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# Book Review: "The Quest for Postmodern Ethics: A Phenomenological Comparison of the Philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Sri Aurobindo Ghose"

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that Christianity is a religion of foreign origin. "The charge persists," Sarkar asserts, "despite the fact that the origins of Christianity in one part of India (Kerala and Tamilnadu) go back to the early centuries of the Common Era, preceding, incidentally, the conversion of England to Christianity and indeed the formation of most living forms of Hindu traditions" and Sikhism (360). It is only because of the perceived collusion of Christianity and British colonialism, Sarkar contends, that the notion survives.

The third assumption that Sarkar critiques is the conflation of secularism and mere opposition to communalism. Opposition to communalism is a noble pursuit, says Sarkar, but if secularism is just another way of speaking of national unity then it is unavoidable that the desire for unity

will overshadow the preservation of diversities. On the contrary, Sarkar contends, secularism "ought to represent a set of human values that would remain indispensable even if Indian unity broke down" (366).

It seems to me today that any worthy investigation of Hindu-Christian relations in India must place those relations in the larger context of long-standing debates about secularism and democracy in the religiously diverse Indian state. This volume, therefore, is indispensable to those working on the topic, both for the articles of more indirect relevance, and for these excellent concluding essays.

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***The Quest for Postmodern Ethics: A Phenomenological Comparison of the Philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Sri Aurobindo Ghose.*** R. Brad Bannon. Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2007, 269 + xi pages.

DESPITE Brad Bannon's assurance that he has "tried to write this book to students and 'non-academics'" (15), *The Quest for Postmodern Ethics* is not for the faint of heart. The fruit of Bannon's philosophical studies at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram in Bangalore, the work attempts to move beyond mere "philosophyology" or comparative philosophy to a more profound "discussion 'with'" or "playing forth" of great philosophies as he and his readers think through these major issues for themselves (6-7). In form, it draws on the work of the German existentialist Martin Heidegger as its "starting point" and of the neo-Advaitin Aurobindo Ghose as a "complement." But Bannon's more basic intent is to construct an "ab-ground" or creative space for post-modern moral reasoning around questions of character development and conscience formation in the contemporary world. Only a rigorously non-foundationalist "aretological" or virtue-based ethics, developed through authentic enquiry, continual reformulation and ever-widening circles of concern, Bannon suggests, will move religions and cultures beyond an inauthentic reliance upon

teleological (goal-driven) or deontological (rule-based) ethical systems.

In his predilection for meta-discourse and neologisms, Bannon reveals great affinity with Raimon Panikkar; indeed, Panikkar's distinctive understandings of "advaita" "ecosophy" and "cosmotheandric experience" are invoked at several key junctures of the argument. Also like Panikkar, however, Bannon offers far more than a new technical vocabulary. In the first four chapters, he explores what Heidegger referred to as the "ontological difference" between Being itself and the lived experience of "a being." In articulating his understanding of this being as "Dasein"—"Being-there" in space and time, "Being-with-Others" in mutually constitutive relations—Heidegger attempted to overcome the subject-object dualisms of Plato, Descartes and Kant. In so doing, Bannon argues, the great philosopher also moved toward and is met by Aurobindo's evolutionist *advaita*, which attempted to rescue a robust sense of individual identity and cosmic play (*lila*) from the purportedly world-denying monisms of Buddhism and classical Advaita. These two

great thinkers thus offer complementary accounts of a fundamental ontological unity that comes to full expression only through rich diversity. According to their shared vision, each and every concrete existent comes into full view as a unique manifestation of the "truth of Being," claiming our full attention and ethical commitment.

Having thus distinguished "being" from "Being" and placed them into dynamic mutual relation, Bannon attempts in chapters 5-7 to "leap over the distinction and enter into inceptual thinking" (4). In practice, this involves an application of his synthesis of Heidegger and Aurobindo to explicitly ethical issues of personal responsibility, conscience and human community. From the perspective of Hindu-Christian studies, these three chapters merit special attention, for two reasons. On the one hand, it is in his argument on behalf of healthy corporate life in chapter 7 that Bannon explicitly adverts to his Christian perspective as a member of the self-consciously "non-doctrinal" United Church of Christ (222). On the other hand—and paradoxically—it is the Hindu Aurobindo who, especially in chapters 5 and 7, points a way past Heidegger's too-narrow focus upon comportment in the face of personal death toward a broader understanding of history, of karmic transformation and of an "authentic 'they'" or "Gnostic community" that nourishes personal authenticity rather than stifling it. As revealed in the Holocaust, in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature and in radical environmentalist movements, whole communities can develop a sense of group responsibility and conscience in the face of the very real possibility of corporate death (214-15). The potential result? A self-aware "inceptual community" of mystics and authentic religious seekers. "In the inceptual religious community . . .," Bannon writes, "mit-Dasein is not 'Being-with-Others' by virtue of doctrine or dogma, but because mit-Dasein is grounded in the ab-ground of perpetual beginning and continuous questioning" (228).

In the book's conclusion (ch. 8), Bannon highlights this "authentic 'they'" as one of the main bulwarks against the spectre of relativism which, by his own admission, haunts the whole project. Neither Heidegger nor Aurobindo can be classified as relativists, he maintains, because

both accepted the real uncovering or evolution of Being, even as they insisted that every such uncovering only emerges through assiduous self-enquiry by the inescapably particular and fallible Dasein in its inescapably particular relations with others. The point is well-taken. It is also somewhat weakened by the sheer abstraction of the preceding chapters. Bannon is quite diligent about providing illustrative examples for difficult ideas, and he stops, in each and every chapter and in the entire final chapter of the book, to ask, "so what?" Nevertheless, he too easily passes over some of the most difficult questions about the "Daseins" that form the basis of his enquiry. What of Heidegger's membership in the Nazi party, which was constructing concentration camps at the very same moment the philosopher was arriving at ethical insights in *Being and Time* (see 38-39, 114)? Does it matter that Aurobindo not only spoke about Gnostic community, but actually founded one, with its own history of institutional struggle? Certainly one cannot evaluate the contribution of either great thinker on the sole basis of personal character or institutional legacy. But, in an enquiry that attempts to move beyond Platonic "ideas" and militates so strongly against basing ethics on rules or soteriology in favour of personal character and authentic community, attention to the particular characters and communities in question would seem a necessary correlate to pure philosophy. Without engaging such real-world complexities, this post-modern alternative to traditional morality rings somewhat hollow.

According to Heidegger, it seems, true philosophy begins in "startled dismay" and comes to full expression in an "inceptual thinking" that always begins anew, continually turning its attention back to what had previously escaped our view (9-12, 70). For less philosophical readers, *The Quest for Postmodern Ethics* will likely produce more than a few moments of startled dismay. For Bannon, clearly a thoughtful and gifted comparativist in the early stages of his career, it provides a rich "non-foundation" from which to start afresh. In both respects, it can be reckoned a success.

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