Book Review: The European Encounter with Hinduism in India. By Jan Peter Schouten and translated by Henry Jansen

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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...
the religions and cultures of the Indian subcontinent from the 13th to the 19th centuries. The earliest of the visitors discussed is Marco Polo, a 13th century Venetian merchant, and the latest is Ferdinand Kittel, a 19th century Basel missionary. Except for scattered and rare connections, Asia, by and large, remained a distant reality in the imagination of Europe. The aftermath of religious wars, the threat of or the fascination towards the Mongols, and the emerging business ties with China occasioned the visits of European visitors, most of whom passed by the Indian subcontinent. Locating the volume in the current conversation about interreligious and intercultural relations, Schouten characterizes the phenomenon of European encounters with India’s religions as precursors to modern interreligious dialogue.

In the first nine chapters, Schouten analyzes the perceptions and representations of European visitors about what is now known as India, her peoples, and their religions. The visitors analyzed in the volume include missionaries—Roman Catholic or Protestant—merchants, navigators, and ambassadors. In each chapter, Schouten interprets the world a visitor or a group of visitors created in their letters and reports about India to their audience in Europe and analyzes the world the visitor himself was a part of and its impact on a particular perception. With his expertise in the histories of Europe and the Indian subcontinent, Schouten accompanies the traveler from Europe and sheds insight into what would have transpired in the mind of the travelers in their encounter with India. With his summary in the concluding chapter, Schouten identifies not only the shared impressions among the visitors but argues that these encounters constitute the prehistory of interreligious dialogue. These chance encounters of European visitors with the faith communities in India and the ensuing impressions were often characterized by curiosity, but seldom by respect for the other or by an openness to learning from the other.

As mentioned earlier, the European travelers analyzed were from many walks of life often with disparate agendas. Some were emissaries representing their rulers and their national interests. For example, Marco Polo (1254-1324) was a papal representative to emperor Kublai Khan of China. A few others were missionaries committed to introducing their faith to others. They included Roman Catholic friars of different missionary orders as well as Protestant missionaries from multiple missionary societies. Inviting others to their worldview, by and large, was their agenda. Their faith commitments and missionary agendas shaped their gaze. The list of visitors also includes navigators seeking to explore the sea routes and comment on the people they encountered. Jan Huygen van Linschoten (1562/63-1611) was one such. In many cases, both religious, economic, and political interests may have intersected. However, not everyone was eager to spread their religion or engage in interfaith dialogue. With his choice of European visitors from disparate missions—religious and mercantile or political—Schouten has expanded the definition of interreligious dialogue to include the accidental encounters between two worldviews, whatever agendas the visitor may have.

By terming the encounters between Europeans and India’s Hinduism as dialogue, Schouten rightly highlights the agency of the world that was encountered. This approach
shifts the focus from the European gaze and the world behind to the world of the people viewed, and practices observed have a life of their own to evoke perceptions, however flawed the latter were. As an interpreter, Schouten seeks to explain the (mis)perceptions the encounters between these two worlds had generated.

Not only is Schouten’s view of interreligious dialogue and its precursors broad so as to include the coincidental encounters with scant respect for the other but so is his view of Hinduism. The practices observed by the European visitors and discussed in the volume cover those of different segments of Indian society from the 13th to the 19th centuries, both at the margins and centers. They were drawn from visits to various regions of the Indian subcontinent and belong to multiple religious traditions, broadly categorized as Hinduism. Even while concurring that these practices reflect and in part reveal the social stratification in Indian society, and that Hinduism is a broad category inclusive of several loosely aligned religious traditions, such a sweeping inclusion might transgress the integrity of the religiosities of the communities, such as Dalits at the social

encountered, their practices, art, and architecture. The temples visited, images margins who refuse to be identified with Hinduism.

With a broad repertoire of reports and helpful interpretations, any scholar interested in studying religions in India in general or customs in different regions of the subcontinent would find this volume helpful in their research, whether their focus is on the 16th century Vijayanagar Empire or 18th century Bengal. Those of us seeking to understand the changes and continuities in social customs would find this a rich resource, as would those studying the encounters between two or more religious worlds, especially in terms of understanding how one world shapes the perceptions about the other and the processes involved. Both the writer and translator ought to be commended for the accessibility of the language. Illustrations and the glossary of terms further help the reader seeking to understand the European visitor and the Hinduism they encountered.

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**The** concept of ‘pet fish’ is popularly used in the philosophy of concepts literature to argue that language is not compositional. In other words, the concept of ‘pet’ and ‘fish’ together, does not correctly predict the image that the term brings to our mind. This is so because a goldfish is considered a poor example of a pet (dog or cat would be better), and a poor example of a fish (tuna or salmon would be better). The same **cannot** be said of Indian Christianity, that is, it is not the case that Indian Christianity is a poor example of something “Indian” (Hinduism or Buddhism would have been better) or something “Christian” (Greek