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Book Review: *Modern Hindu Personalism: The
History, Life and Thought of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī*

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spiritual wisdom that visitors brought was warmly welcomed. It is a pity that this Christian ashram movement, which had its heyday in the period roughly from the 1960's through the early 80's seems now to have died down.

The lives of Murray and Mary Rogers indeed exemplified a pilgrimage of awakening from their fundamentalist and conservative origins to their final evolution as deeply mystical Christians, who did not attempt merely to follow the living Christ but actually to incarnate Him in

their lives and witness. It is this third feature that in this ecumenical age of inter-religious openness provides continuing inspiration by offering an example of inter-religious existence capable of absorbing the best that religions and cultures have to offer, but yet looking beyond to farther horizons.

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***Modern Hindu Personalism: The History, Life and Thought of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī.* Ferdinando Sardella. Oxford University Press, 2013, xv + 342 pp.**

THIS study is an excellent introduction to Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, an important figure in the history of Vaishnavism and one who directly inspired the better known Swami A.C. Bhaktivedānta Prabhupada of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. As the subtitle accurately states, the author has tried to situate Bhaktisiddhānta in his whole cultural and historical context so that we can see how the thought and the movement he created are to be understood with respect to other interpretations of Hinduism which competed for the Indian public's attention and support in a colonial and then postcolonial context. India was finding its identity as an independent nation-state and also as a democracy troubled by poverty and by religious divisions between Muslims and Hindus.

To assemble this context, especially for readers outside of India, and simultaneously describe Bhaktisiddhānta's own spiritual evolution from his family roots onward is no

small feat, and the author has succeeded in reconstructing this from various archives.

He has also given us background on the classic three prejudices of Protestant Christian missionaries in the period 1739 to 1850, who reacted to Hinduism based on their hatred of so called idolatry, their contempt for sexual expression, and their high regard for science and rationality (Geoffrey A. Oddie). We could note that Catholic missionaries would not share this Protestant tendency toward iconoclasm and the bias against ritual in favor of preaching.

Sardella is interested in showing the distinctive characteristics of Vaishnava religiosity as compared to "Brahmanic-Sanskritic" Hinduism. He also points to the influence of Freemasonic esotericism which stressed universalism, tolerance and openness to all religions in the intelligentsia of the bhadrakalok class of the time, to include educated Bengalis like Vivekānanda. The bhadrakalok "middle class", often engaged in connection

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with local economies and the East India Company, were in general the landed elite, the educated, those at the top of the caste hierarchy, and as he notes, benefited from colonial rule and who were often alienated from the poorer rural Muslims. Inevitably, as an elite and in the context of the Bengali renaissance they were engaged in a construction of Hinduism for the modern age, determining what cultural markers and devotions their brand of Hinduism would embrace. At the other end of the spectrum from the esoteric universalist interpretation were the Hindu traditionalists with their rootedness in caste and brahmanic ritual and law codes. In what becomes a program to strengthen the Vaishnava approach to Hinduism and remove its perceived taint of immorality and complacency, Sarasvati finds a middle way, and as one not of high caste, a way which is to a degree self-authorizing.

Sardella gives important background on Sarasvati's father Kedarnath Datta (Bhaktivinoda) as a *bhadralok* with contacts among the intellectual elite of Calcutta and friend of Tagore, who for a while preferred Christianity to Brahmo Samaj but who was later (1868) immersed in Caitanya Vaishnavism. In a methodical way, the father led his son Bimal Prasad (Sarasvati) into Vaishnavism through his efforts to take him on pilgrimages, introduce him to gurus and immerse his son not in commerce but in a spiritual milieu. The Vaishnava mystic and ascetic Guara Kīśora dāsa Bābaji sometimes visited the family home to listen to the his now prominent guru-father Bhaktivinoda and made a strong impression on Sarasvati who felt drawn into a more ascetic life. Gaura Kīśora was an intense ascetic who lived outside in rough shelter, was uneducated and begged for food while chanting the sacred

names of God. His sometimes bizarre behavior was meant to deter those who wanted to attach themselves to him as a guru.

Sarasvati would go on to found an interpretation of Caitanya bhakti not as a work for the direct uplift of the masses or for nation building, as others conceived religion, but primarily as a means of union with the divine in this world, seen as caught in the dark Kali yuga. In the maths he founded all over India, a recitation of the sacred names of Rādhā and Krishna as a practical means of fostering love of God as well as kīrtans, public singing accompanied by instruments, a devotion going back to Sri Caitanya himself. By 1911 he was publicly challenging the hereditary authority of the brahmins over whether non-brahmins could initiate people who were not of that caste. Sarasvati wanted to allow these things and cited verses from the Mahabharata and other Vaishnava texts in support of his view that the character of persons of all castes and not their heritage should determine who is initiated. Shortly after this, in an unusual gesture, Sarasvati invested the order of *saṁnyāsa* upon himself in the presence of a picture of his guru Gaura Kīśora, as the author tells us, and began to wear the saffron robes normally associated with Advaita Vedānta, not the Vaisnavas. The author also emphasizes the rootedness of Sarasvati in the traditional Vaishnava texts, the works of such figures as Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja Goswami, Rūpa Goswami, Sanātana Goswami, and also Vaishnava interpretations of earlier works such as the Bhāgavata Purāna which he consistently studied, commented on and had published. The author offers a very detailed Appendix E showing all of the works Sarasvati commented on in another manifestation of the quality of the author's research.

Interestingly, although consciously projecting this image of the ascetic himself, Sarasvati would not initiate others of his followers into Saṁnyāsa. These challenges to tradition met with severe opposition and occasionally violence on the part of traditionalists, but in many ways Sarasvati was following the core views of his father who he often referenced. Sarasvati also faced opposition for his use of motor cars, printing presses and the building of large temple complexes. He encouraged his disciples to avoid the evil of pride and to live a simple lifestyle of humility and service. He gave an example of this by his refusal to accept a pension from his former employer the Maharaja of Tripura and by begging alms from the bhadrak in Calcutta.

At times opponents in Bengal would accuse Bhaktisiddhānta of being too other-worldly and not responding to the material needs of the people especially in instances such as the suffering caused by the flooding of Sept. 1931 in Bengal. It appears from Sardella's book that Sarasvati did not address in any specific way the disenfranchised Muslim peasant class. Despite these criticisms and attacks, his life work provided the basis of what would later become a global movement as ISKCON, and Sardella notes how often Swami A.C. Bhaktivedānta Prabhupada references the commentaries of Sarasvatī. It is notable that Sarasvatī did not oppose the caste system as a stable frame for society nor did he oppose British colonial rule. Sardella's book includes as an appendix an excellent review of the literature which enables him to respond to other views of the guru. He leverages the work of Elizabeth De Michelis and others in schematizing the strands of modern Hinduism. His work to contextualize Bhakti Siddanta and its global reach had set broad and solid

foundations for future research. The book consistently shows a well grounded research including impressive archival research. On the level of methodology it shows a reflexive awareness of the way in which he has framed this particular construction of Vaishnavism in its institutional dimensions and in its construction of its own legitimacy. Sarasvati's focus was on love rather than on immediate social transformation, because that love would ultimately result in a desire to relieve the suffering of other living beings, since all beings are ultimately connected to the person of the Godhead. It would endure. The need of the day in Sarasvati's core view was to inspire strong interpersonal bonds based on sincere affection, honest dealings and mutual respect, a core belief the author explicates under the term personalism. On a deep philosophical level this personalism contests the impersonalism of Śāṅkara's Advaita. Brahma is understood as the Supreme Person transforming the entire universe (braṁāṇḁa) and well as Nature (prakṛiti) The devotional service of the bhakta is also a construction of and cultivation of the emotion of compassion rooted in the belief that society for its uplift needs deeper compassion more than political changes, especially if those policies promote egocentric isolation from others and a lack of solidarity with lives that matter. While finishing up this review, I follow from the coffee shop where I am working two street persons; one familiar, who has woken up from his usual sidewalk sleeping, and one less known and much more mentally ill, who is sometimes shrieking at passersby. As Rādhā always sees Krishna in a loving awareness, so for both East and West, the focus on compassionate, loving service of Caitanya Vaishnava can still awaken hearts to service and connection, far

from its Bengali roots, in my view. To recover this spirit for us may be Sardella's most significant contribution and kīrtan.

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***Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood.* Timothy S. Dobe. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 363 + xiii pp.**

HINDU Christian Faqir is a comparative work that examines the lives of two prominent saints in North India during the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries: the Protestant Christian convert, Sundar Singh (1889-1929) and the Neo-Vedantin Hindu, Rama Tirtha (1873-1906). Both came to be regarded as "saints," rose to international recognition, and challenged the on-going formation of their respective religions. Timothy S. Dobe's compelling study of these two figures highlights the influence of vernacular [inter]-religious practice, asceticism, and the individual agency of the men themselves to reconsider the meaning of sainthood in the Indian and global contexts.

Chapter 1, "Unsettling Saints," recounts the biographies of the two men, highlighting the religiously plural context of their early lives in the Punjab state of India. Interestingly, both men used the terms saint, sadhu (monk), and sannyasi (renunciate) interchangeably to refer to themselves and other ascetics in Indian and English contexts. Yet both favored the term faqir when speaking to Indian audiences. Faqir literally translates as "poor person," yet it is also commonly used to signify a Muslim holy person or Sufi. Faqir (like the term yogi) is widely used across religious boundaries, and its use reflects the complex and fluid religious identities of Punjab. Also, (like the term yogi) it came to

symbolize at once a person of relative honor and respect in indigenous contexts and a class of potentially dangerous degenerates in the colonial eye. For Dobe, faqir is indicative of Islam as a formative "third space" in the Hindu-Christian study of [pre/post]-colonial India, a space selectively ignored or rejected in the latter discourse of neo-Vedanta Hinduism and Indian Christianity.

In the context of Punjab prior to the partition between Pakistan and India, ascetics combined and transcended religious difference to underscore the selective authority of a leader, place, or particular practice. Thus, the faqir was often a public figure, a teacher and healer, credited with miracles and representative of the blurred lines of vernacular religious life. Chapter 2, "How the Pope Came to Punjab," portrays the centrality of ascetic work and self-determination in contrast with the Protestant (British) rejection of both Catholic monasticism and saints and North-Indian faqirs (and yogis). The earlier diversity of local practice became obscured in part through the introduction of colonial education that emphasized English language and the study of select religious texts.

Chapter 3, "Resurrecting the Saints," provides an excellent historical study of the early leaders of modern Hinduism within colonial India. By examining figures such as