphasis on the Veda as oral, and its downplaying of the written text, made me think back to my own experience of hearing the parables of Jesus as my mother's knee. For the Hindu, it is the spoken sacred word that reveals divine truth and has power to transform one's consciousness. Writing is only a prop, a teaching aid aimed at actualizing the oral experience of the word. Returning from the study of Hinduism, I set out to discover the relationship between the oral and the written experience of scripture in my own Christian tradition as well as in the other world religions." (*Sacred Word and Sacred Text*, p. ix)

Much of the book is devoted to exploring a sacred word that is powerful particularly insofar as its oral power has not been lost. Coward seeks to encourage and aid modern Westerners as we learn from other religious cultures how to retrieve what has been lost in our own sense of the power of sacred words and texts as read and heard.

The last chapter is a kind of spiritual testament encapsulating years of insight into the role of oral and written scripture in the world's major traditions as past and future realities, with a focus on key topics, "the primacy of the oral," "the need for the written," "the spiritual power of oral and written scripture," and scripture's "future" in worship, religious education, and private devotion. Coward maps out a rich and multi-dimensioned perspective on how scripture and scriptures have functioned and will function in our increasingly integral global context. In effect, Coward describes for all of us a program for renewing our scholarly, communal and personal use of sacred scripture.

In "*Hinduism's Sensitizing of Christianity to its Own Sources*," Coward reviews the matter autobiographically, beginning with an account of his own encounter with a Christian preacher in Varanasi:

One day while dressed in pajamas and kurta, sitting in a Banaras Hindu University residence room, I was evangelized by a passing Christian missionary who took me to be a Hindu. Suddenly, I found myself looking at my own Christian religion through Hindu eyes. The effect was striking! First, I was shocked at the lack of sensitivity by the Christian missionary to what might well have been my Hindu world view. The Christian message was presented in fine imperialistic fashion — a superior voice that simply stated the truth of Jesus that would save me from my sin and ignorance. The attitude projected was clearly that of the superior truth saving the inferior, in a kindly paternalistic fashion. To see my own Christian tradition presented this way caused me wonder. (*Hinduism's Sensitizing*, p. 77)

Coward goes on to reflect on the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4, and how Jesus' ability to awaken her thirst for deeper, living wisdom by conversing with her exemplifies the need to listen to religious others and to learn from them:

My 'Hindu reawakening' to the experience of Jesus with the Samaritan woman had the effect of deepening my own faith commitment and simultaneously allowing me to be more truly open to others. (*Hinduism's Sensitizing*, 78)

He records similar experiences in his study of the Yoga Sutras, which helped him to see that "one's consciousness is so completely one with the word that it is the object of scripture itself that is revealed (i.e., the Lord) rather than the object of the rational activity of the mind (i.e., conceptual thought about the Lord)." (*Hinduism's Sensitizing*, p. 80) This discovery led Coward to an entirely new approach to the Bible:

I put away the commentaries from my desk and immersed myself only in the revealed word itself. My morning Bible study became less and less intellectual and more and more an opening of myself to the transforming power of the Biblical word... The rational/analytical approach to the word to which I devoted myself during my working hours as a scholar was balanced by a non-rational devotional experience of the world in my early morning svadhyaya study... The overbalance on the rational side was corrected and I was reconnected with the deep transforming power present in the direct devotional experience of the world... The intellectual and personal experience of my Christian

religion had been returned to its formative basis in my childhood hearing of the parables of Jesus by my encounter with Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. (*Hinduism's Sensitizing*, 80-81)

Coward's study of the Hindu appreciation of sacred orality enabled him to reappropriate the power of the proclaimed word in Christianity, and by way of his appreciation of mantra practice, even of the Catholic rosary recitation. As a result, the study of Hinduism has been both a confirming and a deepening experience. It has confirmed my Protestant Christian experience of the power of the scriptural word but broadened my awareness of how that power functions in processes such as devotional chanting. Study of the Yoga Sutras has led me to discover traditions of daily spiritual discipline within Christianity, of which I was previously unaware. My daily Bible study has been changed from a rational to a devotional exercise and I have been resensitized to the roots of my spiritual foundation in the hearing of the parables of Jesus as a young child... Seeing my Christian faith through Hindu eyes has also radically altered my view of chanted prayer and my understanding of Christian mission. Hinduism has powerfully sensitized me to a recovery and rediscovery of my own Christian tradition. (*Hinduism's Sensitizing*, p. 84)

A third component in Coward's contribution to the scholarly world is his work in writing numerous essays and writing and editing several books on religious pluralism. *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (1985) echoes the work of W. C. Smith, emphasizing how different religions and theologies are now so deeply intertwined that the future of seminary education (and its parallels in other traditions) will be deeply constricted unless interreligious learning is made a goal and regular part of the curriculum. At the book's

end he suggests six guiding presuppositions for dialogue in the future:

1. that in all religions there is experience of a reality that transcends human conception;

2. that that reality is conceived in a plurality of ways both within each religion and among all religions and that the recognition of plurality is necessary both to safeguard religious freedom and to respect human limitations;

3. that the pluralistic forms of religion are instrumental in function;

4. that due to our finite limitations and our simultaneous need for commitment to a particular experience of transcendent reality, our particular experience, though limited, will function in an absolute sense as the validating criterion for our own personal religious experience;

5. that the Buddha's teaching of critical tolerance and moral compassion always must be observed; and

6. that through self-critical dialogue we must penetrate even further into our own particular experience of transcendent reality (and possibly into the transcendent reality of others). (*Pluralism*, pp. 105-106)

Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism (1987), and *Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (1989) focus more specifically on the history of Hindu-Christian encounter in the Indian context, with an appreciation of specific conditions and factors affecting instances of that encounter. Hindu-Christian contexts today of course occur only in the context of a long history of prior contexts, and Coward has helped us to see more clearly where we are in this conversation at the beginning of a new millennium.

One might of course simply stop with any of the preceding areas of work, but fourth and finally we must also mention the edited volumes on a wide range of issues, for example: *Religion and Ethnicity* (1978), *Peace, Development and Culture* (1990), *Ethics and Climate Change* (1993), *Aging and Dying: Legal, Scientific and Religious Challenges* (1993), *Religious Dimensions of Child and Family Life* (1996), *Life After Death in World Religions* (1998), *Religious Conscience, the State and the Law* (1998), *A Cross-Cultural Dialogue on Health Care Ethics* (1999) *Visions of a New Earth: Religious Perspectives on Population, Consumption and Ecology* (2000). We can mention here *Hindu Ethics: Purity, Abortion, and Euthanasia* (1989), a volume he co-authored with Katherine Young and Julius Lipner.

Much of this interdisciplinary work flows from Coward's deepest and most stubbornly held intellectual convictions. Early on, when his Ph.D. committee was unwilling to approve a broadly interdisciplinary topic for his dissertation, he changed his thesis project to the study of scripture within Hinduism, since "in Eastern thought the disciplinary divisions of psychology, philosophy and theology did not obtain — thus allowing me to study the experience of scripture and its impact on human self-understanding in a holistic and, to my mind, humanistic fashion. Such a broad approach to study is to me the mark of scholarship in the humanities, and the reason I left empirical psychology to become a humanist." (*Humanities*, pp. 23-24) The resultant thesis, however, brought together the various strands of thought in a rich fashion:

"[The thesis] did indeed engage psychological, philosophical, and theological issues in the reception of Christian scripture, but it did so in the much larger cross-cultural context of the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim and Jewish experience

of scripture. In short, the question was studied across the broad range of human experience, and without disciplinary restriction.” (*Humanities*, p. 24)

A still more encompassing statement is found in *The Contribution of Religious Studies to Public Policy*. Coward defends the constructive and in a way privileged role Religious Studies can play when, as part of a rich interdisciplinary effort, such studies enable people of different religious traditions to rethink their place in public life:

Today’s policy problems such as overpopulation, excess consumption of the earth’s resources, and the pollution of the earth, air and water are new ethical problems that call forth new theology challenging each tradition to search its teachings for relevant wisdom. (*The Contribution of Religious Studies*, p. 491)

As people of different faiths work together to solve the great human problems facing humanity today,

[T]he views of the religions, presented in a even-handed Religious Studies format, along with the knowledge of scientists, social scientists and secular thinkers are now very much front and centre as the world attempts to solve its most pressing problems. (*The Contribution of Religious Studies*, p. 494)

Coward approvingly cites Princeton professor Richard Falk on the power of interreligious cooperation today, as religions become a major force for social change, because “they can reach people around the globe more directly and more fully than any other societal institution.” (*The Contribution of Religious Studies*, p. 495) By examples from multiple religious traditions, and from

his Centre’s work in the areas as diverse as health care ethics, the challenges facing coastal fisheries, and restorative justice, Coward vividly demonstrates the pertinent and wider role of religions today. Interreligious study and cooperation are deeply intellectual enterprises, but they are also urgently needed practical contributions to the betterment of our world. As teachers, scholars of religion have a key role:

Our narrow and less challenging Religious Studies departmental ways, in which we have all been reared, must be imaginatively stretched into new patterns if the wisdom of the religions is to have a seat at the table where the solutions to the world’s problems are being developed. (*The Contribution of Religious Studies*, p. 501)

The collaborative nature of such work is central to Coward’s vision of religious studies: there is too much to be known, involving too many disciplines, for us to retreat into overspecializations; religion is too important to be cut off and isolated in a world unto itself; we need one another, we need to work together. It is thus primary to note that Hindu-Christian studies and dialogue ought not to be focused solely on the rarified realm of the “Hindu-Christian encounter,” but rather should open more broadly onto a world where humans who are Hindu and Christian and other religious persons live together, all concerned with the issues facing humans today.

All of this formidable erudition, imagination, and skill in convening conversations and collaborations has over the years yielded abundant fruit in this *Hindu-Christian Bulletin* itself, as even a recollection of the thematic topics of recent years will indicate: volume 11 (1998): “The Hindu Diaspora;” volume 12 (1999): “Time in Christian and Hindu Thought;” volume 13 (2000): “Hindu and Christian Mutual Misperceptions.” As is appropriate for the

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final issue of *Bulletin* under Coward's editorship, volume 14 (2001) highlighted a retrospective theme, "How my thinking has changed." Contributions by C. Murray Rogers ("Grounds for Mutual Growth"), K.L. Sheshagiri Rao ("Hindu-Christian Dialogue: A Hindu Perspective"), Anantanand Rambachan ("Hierarchies in the Nature of God?"), William Cenkner ("Retrospective: The Birthing of a Discipline"), and Kenneth Cracknell ("Dialogue: a Call to Friendship") all remind us of the endurance and energy of Hindu-Christian dialogue and scholarly exchange, the vitality and commitment of those who have been solidifying this enterprise over the last generation, and also of the merit of

finding fresh approaches in years to come. The Society for Hindu-Christian Studies itself is an increasingly successful forum for the new conversation convened across the generations, as we all learn to read together, listen, converse in words that are scholarly and alive, our own but also rich with the learning of innumerable generations of Hindus and Christians before us. Perhaps it is Coward's commitment to the power of language - written, oral, among us - which inspired him to found the Society in the first place; our cooperation in keeping alive the conversations of the Society will also be our best way to assure him that his good work will continue to bear fruit.