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Postcolonial Theological Approaches to Hindu-Christian Studies

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THE disciplinary boundaries of “Hindu-Christian” studies call into question the cultural and political terrain in which it is engendered. As a Christian theologian from India whose encounter with academic Hinduism is as it is taught in the US, my experience is tangential and rather critical in terms of the power issues it raises. Nevertheless, as a theologian of culture I am most interested in how the project of decolonizing theology or the study of religion should take place in the context of the North American academy. Of primary importance here is the dissolution of problematic devaluations. For example, what goes by the name of “Christianity” and what goes by the name of “Hinduism” in the academy? As an Indian theologian, my work of constructive theology has often been peripheralized as “contextual” Christian theology in contrast to the theology produced by representatives of the centers of theological power. Or, as my good friend Neelima Shukla-Bhatt often bemoans, her form of Hinduism is often taken to be a subjective and faith-based description of religious practice, whereas, her white, Euro-American Protestant or Christian or Atheist colleagues are able to do “objective” and academic Hinduism. The colonial and neo-colonial context of academic Christian theology and Hinduism cannot avoid persistently interrogating this context.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would call this stance the deconstructive stance: “Persistently to critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit”¹. What forms will theology take, since I must speak from the home I wish to inhabit

when a decolonizing imperative attends the dialogical moment between Hindu-Christian studies? However, precisely because the project of decolonizing the mind takes place within the liberal academic setting of application models, I will argue here with one such as Ashis Nandy, that the retrieval of culture is less about “applying” a cultural theorist such as Bhabha or Spivak to Western proposals, and far more about dialogue in a mode of ascesis of the ego. In other words, a spiritual practice attends the production of academic knowledge, particularly in comparative religion. Knowledge thus produced is far removed from the mastery models so dear to the academy. Two broad moves are presented in this essay. One, the dialogical model for constructive Christian theology “meddles” with both Eurocentric Christian theology as well as secular western cultural theory. Secondly, the ascesis of the ego that I am proposing as a broad model for performing comparative work dwells not on any form of textual analysis or other forms of acceptable reasoning, but makes a plea for utilizing “culture” for a practice of intellectual spirituality. Both of these moves attend the theological dialogue between Hindu-Christian studies by investigating the cultural matrix in which this body of knowledge is produced.

In my book *Identity, Ethics and Nonviolence in Postcolonial Theory*,² the attempt to influence the manner in which Roman Catholic theology is construed in most academic contexts as one largely untouched by political and cultural issues (the study of liberation theology and political

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theology being the exceptions), takes the form of a critical dialogue between de-colonizing postcolonial theories and progressive Catholic theology. One concern, the theological issue of anthropology as it impinges on the postcolonial construal of identity construction, continues to be an interesting problem to revisit for such de-colonizing attempts. For example, a postcolonial theorist such as Homi Bhabha has advanced the notion of hybridity³ in cultural studies to indicate the manner in which dispossessed groups will negotiate identity with the oppressor in order to counter the negative effects of retaining the preferred identity conferred on them by the oppressing group. However, in the early presentation of this idea, Bhabha's theory of hybridity of identity led to its interpretation by some in the West as simply referring to syncretic modes of cultural and religious identity creation. My reading of Bhabha's notion of hybridity argues for a far more anthropological and theological grounding for identity than Bhabha.

There is a theological and anthropological warrant for reading Bhabha in this manner. This complex reading depends on a particularly religious reading of hybridity, which reads Bhabha against the cultural grain. Since Bhabha himself retrieves the colonial archive selectively by ignoring the religious context of the hybrid strategies of native Hindus, I argue that highlighting the religious context of his retrieval enables us to see how cultural hybrid strategies arose in a particularly religious context—that of Hindu poly/theistic worldviews. In other words, the Hybridity of identity that Bhabha wants to present as cultural depends on a worldview that imagines religious subjectivity much more capaciously than secularized theories produced in the West. Nevertheless, such a hybrid mode does not lead to the kind of syncretism that worries Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authorities. The negotiations made with power instead lead to modes of being that allow for strategies of inclusive identity formation which confound the rigid manner of identity-boundedness imagined by conserving authorities.

Homi Bhabha's attempt to argue that the "natives" in India encountering missionary attempts to convert them plays into the hands of

conserving academic and ecclesial authorities who argue for "pure" boundaries for very different purposes. Thus a reading of Bhabha which advances a triumphalist notion of hybridity actually justifies the conserving argument of "pure" identity which undergoes change due to contamination from the outside. The theory of hybridity of identity as Bhabha understands it was worked out in one of Bhabha's most famous essays "Signs Taken for Wonders"⁴ in which he describes how hybridity as a form of agency emerged in the context of Christian mission in India. The story is that of an Indian evangelist called Anund Messeh who finds a group of over 500 people reading the Bible in Hindi. On asking where they acquired the Bibles, he is told that an angel had given them the book. The people assert that they read and love the book since it came to them as a gift directly from God. Messeh tells them then that the angel was just a missionary, and the reason why the book was given to them was because it contained the religion of the European Sahibs. The people demur, saying that it could not be the book of the Sahibs since the Sahibs are flesh eaters and surely God's word would not be among those people with such disgusting cultural habits. They proclaim that the arrival of the book is a miracle. And that is as far as they are willing to go. When Messeh argues that in order to become the true people of God they must be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and not just read the book, the people excuse themselves politely remembering that they have to be home at the harvest just then (102–104). Bhabha's story attempts to point out that the natives' survival as a culture depended on a hybrid moment of negotiation of cultural identity. He is partially correct.

Bhabha's analysis of this event from the colonial archive asserts that the adoption of the book without the radical change of identity presumed by Christian missionaries in the event of conversion is an example of interruptive and interventionist enunciation: the agency of the colonial subject who possesses the ability to relativize universal claim of authority by pointing out inner contradictions and ambivalences on the cultural plane. Bhabha is gleeful of the fact that none of these people

convert to ritualized Christianity: it proves his point that agency is located not in the subjective realm of conversion but in the articulation of cultural relativization. The interventionist and interruptive enunciation holds up a mirror that questions the colonial insistence to capitulate to raw power by interrogating the ethical underpinning of universalized identity. The people refuse conversion because it does not match up with their world-view and their values.

For Bhabha this event is ample proof that the missionary enterprise in colonial India failed in the final analysis. Cultural identity is preserved in the face of the assertion that the integrity of the message is compromised if conversion did not occur. Yet, the people take home the holy book and love it by belonging to an interstitial "third space" which is neither the one nor the other originary identity. This is not simply a cultural move. Bhabha's cultural reading of hybridity depends on an unquestioned assumption: that the Bible is a western book. However, the book is entirely at home in the homes of inclusivist Hindus who are establishing the interstitial third space in full view of domestic, foreign and religious attempts to discipline and patrol the boundaries of their identity formation. The book is at home precisely because one can argue that Hinduism tends to create platforms for "anonymous Hinduism." Such an "anonymous Hinduism" is the result of a theological worldview arising in the Indian poly/theistic cultural context.

Thus, in its constructive mode, Indian postcolonial theology seeks to foreground those moments of theological innovation which occur in response to the colonial presence. Since Indian postcolonial theology is not limited to the temporality of the colonial context alone, and must take into account the present neo-colonial context in which theological production takes place, a dialogue with representatives of such theological production is necessary. However, instead of simply adding a cultural perspective to theology such as Bhabha + X theologian, postcolonial theological thinking mandates a more complex engagement to *do* postcolonial theology. For example, a postcolonial and cultural engagement with the thought of a thoroughly Eurocentric and Western theologian such as Karl Rahner would help advance the

conversation for an Indian postcolonial theological anthropology precisely because of its focus on inclusivism as a middle road between relativism and exclusivism. In other words, Rahner is not immediately "irrelevant" to the Indian postcolonial context as some might think and neither is Bhabha immediately "relevant" to that context as well.

Rahner's theology, as is well known, expounds a Catholic systematic perspective starting with the Enlightenment imperative to begin with the human. His anthropological starting point, which is developed within the Catholic Thomistic tradition, has much potential for development for those Christians whose experience under colonialism and aggressive forms of domestic nationalism led to an "anthropological poverty." Anthropological poverty, arises in a context where the colonized are rationalized as subhuman or worthy of oppression and domination through the use of power in colonial logic. As Ashis Nandy, among others, has shown, this mode of devaluing is internalized by the oppressed in colonial contexts. Engaging Rahner, of course, means engaging with his Eurocentricism which includes his concern with the rising secularism of Europe in the mid-twentieth century. His solution to retain the basic Catholic optimism inherent in Catholic Theological Anthropology and emphasize a positive theology of divine grace results in the development of an inclusive anthropology through which believers, non-believers and even atheists could be included as recipients of divine grace. The inclusive term thus delineated is called "Anonymous Christianity" and rests on another weighted term specific to Rahner's theology, the "Supernatural Existential."

What is Anonymous Christianity? Its deployment in the rhetorical terrain of the Western academy is informative here. For Roman Catholics on both the so-called left and the so-called right, this term is one that creates an incredible amount of academic noise. It also raises the hackles of some Western academics who claim to have "objective" standards when encountering and conceptualizing the religious "other". It is dismissed with great effectiveness by institutional Roman Catholic watchdogs that piggyback on the back of the liberal anxieties

about the term and castigate it for wrongly affirming the legitimacy of other religious identities and claims. The oppositional stance of this debate, constructed within Western liberal forms of othering and institutional forms of conserving lead to the confusion around the reception of the term. Decolonizing this debate might need to look both at inner theological assertions as to the value of the term for an inclusive position in comparison with other religious identities.

An exception to such polarized thinking with regard to the term Anonymous Christian is Roger Haight. As early as 1979, Roger Haight argued that the notion of the "Supernatural Existential" leads Rahner to stand in line with Vatican II's theology of religions to assert that other religious identities and claims may have authority as well (Haight, 1979, 132-133). Haight writes: "[Anonymous Christianity] is a Christian [term], which defines first of all a Christian self-understanding vis-à-vis the continuing pluralism of religions. It represents an attempt to understand the world and other religions in terms of the definitive character of *Christ's* grace. It is *not* a term to be addressed to non-Christians; it is a term applicable to others when Christians talk about them in terms of the revelation that we have received in Jesus Christ" (133, original emphases). Haight's robust inclusivist and pluralist framework does not capitulate to false standards of "objectivity" and acknowledges the thickly contextual standpoint that can give rise to complex rules of recognition in the encounter with multiple religious communities. While this explanation serves to highlight the inclusivist agenda of modern Roman Catholic and progressive theology, it may seem as if its opposite in the wake of the great criticisms of cultural anthropology in the West serves to undercut this form of Roman Catholicism's attempt to creatively engage religious difference.

The decolonizing of the disciplines therefore requires theorizing complex moves to be made in view of ethical horizons of democratic inclusivity. Thus, Rahner's proposal for anonymous Christianity can be read in such a manner as to preserve a strong self understanding and investment in the preservation of boundaries while simultaneously

being inclusive on *Christian* terms. It is a middle solution and one that is played out at the boundary of religious difference and cultural difference. Further, anonymous Christianity on Bhabha's terms fulfills the requirements to be a strategy of iteration, a solution of the middle, a tactic of survival by being inclusive by countering assumptions that either make Christianity extrinsic to the Indian experience or makes Christian speech incommensurable to Indian or Hindu idiom. Rahner's theological solution to the question of whether divine grace is limited to those who are "Christian" has relevance in the academic discussion between secular forms of theory and marginalized theology. If Christianity is based on a capacious and positive understanding of both theological anthropology as well as divine grace, a very Catholic perspective, then a term such as "Anonymous Christian" actually throws better light on Bhabha's natives who bring the Bible home than Bhabha's theory of hybridity alone. Of course, the natives do not bring the book home because they think of themselves as Anonymous Christians. They bring the book home because it is Anonymously Hindu! It must also be borne in mind that the idea of Anonymous Christianity did not come into being with Rahner. R. S. Sugirtharajah asserts that inclusive strategies advocated by Rahner and Vatican II were very much part of the Indian Christian theological scene in the 19th century (2003, 165). In other words, insisting that Anonymous Christianity has a purely European provenance and is mired in imperial logic is a misrecognition of the complex religious and theological Indian context.

The ethical move to be inclusive of the encounter with the religious "other" gives rise to a consideration of the policing of the boundaries of religious identity and academic divisions. The move may be deemed a "failure" for both conservative and liberal guardians of identity. However, the issue here for a decolonized theology in view of other religious claims is not just questions of religious identity or strategies for inclusion or pluralism. While staging a conversation between Bhabha and Rahner may seem to provide a way forward for culturally sensitive theology, the decolonization of the mind that must attend Hindu-Christian studies

might also engage the critical traditionalism of Ashis Nandy. Instead of the sort of “objective” knowledge that the Western academy seems to insist on, a deeply contextualized reading of the manner in which knowledge production in the Western academy results in novel forms of colonial superiority, a practice of spiritual asceticism to dissolve the false binary of religion and culture will be useful. Such a spirituality is not falsely “other-worldly,” but remains vigilant with regard to assertions of religious or secular forms of certitude. This is to *do* postcolonial theology.

Nandy asserts that a “language of the spirit” is not to be removed from cultural criticism. This is most clearly seen in his essay “Cultural Frames for Social Transformation: A Credo”⁵ which is one of the clearest presentations of his method. His methodology informs his sustained criticisms of secularism, Hindu nationalism, scientism, and the politics of knowledge. The constructive vision he espouses has to do with a view of the future in which the language of spirit and transcendence transform the multiple structures of violence that can be charted in the postcolonial context. The language of the spirit is not the presentation of spirituality as such. Instead, it allows for the articulation of cultural criticism with traditional idiom such as popular religiosity. While Nandy is not religious in any thick sense of the term his soft Christianity reflects the fluid cultural appropriations of religion that can befuddle the rigidity of Western notions of religious identity and the assumption that it is a *sui generis* discipline unmoored from history and culture. Critical traditionalism forwards non-modern identity constructions of interest to our discussion.

There are three foci to Nandy’s critical traditionalism. First, there is great skepticism directed toward the discourses of the nation-state⁶. In other words, the modern construction of identity organized in the idea of the “nation” draws great skepticism from Nandy. Postcolonial independence, which created the nation-state called India, did not bring true liberation, freedom, or agency to its citizens in this view. Instead, as Nandy points out, what we have are ever more rigidly drawn lines of inclusion and exclusion through which minoritized groups are resolutely marginalized

or displaced in service of the “identity” of the nation. Further, nationalistic discourses hide the tremendous corruption, violence, expropriative, ethnocidal, and ecocidal tendencies inherent in the construction of homogenous identities. In fact, according to Nandy, the examination of the culture of “statism” is a crucial clue to the manner in which democracy functions to marginalize and oppress.⁷ Thus Nandy’s postcolonial emphasis is less about sanctioned forms of political and cultural identity and a far keener analysis of the manner in which power constructs and constrains identity.

Second, Nandy is extremely skeptical about the methods of modern science.⁸ Modern science in his estimation has become the model of domination and the justification for institutionalized violence. Modern science also fuels the competitive capitalist culture of contemporary statism. It fails to engage with the critique of scientism, technicism, and the paucity of the scientific imagination in general. Scientism and technicism are utilized by statism to perform violences as insidious as the creation of superbombs in the form of “bureaucratization of human suffering” and through the principle of clinical iatrogeny which dupes the middle classes to applaud its excesses (21–22). In actively colluding with the violent agenda of the nation-state, modern science simply has failed to live up to its promises of a better life for the vast majority of human beings. The violence engendered by science is particularly painful for those who are victims of the double-edged sword of scientism—those who have been displaced through development efforts or forced migration to the industrial centers of the nation-state. In face of these concerns, Nandy advocates that a “cognitive indifference” (14) may give rise to “nonviolent science” which is a syncretic, hybrid structure that incorporates modern and premodern forms (17), allowing for a more symbiotic relationship between nature and human community. Instead of striving towards “scientific objectivity” it is incumbent on all to disdain models of mastery and attempt instead a narrative of the organic and coherent mode of living. Postcolonial theoretical frameworks therefore cannot present any positivist knowledge about people or systems.

Finally, he directs his skeptical analysis

toward the “larger forces of history” on which the fatalistic blame is laid for the ills of a democratic society. In other words, Nandy is more interested in the kind of historical narrative that roots responsibility in the individual and their decisions in light of the so-called larger forces of history.⁹ Here, in explicitly alluding to Gandhi, Nandy argues for a personal morality and humility informing political (and religious) life. Accountability was Gandhi’s criterion for humane politics and humane religiosity, and he emphasized that he would not ask the British what he could not ask Indians to do first. The Gandhian model of political intervention that Nandy espouses stresses that the systemic analyses we engage in can be extended to the individual level to judge accountability by first modeling the manner in which we intervene in the world in the same manner that we intervene in our own self and second by acknowledging that systemic structures are simply duplicating what we do to our selves. Hence, the Gandhian mode of intervention investigates the symbiotic relationship of oppressor and oppressed arguing that what is being done to one is what is what one is capable of doing to oneself and others. Hence, the principle of accountability does not allow us to investigate just the “oppressor” or the “colonizer”: agency is to be located not in the manner that one group exerts control of the other but in the manner that both collusion and resistance can be charted in the colonized. The theory of oppression that is engendered thus has to do with accountability, resistance to those ideologies of modern science and technology as well as resistance toward the exclusivist demands of nationalistic ideology.

A spiritual ascesis of knowledge is at the heart of Nandy’s critical traditionalism. Such a spirituality of personal accountability and morality, which is critical of modern claims of mastery and is able to be inclusive of the theological and religious terrain in which postcolonial subjectivity is engendered is precisely what the discipline of Hindu-Christian studies must develop. Critical dialogue in this view is not about bringing one fad to another as in the manner of many liberal attempts to present postcolonial thought. Critical dialogue instead demonstrates the essential permeability of all boundaries which is not to say that the

boundaries dissolve. Because the boundaries do not dissolve, we are able to track complex theological strategies of inclusion. Inclusivity at the boundary of religious identity may be a better strategy given the colonial relations that saturate the academic terrain that constructs Hindu-Christian studies.

Inclusive strategies at the heart of “Hinduism” are mimicked in progressive European Roman Catholic strategies asserting a positive anthropology and theology of grace. An anthropological starting ground, enveloped in divine grace is not inimical to the postcolonial strategy of cultural hybridity if comprehensively grasped in its religious and theological embeddedness. Nandy’s critical traditionalism gives legitimacy to such a theological enterprise: the languages of the spirit are not to be automatically discarded in postcolonial theory. The religious knowledge thus produced also challenges simple forms of socio-political identity conferred by modern categories of state and race. Rather than Homi Bhabha’s transnational and positive hybridity of identity, what we have instead is the negotiated identity of both oppressor and oppressed. Finally, Nandy’s critical traditionalism and its emphasis on personal morality and accountability in the colonial relationship allows for an anthropological and ethical inclusivity which does not automatically discard theologically saturated frameworks such as Rahner’s as hopelessly Eurocentric. The absence of the ascesis of the ego in knowledge production leads to an insidious form of misrecognition in the academy—that certain forms of religious strategy in the context of pluralism have much older histories in other parts of the world. Theological approaches to Hindu-Christian studies as argued challenge the very construction of the debate and its presumptions of geo-political and academic allegiance.

Notes

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 284

² Susan Abraham: *Identity, Ethics and Nonviolence in Postcolonial Theory: A Rahnerian Theological Assessment* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007)

³ Homi Bhabha: *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994)

⁴ Ibid. 102-122

⁵ Ashis Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004)

⁶ Ibid. 27

⁷ Ashis Nandy: *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 37

⁸ Ibid. 27

⁹ Nandy: *Time Warps*, 28