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The Pitfalls of Trying to Be Different

Brian K. Pennington

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FOR more than a decade Rajiv Malhotra has been known to the study of South Asian religion as a vigorous critic of the practices and frameworks that academics have employed to represent India to the West. Those who know him from his no-holds-barred online articles or by his unflinching confrontation with established scholars at academic meetings may be pleased by the rather different tone of *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*, Malhotra's latest attempt to intervene in the academic study of the religious traditions of the South Asian subcontinent. Whereas Malhotra has achieved much of his renown through intemperate language, he is and should be remembered also for his demands that practicing Hindus have a say in how they are represented and for provoking a needed self-examination by the scholarly community writing about the traditions of South Asia. These are not the primary concerns of *Being Different*, and if one reads it motivated by the lurid promise of a new assault by Malhotra on the motives, character, or

methods of senior scholars in the study of Hinduism,¹ one will discover the author pursuing a somewhat different agenda.

How exactly to understand this agenda, however, is one of the central questions I came to ask myself as I made my way through the volume. *Being Different* appears to reveal Malhotra in the process of refashioning his image as well as his tactics for counteracting the influence of university-trained scholars on the public perception of Hindu religious traditions. Here we find Malhotra concerned less with landing a series of blows via umbrage and verbosity and more with constructing an Indic/Western binary that casts each tradition in a dualistic plot of utterly irreconcilable worldviews competing for supremacy and relevance on a rapidly shrinking planet. In depicting their incompatibility, Malhotra unapologetically takes sides, distilling essential characteristics and drives out of each of the traditions he has manufactured and arguing that the dharmic traditions of India (which, as I discuss below, he identifies as both the modern

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“nation” and the ancient civilization),² provide techniques and resources superior to those of the Christian West for generating a truly pluralistic society. He operates in this book less in the mode of protest and more in the mode of apologist, in the classical sense, for the intellectual heritage of the South Asian subcontinent.

Let me say first of all that I have no quarrel whatsoever with the book’s major argument about Indian intellectual traditions as a rich and under-exploited resource for confronting our globe’s manifold social challenges. Malhotra argues, and I agree, that they can prove remarkably “comfortable with relative truths, uncertainty, ambiguity, disorder and pluralism of all kinds.”³ The book’s underlying shortcoming, in my judgment, is in the execution and sweep of this argument. In a moment, I will address that issue, but first allow me to offer some context for what readers might regard as a fairly unforgiving assessment of the work: Malhotra has previously likened the system of academic training and university credentialing to a caste system, implying, among other things, that it protects its privilege and status by restricting access to the labor that generates them.⁴ He has more explicitly labeled practices of peer review a “cartel” and complained of their preference for theory over data and their propensity to shield authors from critique by those who lack credentials issued only under their auspices, particularly by practitioners of religious traditions whom religious studies scholars represent in their work.⁵

Indeed, it would be hard to deny some merit to these critiques. But Malhotra has further charged the academy with “intellectual corruption” and “cronyism” and demanded a

free-market trade in the depiction of Indic traditions in which activist groups with knowledge of India scrutinize scholarly work on both India and the West, employing their own knowledge of India and her intellectual traditions.⁶ I take, therefore, *Being Different* as the latest stage in Malhotra’s campaign to speak back to the academy whose ranks, he has complained, are closed to him, and I will assess it as he clearly intends it, as a direct engagement with the scholarly world.

It is with that prior understanding of Malhotra’s longer career as a Hindu activist opposed to the Western study of Hinduism and a broad acquaintance with his writing that I accepted the invitation to this forum and with which I read the book. I was relieved to find that he has left some of his more colorful language aside in favor of mildly self-aggrandizing tales of his clashes with (mostly) American scholars, but the result is Malhotra stripped of much of his fire. Instead, he trades in the broadest caricatures of Western and Indic traditions. Despite its length, the major observations of *Being Different* can be summarized in a set of pithy and reductive generalizations for which many of us would chastise our undergraduates had they proposed them: India is enriched by traditions of the embodied pursuit of knowledge but the West is constrained by its orientation to historical revelation; dharmic traditions perceive an integral unity to the cosmos while the Western worldview can only construct a forced unity of parts; dharmic traditions accept difference and uncertainty but the West can only respond to those realities with anxiety and conquest. In the process of erecting these neat and perfectly mirrored cultural formations, Christian and Indic traditions are reduced to mere cartoons

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of themselves.⁷ For Malhotra, every Christian is a fundamentalist evangelical bent on the aggressive propagation of Christianity, and every practitioner of dharmic traditions is a philosophical monist engaged in the rigorous application of the “contemplative sciences.”⁸ So thoroughly unnuanced and two-dimensional are his images of Abrahamic and dharmic traditions that he frequently takes recourse to tables neatly displaying the absolute binary relationship between them.⁹

In Malhotra’s introduction, he announces his intention to studiously avoid any suggestion that dharmic traditions are multiple, distinct in their various expressions, or products of disparate influences. To put it in his own language, “If dharma is put forward merely as an eclectic collection of disparate ideas, it will lack the cohesiveness necessary to function as a force for change” (5). In these words I find well captured a serious flaw in the book’s conception and design: its major claims about India and the West are assertions in search of corroboration. It would appear from the outset that Malhotra intends to avoid the evidence of history if it proves inconvenient to the lionization of Indian intellectual traditions on the basis of the dharmic principles he imputes to them. Malhotra’s casual and thorough rejection of history as ill-suited to his goals leads him to attribute historical consciousness entirely to the sad and neurotic West, happily liberating dharmic traditions, the West’s utter and absolute opposite, from forces of historical change and external cultural influence. The product is an uncritical promotion of a homogenized Indic heritage whose superior character, he argues, rests on the fact that it is protected from the forces of history because it arises from the internal religious experience of

rishis who have reconfirmed its core insights generation after generation.¹⁰ Dharmic traditions emerge with an organically and internally generated integral unity that is breathtaking in its bold defiance of the forces that the Humanities have long demonstrated shape all human institutions and human ideas. The title of his second chapter, “Yoga: Freedom from History,” is just one indication of how adamantly Malhotra’s method must and does deny that Indic traditions are subject to or products of material, social, or political influences.

Malhotra’s antipathy for history, verging at many points on an outright anti-historicism, is also evident in Chapter 4, “Order and Chaos.” His aim there is to demonstrate that the West “sees chaos as a profound threat that needs to be eradicated either by destruction or by complete assimilation,” while “dharmic cultures tend to be more accepting of difference, unpredictability and uncertainty than westerners” (168). In many respects it is the book’s strongest chapter. It compiles compelling secondary sources¹¹ and takes recourse to authoritative primary sources, its argument is cohesive and progressively developed, and a number of its claims follow directly from the evidence offered. But it is precisely for those reasons that the book’s failure to meaningfully engage scholarly discourses shows through so clearly. Although his best secondary sources would have cautioned against such formulations, he blithely makes such categorical assessments as “Westerners are especially uneasy about variation and nuance in the domain of ethics,” and “Westerners are...baffled and disturbed by Indian aesthetics” (191 and 203). In his examination of Vedic and Biblical sacred text

the myths are treated in a wholly ahistorical manner as if they exist as eternally present, unitary, and uncontested templates for moral action and the apprehension of reality (183-191).

I mentioned above Malhotra's elision of the distinction between India the modern nation-state and India the ancient civilization. He devotes no ink to explaining his ready identification of the two and avoids, thereby, calling much attention to what may be the most spectacular of his many bold moves. To me it is perhaps the most troubling. He has disavowed any connection to Hindutva politics. I take Mr. Malhotra at his word and, I want to be clear, I have no reason whatsoever for questioning his sincerity on that point. But at the same time, his project is thoroughly imbued with the identification of India with the Sanskrit and Hindu traditions, an identification that utterly disallows the association of any individual or community that does not understand itself in those terms with authentic India. Islam is mentioned but a handful of times, the majority of them to link it historically or politically to the undifferentiated Abrahamic/Western Christianity he establishes as the foil to dharma (59, 63, 86, 88, 92, 165, 174, 191, 255, and 288). In the few cases where he actually mentions Muslims in India, all but one positions them as conquerors or rapists of Indian women (117, 171, 240, 291). In a single instance, at the close of the book, he mentions Muslims in a framework that seems to accept they are Indian by way of acknowledging that they share *jāti* as a principle of social organization with Hindus, a fact which gives them a place to "advocate their legal and ethical principles in the public sphere." He follows this magnanimous

allowance of the rights of democratic citizenship to a religious minority, however, with the shocking caveat that, as Indians, they would, however, have to set aside their commitment to the killing of infidels (341)!

Indian Christians fare no better, although they fare no worse. Despite a presence in India that predates their appearance in much of Europe, despite their establishment long before some of the forms of Hinduism that Malhotra celebrates, they are simply ignored, a social fact inconvenient to his absolute India/West, Hindu/Christian binary. Troublesome though they might be to an effort such as this one that seeks to simplify matters far beyond what the data will allow, they are also citizens of a constitutional democracy that Malhotra fashions as thoroughly Hindu. Malhotra has and will object that his project is not about Islam and that he is under no obligation to treat it systematically. While he would be technically correct on the latter point, here and elsewhere¹² he emphatically and repeatedly insists that his concern is about *India* and the West. For *Being Different*, however, India does not and cannot include those outside dharmic faiths. Whatever his more scholarly aspirations, there is no doubt his work can be—and may already be—used as a device to delegitimize the political subjectivity of non-Hindu Indians and offer support to those who would marginalize minority communities in India. In a book whose explicit aim is to "argue that the dharmic traditions...offer perspectives and techniques for a genuinely pluralistic social order and a full integration of many different faiths," the saddest, and, I think, the most damning of the book's failures is the absence of any meaningful discussion of actual, living religious pluralism based on dharmic principles in ancient or

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contemporary India or the contributions of its minority religious communities to forging a pluralistic India.

The question I am left with at the end of the book is not “what has Malhotra accomplished?” because I believe he has produced a work that some audiences—perhaps Western seekers into Indian spirituality who are after a cogent challenge to the categories of self and belief they have inherited; perhaps Indians attracted to a confrontation with Western worldviews built on categories from Indian traditions; perhaps readers raised in secularized households who want to understand some of the broad distinctions that might be made between India and the West—will find useful, and they will not be substantially misled. I remain, however, somewhat perplexed by the question of why academics of many stripes, including those Malhotra has directly attacked, continue to engage him in dialogue. If, as I think this book shows, his command of scholarly literature is basic at best; if he rejects the very practices of self-government and principles of credentialing that we employ to ensure (imperfectly, it is true) informed discourse and rigorous investigation; if his arguments and claims seem an unacknowledged pastiche of widely accepted and overly simplified conclusions borrowed from the academy, why do Princeton and the University of Massachusetts offer him a podium? Why does the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* organize a symposium on his work? Why does the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies honor him with serious discussion of his book at one of the only two sessions it holds annually and with a symposium in the one issue of its annual journal?

One reason, of course, is vigorous self-promotion on Malhotra’s part, but few academics can legitimately throw that stone. Another explanation casts the academy in better light than Malhotra has represented us and undercuts, moreover, one of his central assertions: that the academic study of religion maintains a strict custody over its conversations, deliberately, strategically, and cynically restricting access to knowledge and inuring itself to critique. It is quite simply the fact that academic institutions such as those I have named as well as individual scholars¹³ have courted Mr. Malhotra precisely because he has offered that critique, even if inelegantly and acerbically. The generous responses of some of my colleagues, including the most abused among Mr. Malhotra’s targets, have shown admirable restraint and have caused me to reconsider the offense I have taken at his attacks on the academy.¹⁴ What most of the available evidence, in the form of apologies, pained disclosures, and willing engagement with Hindus critical of the academic study of Indian religious traditions reveals is not an arrogant cabal, hostile or indifferent to how its audiences might understand or misunderstand its work, but often an embarrassed and solicitous crew tripping over itself to demonstrate its goodwill and eagerness to hear and understand the concerns he represents.

I concluded my 2004 book *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* with a plea that scholars of religion seek meaningful dialogue with practitioners of religious traditions who are critical of the academic study of religion. At that time, Mr. Malhotra was becoming more widely known as a leading voice among those Indians in the US who called on Hindus to

exercise a vigilant surveillance over scholars' representations of Hinduism. I think it is fair to say that, even as he has angered many of us, Mr. Malhotra has done the academy a service by making us feel the need for that dialogue more urgently. In spite of the rising temperature in those days, however, I was still naively unaware of how poisoned the atmosphere would continue to become. It is my personal judgment that Malhotra's methods for raising his audience's awareness have resembled too closely the political manufacture of rage and affront that have triumphed over civil discourse around the world during the last decade or two. I believe that the dialogue between scholars and Hindus concerned about the academic study of Hinduism has been much less productive than it might have been as a result.

Taking this longer view of his career into account, particularly when he has demanded a free market exchange of ideas, I believe we pay Malhotra and the principles he has advocated—the right of the represented to represent themselves, the insistence that the influence of Western categories of analysis and Western theoretical tools in the study of Hinduism be challenged, and the expectation that our academy open itself to critique from the outside, particularly by practicing Hindus—no honor by engaging him on any terms other than the merit of his work. On that score I feel obligated to offer my candid assessment that *Being Different* is a book that is interesting and significant primarily and perhaps exclusively because Mr. Malhotra is its author. Under another's name it would attract little academic notice and certainly would not give us cause to find ourselves on these pages. If the book and this forum signal, nevertheless, a mutual desire

of scholars and those activists Malhotra has represented to move beyond a poisonous antipathy, I welcome it warmly and look forward to further dialogue.

Notes

¹ Rajiv Malhotra, "Washington Post and Hinduphobia," Sulekha.com, http://rivr.sulekha.com/washington-post-and-hinduphobia_103592_blog, 20 Apr 2004, (accessed 10 Oct 2012); "RISA Lila 1: Wendy's Child Syndrome," Sulekha.com, http://rivr.sulekha.com/risa-lila-1-wendy-s-child-syndrome_103338_blog, 6 Sept 2002, (accessed 10 Oct 2012).

² Rajiv Malhotra, *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2011), 3.

³ Malhotra, *Being Different*, 140.

⁴ Rajiv Malhotra, "Is There an American Caste System?" Sulekha.com, http://rivr.sulekha.com/is-there-an-american-caste-system_98493_blog, 29 Jan 2001 (accessed 10 Oct 2012).

⁵ Rajiv Malhotra, "The Peer Review Cartel," The Cycle of Time, http://www.cycleoftime.com/articles_view.php?codArtigo=65, n.d., (accessed 10 Oct. 2012)

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ My choice of the metaphor "cartoon" is informed by Malhotra's frequent invocation of Krishnan Ramaswamy, Antonio de Nicolas, Aditi Banerjee, eds., *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2007), a text funded by his own Infinity Foundation that scathingly attacks the academic study of Hinduism and frequently employs cartoons to belittle it.

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⁸ A glaring error that he repeats many times and uses to build his case against Emory University illustrates how rudimentary his understanding of Christianity is and how careless his research into it has been: he calls Emory a Lutheran institution and attacks Emory on the basis of a thorough misunderstanding of Lutheran theology. Emory is affiliated with the United Methodist Church. See 21-24.

⁹ Malhotra, *Being Different*, e.g. 62, 100, 112-13, 201, 259, 299.

¹⁰ This is the argument of Chapter 2, “Yoga: Freedom from History,” 54-100.

¹¹ Although the chapter relies heavily and primarily on a forty-year old work, R. Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). <http://dx.doi.org/2027/mdp.39015002387838>

¹² Rajiv Malhotra and Aravindan Neelakandan, *Breaking India: Western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines*. New Delhi: Amaryllis, 2011.

¹³ See, for example, the list of endorsements that appear in the first pages of *Being Different* that precede the title page.

¹⁴ For two examples, see Ann Grodzins Gold, “Toward Context Sensitivity,” Barnard Department of Religion, <http://religion.barnard.edu/defamation-context>; n.d., (accessed 10 Oct 2012), and the personal correspondence from Sarah Caldwell made public by Malhotra in “The Insider/Outsider Academic Game,” Rajivmalotra.com, <http://rajivmalotra.com/index.php?view=article&catid=20%3Aamerican-education-reform&id=33%3Athe-insideroutsider-academic->

[game&format=pdf&option=com_content](#), n.d. (accessed 10 Oct 2012).