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Erratum

The print version of this article misspelled the name of Sarbeswar Sahoo. It has been corrected for the online version.

Response to Sarbeswar Sahoo and Eliza Kent

Nathaniel Roberts

Abstract: In this response to Sarbeswar Sahoo, and Eliza Kent, I attempt to address some of the questions, challenges and insights they have put forth in their comments on *To Be Cared For*. I focus, in particular, on the methodological question of how I define the object of that and what it leaves out, and how I justify my own epistemological stance in relation to those I study, whose views I sometimes challenge. I do so by highlighting a basic distinction between ethnographic studies which take religion itself as an object of investigation, and an anthropological study such as mine, in which religion is approached as an aspect of social reality. I then draw a distinction between two ways of understanding “culture,” and the links I see between them and the two contrasting views of religious conversion described in the book. I end by clarifying what I see as the ethical imperatives of this sort of research and its relation to the question of religious tolerance.

I am very grateful to the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies for the opportunity to converse with Sarbeswar Sahoo, Eliza Kent, Shana Sippy, and Amy Alloco at an SHCS-sponsored panel for my book in Denver, 2018, and to respond further to the first two in print here. It is an honor, furthermore, to address the broader community of scholars who read and contribute to the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*. Their expertise is in precisely the two religious traditions whose differences, similarities, and interaction emerged as a major point of interest in my own research, though this was not what I originally set out to study. My questions were always sociological in focus and trained in particular on the crushing odds slum dwellers face and how they attempt

to even them. This focus led me to religion and in particular to the religious lives of women, because religion was regarded as women’s work in the slum’s gendered division of labor.

It is difficult to know how to address in a single essay all the questions and challenges my respondents have handed me and I have therefore adopted an oblique approach that begins with two features of *To Be Cared For* that many readers coming to it from a religious studies background have found noteworthy. The first concerns my observation that, in contrast to slum Christianity, the form of Hinduism I encountered in Kashtappattinam was discursively very thin—that tales of gods, great yogis and bhaktas, moral narratives, cosmological speculation, and so forth, were notably absent from Hinduism as practiced there (pp. 217–19). The other is my willingness, highlighted by Shana Sippy in Denver, to challenge and even “correct” the views of my informants. The first is noteworthy because the Hindu tradition overall is well known for its discursive richness, and because most if not all academic studies of Hinduism have focused, to greater or lesser degrees, on this aspect. The second, because it flies in the face of the common practice in the field of religious studies of treating informants’ testimony as veridical, and perhaps also because it flouts the stance of conceptual relativism that many scholars, including many anthropologists, see as ethically imperative in research contexts involving a clear power imbalance between the researcher and his or her subjects.

My explanation for both comes down to the fact that although *To Be Cared For* has much to say about religion its ultimate focus is sociological. That is to say, its primary purpose is to understand the concrete relations among

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persons and the objective structures—written and unwritten rules, the conventions, the distribution of wealth and power, and so on—that shape them. These structures are objective insofar as they exceed participants' conscious or unconscious ideas about them. Though social reality is mediated by participants' beliefs about it, it is not reducible to those beliefs. Gaps between what people believe and what is in fact the case are inevitable, not only in the societies we study but also our own. Put another way, social reality is never transparent and necessarily exceeds our understanding of it (Graeber 2015). The situation is very different when the object of study is not society but religion. At least in the case of lived religion (Orsi 2010), the contents of that religion are whatever participants take them to be—no more, and no less. There is no scope in the study of lived religion for the scholarly observer to second-guess or “correct” what practitioners tell them, because the practitioner is the highest and ultimate authority when it comes to their own beliefs.¹

Some examples will help illustrate why I think it is important to actively challenge and not simply defer to native claims, at least when it comes to claims about social reality, and also why I do not extend this precept to matters of religious faith. One of the surprising discoveries of my research in the slums of Kashtappattinam was the very positive image the people living there had of foreigners, whom they envisioned as intrinsically moral and caring, in contrast to the majority of their fellow countrymen, who they believed to be uniquely immoral and selfish. That an oppressed population would harbor negative stereotypes of their oppressors is not surprising, but due diligence required me challenge their claim that Indians are uniquely or universally uncaring, because I do not believe it to be the case. But imagine a foreigner turning up in an African-American ghetto and trying to convince the people living there that white people aren't really as racist as they imagine them to be. When I tried something similar in Anbu Nagar, the people I spoke to were politely dismissive. I simply had no standing to make such an argument, in their view, because I had not experienced the things they had. This may seem like a predictable

outcome, but if I hadn't challenged them, I would not have known this for a fact. And though I make very clear in the pages of *To Be Cared For* that I do not agree that caste people are uniformly uncaring, or uniquely so, by the end of my field research I had observed enough to understand why my subjects would think so.

More perplexing to me was the firm conviction among slum dwellers that people outside India exemplify their own moral ideal of loving kindness, or care. This was both surprising, firstly, because it reversed the supposedly universal human trait of ethnocentrism. According to the theory of ethnocentrism, all humans see their own culture as the best, and envision a series of concentric circles of identity such that the more distant from the self/center the worse. The people of Anbu Nagar, by contrast, scrambled the conventional picture of ranked concentric identities. In their view, the most distant identity of all—those who share nothing with the people but their bare humanity—were regarded as natural allies, whereas those with whom they shared so much at cultural level, the majority of their fellow Tamils and fellow Indians, were not second best to themselves, but the worst people of all! The other reason this surprised me is that there was simply no basis for it. Foreigners do not, as anyone reading this will know, uphold the slum moral ideal of caring for the poor and the weak.

As a foreigner myself, and someone who had spent the majority of my life outside India, in multiple countries, I had standing to speak authoritatively on this matter. Yet my attempts to convince them were consistently brushed off. I could not dislodge their view, but I would not have known this if I hadn't tried! Only by challenging them did I learn that this particular belief was not only very deeply held, but deeply held despite the fact that they had no actual evidence for it. We often speak of beliefs—religious or otherwise—as if they are all of a piece, but beliefs differ greatly in how they are held. Some beliefs are held deeply; others lightly. Beliefs can be based on the evidence of personal experience, but they can also contradict it. And *how* a particular belief is held is as important as its contents, at least for an ethnographer who wants to understand the

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concrete social configuration within which those beliefs are produced.

The point I am trying to make is that challenging the ideas of our research subjects plays an important methodological role, and I do not think it takes anything away from the people we write about to do so. Put another way, respecting our subjects' dignity does not require us to treat them as infallible. Few people see themselves as infallible and, outside of a few very circumscribed domains of human activity, on most matters people are more interested in getting it right than insisting on the correctness of whatever their current understanding happens to be. The most significant exception is when holding a particular belief (or to be more precise, professing to hold it) functions as a marker of group identity, an affirmation of loyalty and belonging. For example, during the Vietnam War it was permissible in American public discourse to debate whether getting into the war had been a mistake or not, and also to criticize the particular way American strategic objectives were pursued. What was not up for discussion, as Noam Chomsky (1977) has argued, was the fundamental precept that America's motives for being in the region were noble. To suggest that this might not be so—that America was an amoral or even immoral force in the world—was to render oneself an outsider. In the language of the era, to voice such thoughts was simply *un-American*.

It is generally only when a belief is linked to being part of a team that challenges to it are taken as an attack, and rightly so. For to undermine such a belief is to undermine the collective being of those who define themselves in terms of it. It threatens the very basis on which members are distinguished from non-members, and for this reason identity-defining beliefs are normally imbued with an intensely moral character. To reject such a belief is not merely to change one's mind, but to *betray*, and group members often subject potential defectors to intense moral pressure to prevent them from doing so.

Religious belief is widely regarded as a paradigmatic example of an identity-defining belief, or commitment. The history of Christianity provides a ready-made example, insofar as creedal statements have been explicitly used in that tradition to define group

membership (Ruel 1982). But even traditions that do not require formal declarations of faith may react defensively when its beliefs are questioned, as for example when its gods are declared not to be gods at all but stone idols.² The opposition of many Hindus to religious conversion, and the strong moral pressure mobilized to prevent it, is certainly an example of belief playing such a role. Religious belief is, in this example, not merely about a person's commitment to God, but simultaneously to a social identity. But what my research shows is that commitment to a particular god does not necessarily entail commitment to the social identity commonly associated with that god. Though the two commitments—which we might distinguish as *faith* and *partisanship*—are often linked, they need not be, and a correct understanding of slum conversion is not possible if we fail to keep the two analytically distinct.

Simply put, the question of which god a person worshipped in the slum was of no consequence to group identity. Faith, defined as a relationship of commitment between a human being and a god, did not entail commitment to any team or faction in the world of the slum, for the simple reason that “Christians” and “Hindus” did not comprise two distinct social formations or communities there. Even within a single household or family, one normally found both Christians and Hindus, and there was no expectation that children should follow the religious practices of their parents, or that spouses would worship the same gods as one another (pp. 152–3). There was therefore no attempt by slum dwellers to pressure one another to conform religiously. Slum dwellers argued frequently about which gods were the best. The criteria they assessed them on, however, were not moral but their propensity to respond to the needs of those who worshipped them, a topic on which new evidence was actively sought and hotly debated. In their morality, all gods were assumed to be identical. Hindu gods were not morally defective according to Christians, but existentially so—for unlike the Christian god they did not actually exist. Even Christian pastors did not present their god as morally distinct from Hindu gods, only more responsive, because Hindu gods were “mere stone idols” and therefore to help anyone, in

reality. Hindus, for their part, acknowledged the Christian god's existence, but held him to be a weak and overly demanding deity (p. 152). Notably, neither side took offense at the other's negative assessment of their chosen gods, misguided though they may be. A person's decisions about which god or gods to worship—and therefore the phenomenon of religious conversion—was not a morally fraught in the slum, in short, because gods were regarded as morally identical. And they were regarded as morally identical, I argue, because they were not forced to double as emblems of social identity.

Space does not permit me to elaborate on the relationship of faith that bound the individual worshipper to their god of choice, or how the notion of faith (*vicuvācam*) was articulated within a constellation of related concepts, such as belief (*nampikai*), knowledge (*aṛivu*), perception (*terital*), understanding (*purital*), and evidence (*cāṭci*) (Roberts 2012: 283). Nor can I explain how such relationships might be voluntarily severed without moral jeopardy, though I will note that neither Christians nor Hindus believed worship was something gods *themselves* demanded or defined as obligatory for human beings. But I hope it is clear that the non-obligatory character of worship, like the non-moralization of religious choice itself, follows from the social organization of religious belief, i.e. decisions about which god to worship not being linked to social faction. This is a significant finding in the Indian context, where religious conversion is widely but falsely assumed to be socially disruptive, and legally suppressed on that basis (pp. 111–51). What I have shown, however, is that the disruptions and social conflict sometimes associated with religious conversion are an automatic outcome of religious conversion as such, or to the act of proselytism, or to religious differences as such, or to conversion being a psychologically destabilizing event—to cite just a few of the many arguments that circulate in India and elsewhere (pp. 111–115; Roberts 2012). They are due to power-infused relations among people, in which gods function as emblems of communal identity, and in which the dominant community is permitted to assert its will over minorities under the guise of “wounded sentiments” (pp. 261–2; Viswanath 2016).

I began this response by stressing that, although religion plays a prominent role in *To Be Cared For*, its ultimate focus is sociological, and that understanding slum religion assumed significance because of the role it plays in my subjects' socially constituted existence. I promised that the sociological character of my study would help explain two features that readers approaching *To Be Cared For* from the perspective of Religious Studies have found unusual: my willingness to challenge my informant's beliefs, and my finding that Hinduism as practiced was discursively very thin. The thinness of local Hinduism, as I have described it, comes as a surprise to many because the Hindu tradition as a whole is renowned for its discursive richness, a richness that has attracted the attention of scholars for obvious reasons and is therefore heavily represented in the literature. And indeed, had my own research mandate been to contribute to the study of Hinduism as such, rather than being confined to the aspects of it that were relevant to the women I had chosen to study, I would have had much more to say.

In a slum tenement not far from Anbu Nagar lived a nonagenarian by the name of Loganathan, a kind-eyed man whose slight but ever-present smile reminded me of the Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. He was known locally as a medium (*cāmiyāṭi*) (p. 218), and for his talent for inducing women to become possessed in certain festivals (p. 180, fig 10). Apart from these ritual functions, however, Loganathan played no discernable role in slum women's lives, and no one I asked seemed to know anything about him or care. But based on the handful of interviews I conducted with him, I can attest that he was a wellspring of cosmological knowledge, who claimed, furthermore, to know “hundreds and hundreds” of songs about the gods, and thousands of praises. He had learned from his own father, also a *cāmiyāṭi*. Loganathan shared his sadness that, though he had so much to teach, no one was interested. He had not a single student, and knew that when he died all the knowledge he had accumulated would die with him.

He was also keenly interested in Christianity—which he understood not as a rival sect but a powerful ritual system with unique capacities that complemented his own.

One of the most useful things about Christianity, he told me, was the startling fact that when the dead are buried with Christian rites their spirits go away forever and never return as ghosts to haunt the living. How did he know this, I asked him, and was he sure? He assured me that he knew all the local ghosts, and had spoken with most of them, and not a single one of them had been buried as a Christian. He did not know how this had been accomplished, but he hailed it as among the most important benefits conferred on the slum by local pastors, whom he seemed to regard as professional colleagues. He was aware that they did not return the favor, though he did not begrudge their ignorance. In this and so many other ways, Loganathan's religious ideas were consistent with what I have described as the *logic of slum religion* (pp. 152–84)—the underlying principles and assumption about what constitutes religion as such, for both Christians and Hindus alike.

Loganathan was already an elderly man in 2003–4, and he is almost certainly no more. The last of his lineage, his knowledge will die with him, though I am certain there are others like him, somewhere, just waiting for some young scholar to take an interest in what they have to teach. I wish I had been able to delve deeper into his world than I did, but because the focus of my research was sociological, he appears only fleetingly in the story I tell (pp. 180, 218). His treasure trove of knowledge played no role at all, because the women on whom my study centers were indifferent to it. But the fact that he existed at all and was

ignored despite possessing such a wealth of knowledge, supports one major claim in my book. Namely, that it is not the discursive richness of Christianity that distinguishes it from Hinduism, ultimately, but its novel institutional form.

The key innovation of slum Christianity was that it had, quite unintentionally I suspect, provided slum women with a public platform of a kind they had never previously possessed from which to articulate claims against husbands and others who had failed to care for them. The duty to care was attested equally by Hindus and Christians, who alike hailed it as the very essence of human morality, not linked to any religion in particular, but sacred nonetheless. Christianity provided women with a new language through which to speak about care, but they understood it to be a universal human value, not a specifically Christian one. Slum women, in other words, did not need Christianity to teach them about care. What they lacked was not the words but the institutional means to make their grievances a matter of public knowledge and therefore collective responsibility. The relationship between husband and wife constituted a dangerous moral fault line (p. 81) within the slum community—one of two I detail in the book—in which the duty to care was honored as often as not in the breach. The mistreatment of women continued, however, because the sacred moral precept it violated remained a phantasm so long as women lacked the institutional means to call for help.

There is a lesson here, I am sure.

Notes

¹ I stress that the principle of native authority applies only to the study of lived religion, by which I mean religion as it is experienced and understood in the lives of practitioners. The principle does not hold for religion as expressed in a textual corpus stretching over many centuries or millennia. Conceptualized this way, religion is an objective reality that, like society, is not reducible to participants' ideas about it. A second qualification concerns the distinction between beliefs and practices. In contrast to Robert Orsi and other scholars of lived religion, I hold that the principle of native authority applies *stricto sensu* only to belief,

not practices. For in contrast to beliefs, practices are only partially defined by participants' ideas about them, a point pithily expressed by Michel Foucault's observation that "people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't [necessarily] know is what what they do does" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982: 187).

² Hinduism famously emphasizes correct practice (orthopraxy) over correct belief (orthodoxy), and in this way differs from creedal traditions like Christianity and Islam. But the absence of a single orthodoxy in the Hindu tradition does not imply an absence of belief of the kind anthropologists are concerned with, which includes the full range of implicit codes and assumptions through which human beings comprehend their world. In this sense belief does not stand in contrast to religious practice but is intrinsic to it. Religious practices necessarily entail beliefs of some sort, even if unformulated, for example the belief that a particular ritual ought to be performed or that some benefit (spiritual or otherwise) will come of it.

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