Book Review: Essays in Hindu Theology. By Anantanand Rambachan

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with Hindutva actors perceiving a halcyon, united past.

Bauman’s final few pages are fascinating, revealing, and brilliantly written. He affirms Paul Marshall’s ideas on what is at stake in the politics of religious conversion. Central to the ideas Bauman is attracted to is the nature of choice. Traditional societies emphasize that “you are what you were born to be” (235); you should follow the path of your ancestors. Globalization, however, presents choices: you might depart from your ancestral calling; you might become something else. You might forsake your traditional, ancestral, or even ethnic identity. Christians threaten others because they are not only open to change, but their entire religion is founded upon the notion of change. Born again Christians, in particular—those who experience a “new birth”—pose a way of seeing the world where you can completely reorient your alliances. This is unnerving to those rooted in tradition, ancestry, indigeneity, and ethnic uniformity. Christian conversion potentially disrupts completely, allowing people the choice of which community they want to be part of. Great freedom is offered, albeit at the cost of losing one’s communal connectivity.

Bauman concludes by, again, affirming Paul Marshall’s notion that Christianity denies an all-encompassing state. Christianity confesses that Caesar is decidedly not God. Inherent in Christianity is a challenge to “monistic conceptions of social order” (236). He also argues that where we find Christian dominance in the modern era, we also find Western secularism. And for many Hindus, therein lies the greatest threat of all.

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In these days of interreligious dialogue and cross-cultural friendships, it is good to have an insightful and critical account of a major Hindu theological viewpoint, with strong dialogic overtones, by an eminent Hindu practitioner. This book is all the more welcome because Hindu theologians of stature today who give an account of the nature of the Supreme Being and its relationship with the world and human beings from a Hindu point of view in the context of a respectful and knowledgeable understanding of non-Hindu religious standpoints, are, to coin an expression, as scarce as hens’ teeth. Further, as Rambachan points out, the Hindu diaspora is growing steadily, not least in his own country, the USA, where alone the “estimated Hindu population...is now over 2 million” (13). So, a book like this one, with a slant towards a Hindu understanding of Christian belief and practice, is all the more important for keeping abreast of current developments in Hindu dialogic approaches.

Rambachan states that his “analysis is particularly influenced by the nondualism of Advaita Vedānta” (p.47) which affirms that, in the final analysis, the seething multiplicity of produced being is ontologically non-different
(hence *a-dvaita*) from the one, utterly undifferentiated Supreme Brahman (“the Great One”) to which no term or concept betokening any form of distinction directly or indirectly properly applies. Some have called this state of being non-differenced monism (though Rambachan prefers to translate *advaita* as “not-two”, without quite driving the distinction home). Rambachan’s primary sources for maintaining this view are some of the Upanishads, the *Bhagavadgītā*, and the *Brahma Sūtras*, largely as interpreted, metaphysically, by the great 8th century theologian Śaṅkara, and, practically, by the modern Advaitic savants Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and “Mahatma” Gandhi (1869-1948), though how exactly the Krishna of the *Gītā*, who comes across in that scripture as the indissoluble personal Godhead, fits into Rambachan’s Advaitic scheme is never adequately explained.

The underlying theme of this book, which in fact builds on previous work by Rambachan, is that Advaita must be interpreted as an inspiration for regarding the world as the arena for countering individual and systemic evil and suffering, as also for bringing about “the common or public good” (his interpretation of the *lokasamgraha* of *Gītā* 3.20, 3.25: “In Hindu spirituality the public good [viz. *lokasamgraha*] becomes the normative measure of the meaning of all that we do”, 58). In short, Rambachan presses his claim in this book for being a Hindu liberation theologian.

This is all to the good. Every major religious tradition develops and renews itself only through the constant re-interpretations of its responsible theologians. It would be myopic to say that this should not be attempted because new interpretations are not faithful to the old. That is a recipe for stagnation and final desuetude. The art is so to reinterpret the old that it is recognizable as being in continuity with the new. Christian theologians have done this with regard to constructing a liberation theology and, to my mind, Rambachan is fully entitled to attempt this too for the Advaitic strand of Hinduism (though occasionally one gets the impression that he assimilates Hinduism to Advaita). So, it is no accident that he turns so saliently to Vivekananda and Gandhi, both of whose reading of Hindu scripture (Gandhi aided in large measure by turning to the Sermon on the Mount) had the political and social reform of Hinduism largely in mind from an Advaitic standpoint.

Rambachan’s position is described with full force and clarity in Ch.8. Here we are told, in contrast to some traditional and modern interpretations of Advaita, that a Hindu liberation theology requires “an understanding of the meaning of liberation (*mokṣa*) that values life in this world and not escape from the world” (138). For this one needs to articulate “the ethical implications and obligations of *mokṣa* for the transformation of human relationships and social structures” (139) so that we may commit “to working for the overcoming of suffering in its multiple forms” (140) on the basis of “affirming the equal worth and dignity of all human beings” (141). This is because “the infinite brahman exists identically in all beings. Since the infinite is present in each being as the warp and woof of selfhood, to see the infinite in another is to see oneself in another” (111).

But does Rambachan’s interpretation of the Hindu scriptures bear the weight of his innovative conclusions? Though Vivekananda’s and Gandhi’s readings of these texts were socially and politically activist, this did not
quite result in a theology of liberation, which is characterized by a focus “upon “systemic evil”, that is, the suffering that human beings inflict upon each other by unjust economic, social, and political systems. The implication of this emphasis is that genuine change will be achieved only through the change and transformation of such systems” (p.131). However, one notices a tendency towards assertion rather than exegetical justification in Rambachan’s defense of his approach. Thus, we are told without further ado that in “the Bhagavadgītā (18.20-22) Krishna commends generosity, but insists...that thought be given to the maximization of outcomes” (57, emphasis added). It is hard to see Krishna as a liberation theologian here. In these three verses, Krishna is in fact speaking of the three kinds of knowledge that correspond respectively to the three qualities (guṇas) that combine to constitute empirical being. A proper exegetical argument is required to show how the meaning of this text may extend to the “maximization of outcomes” in the distribution of wealth. One could give further examples of such interpretation-light assertions.

Everything—Rambachan’s analysis of the four goals of life in Hindu teaching, of the virtues of Hindu spirituality and the authority of scripture (in Part I), followed in Part II by his treatment of interreligious dialogue as exemplified by the friendship between Gandhi and C.F. Andrews, and his description of “divine hospitality” and image worship in a Hindu temple—is so articulated as to culminate in his call for a Hindu theology of liberation (the focus of Part III), while his excursus into a “Hindu Christology” in Part II where he deals with modern Hindu understandings of Christ, from Ram Mohan Roy’s Jesus the moral exemplar par excellence, to Vivekananda’s otherworldly Christ, shows that dialogue is apt to lose its purpose if one’s interlocutors are unable to recognize key elements of their faith in their dialogue-partners’ engagement with it. Dialogue takes the other’s faith head-on; it is not an exercise in consensus or anodyne intentions.

The chief obstacle to achieving the Advaitic goal, says Rambachan, is a congenital avidyā or active ignorance of the fact that the inner, unconstructed self of each of us is identical with the universal Self or Brahman, a fact obscured by the up-front constructed and adhesive identities of our everyday lives. These false identities generate the socially hierarchical evils of patriarchy and caste. In inveighing against the latter Rambachan takes recourse to the (so-called) untouchable leader, B. R. Ambedkar’s (1891-1956) critique of caste, though unlike Ambedkar, who insisted that caste, rooted in varṇa, is structurally intrinsic to Hinduism, Rambachan does not clarify whether he regards caste as integral to Hinduism or not.

But now we may ask, what is uniquely decisive in the Advaitic discipline that culminates in the awareness that Advaita is the sure and final end? Is it the testimony of (Advaitic) sages who have followed a particular path of ethics and contemplation? But there are many sages who have followed different paths to different ends and who have also testified that they have arrived at the final goal. Rambachan does not really come up with an answer to our question. He says, rightly, “Religion cannot claim epistemological privilege and be sheltered from wider engagement with the growing body of knowledge about our universe and life” (p.43).
But what is the epistemology undergirding Advaitic faith in contrast to the epistemology underpinning everyday empirical experience so that the one can be supported by the other?

There are other questions raised by this challenging book: e.g., those relating to the outworking of karma and rebirth in terms of personal identity and its ethical implications. Rambachan accepts this fundamental Hindu doctrine: “The essential idea here is that we are continuously making ourselves” (59). But how can we keep making ourselves meaningfully if most of us do not remember, and so cannot morally preside over, who we were in previous births, perhaps on occasion as some form of sub-human or super-human being (which most versions of karma and rebirth allow)? This issue too is not tackled, both as a problem in its own right and as a potential factor in dialogue with Christian tradition.

But by now the penny has dropped, which the deontic tone of the text, viz. its many statements signifying directly or indirectly how we should or ought to understand and practice Hindu—rather Advaiti—teachings, indicates. This book is really a manifesto, a programme for understanding and implementing Advaita, rather than a full-scale justification of Rambachan’s viewpoint. As such, it calls for a subsequent work setting out arguments backed by the appropriate exegesis of texts.

The editing of Hindu data in the book is, to be blunt, sloppy. The text uses diacritical marks on Sanskrit terms, but far from consistently, or, on numerous occasions, even correctly. Here are a few examples: not pūja (12, 15, 80, 83-4 etc.) but pūjā; not cāturvarṇa (147, 156-7) but either caturvarṇa or cāturvarṇya; on p.24 we are told that Śaṅkara’s date is ca. 8th century, but on p.51, it is the 7th century; the Sanskrit quotation on p.68 (first para.) is faulty; p.101, li.17, not “immortality” but “immorality” (!); on p.141, the Gītā reference should be 13.27-28; p.154, not SarvApalli, but SarvEpalli Radhakrishnan, and so many more. In addition, the Index is woefully inadequate.

These editorial errors apart, the writing style is clear and mature, and the book is a thought-provoking, indeed unique, challenge to theists who tend to think, complacently, that their fundamental stance on the Deity is the obvious one to maintain. This book is a valuable resource for engaging with and responding to a modern Advaitic religio-ethical stance.

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In this deeply engaging and highly accessible volume, Jan Peter Schouten, a research scholar/retired minister, analyzes and interprets encounters of European visitors with