

BOOK REVIEWS

AUDRIUS BEINORIUS. *Imagining Otherness: Postcolonial Perspective to Indian Religious Culture*, Bibliotheca Orientalia et Comparativa 7, Vilnius: Kronta, 2006, 256 pp. ISBN 9955-734-00-0

The monograph of Dr. Audrius Beinorius, *Imagining Otherness: Postcolonial Perspective to Indian Religious Culture*, is a very important contribution to the humanitarian science of Indology, especially in Lithuanian Oriental studies. We have just a few works that provide us with postmodern material and new approaches in this field. This monograph is an evaluation of Indian religions from the contemporary postcolonial perspective as a form of cultural studies rather than an offshoot of theology. That important idea comes from scrutinizing the primary Sanskrit sources and works of many contemporary writers on India, mainly I. Gonda, W. Halbfass, R. Inden, W.C. Smith, R.T. McCutcheon, R. King, Ph. Almond, D.S. Lopez, C. Geertz, E. Said, and G. H. Gadamer. The comparative study of phenomena such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or mysticism uncovers the main shortcomings of past Orientalist and essentialist approaches. On the other hand, the author proposes more adequate ways to solve the most acute methodological problems with regard to the growing criticism of the conservative and Eurocentrist worldview of the scholars of pre-colonial and colonial times.

The book consists of a preface, five main chapters, an afterword, references, and an index of names and subjects.

In the first chapter, 'Tracing the Landscape of the Imagined', the author writes: 'Western ideological colonization has contributed to the modern construction of "Hinduism" as a single religion in two ways—first by locating the core of Indian religiosity in certain Sanskrit texts (the textualisation of Indian religion) and, second, by an implicit and sometimes explicit tendency to define Indian religion in terms of a normative paradigm of religion based upon contemporary Western understanding of Judaeo-Christian traditions' (p. 20). He argues that the notion of 'Hinduism' itself is an abstraction inspired by the West and that is, according to W.C. Smith (like some others), a 'particularly false conceptualization'. A universalized form of brahmanical religion—so called 'Hinduism'—has distorted the indigenous and diverse Indian religiosity irreparably. Even worse, the emergence of 'Hindu reform movements' like *Brahmo Samaj* is a reflection of Victorian and post-Enlightenment faith in the progressive nature of history—an idea which in my opinion is not bad at all and still lies at the background of European and American democratic laws—and as such, these movements are very suspicious and not genuine.

Of course, British rule helped to form the Indian identity in the 18th and very much in the 19th centuries in the sense that the Indian élite started to rethink (rather, was forced to do so) the religious and political heredity of the country. Western Orientalism and personal contacts made a great impact on the minds of neo-vedantic and national ideologists such as S. Radhakrishnan, Ramakrishna, Bankimchandra Chatterji, Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi. Still, I suppose that the term in question might be useful not only 'on a general, superficial and introductory level' (p. 27), but to serve to outline the evolution of religious and spiritual reconstruction in some historical periods of India, especially in the 19th century, because at that time some Western ideas paradoxically were adopted, transformed, and put at the core of the modern movement of independence in India, as the author rightly admits. The independent India is a most important result of controversial and very complex processes. To think, that *everything* of that time was absolutely false because of the dominating and cunning power of foreigners, meant just to make Indians submit to it and be exploited, is to be on the side of extreme purists and to essentialize the other side of the problem. Perhaps in that discourse it is better, in a words of Edward Said, to let the Oriental lion speak for itself, i.e., to let Indian scholars make the final resolutions about that period, to separate different historical segments with different 'degrees of corruption', and so on. To save Indian subaltern cultures and the heterogeneity of Indian religious phenomena is primarily an Indian prerogative. Anyway, the question is open, because even among scholars of India there are many points of view and some contradictions as well, and such pluralism of opinions is normal in the postmodern humanities.

To avoid unnecessary dichotomy of 'East-West', the same critical attitude is recommended in the second chapter, 'Reimagining "Buddhism"'. Being an expert in Buddhistic studies, Beinorius gives a bright and powerful picture of complex cross-cultural problems associated with the transfer of the system of many-sided thought of Buddha and his followers and explains how Greeks and later Christians were influenced by it. 'In various shapes and forms Buddhism has been identified and written about since the 17th century, even though it is often confused with or seen as just a heretical sect of Hinduism', writes the author (p. 38). At different times Buddhism was labelled 'a form of Hindu Protestantism', 'a system of pessimism', or even 'an atheistic system' and 'Lamaism'.

An 'Oriental Renaissance' came only with translations and textual interpretations of sacred books of various schools and branches like Pali, Mahāyāna or Tantra Buddhism. This 'increasing academic specialization and professionalization', says the author, 'altered the ambience of works on Buddhism' and since the 1960s has inspired intentional spiritual communities in the West (pp. 46, 59). It is true that especially

after Tibet had been occupied by communist China the great authority of the 14th Dalai Lama, exiled monks, and gurus such as Chögyam Trungpa, and the Japanese D.T. Suzuki made Buddhist thought and practices widespread, first in the U.S.A. Nowadays its influence is so deep and even prestigious among the Western élite that we can talk about the real transformation of ostensibly 'passive' Asian forms of religiosity and spiritual practices. The evidence of the vital role of Buddhistic principles such as love or compassion in Western culture and the need for a new kind of spiritual discipline found in the strict and healthy methods of Zen meditation and the like is changing the post-oriental attitude to the subject. In that respect Beinorius shares the position of Charles Hallisey, citing his conclusion: 'We will need to reconceptualize the Buddhist tradition ... to retrieve and reorganize our scholarly heritage in Buddhist Studies in the light of that reconceptualization' (p. 56).

Further the author examines the hermeneutics and thinking processes of some Buddhistic doctrines and lays emphasis on the openness of scholastic and meditative approaches: 'Buddhist hermeneutical tradition is a tradition of realization, devoid of any dichotomy between intellect and experience, the rational and the mystical. Enlightenment as wisdom is perfected as the culmination of the most refined rational inquiry, not at the cost of reason' (p. 71).

In the chapter "Discovery" of the Mystical', the most esoteric form of spiritual practices, so called 'mysticism' is discussed. From the interesting linguistic and historical investigation of the term and its adaptation to the different 'mystical' traditions, Christian as well as Hindu, we can see that the phenomena is so obscure and hard to verify that it has become a matter of personal experiences and psychological inquiry. According to Beinorius, 'an exclusive emphasis upon the experiential dimension of the subject matter misinterprets not only the spiritual traditions of the East, but also the pre-modern usage of the term "mysticism" within the Christian tradition itself' (p. 89). That is a very important statement, because it is not accurate to put different, subtle and secret spiritual phenomenon or their interpretations under a single unifying flag. All the main religions have their own distinct and rather well defined apprehension to the subject, special vocabulary, and usage of ritual forms meant to make men perceive the mystery of the union with the Divine. A quotation from a book by Margaret Smith shows the mix of systems and the misunderstanding rather clearly. 'The aim of mystics is to establish a conscious relation with the Absolute, in which they find the personal object of love', she writes (p. 89). From the Vedantic point of view, it is a false statement, because the Absolute as an impersonal Brahman cannot be perceived consciously in a common sense and be an object of love. It is personal manifestation of Him, one or another form of God, that can be addressed in a personal way. Also, a famous work of Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*,

in the same manner draws a parallel between different states of mystical experiences and states of inner knowledge.

There are too many attempts to explain the enigma by exterior means and simply to mystify the problem that they are not worthy of mentioning here. No wonder that similar inaccuracy in describing such a sensitive subject makes many thinkers, philosophers and even theologians proclaim that ‘mystical’ experiences are mostly inaccessible, subjective and irrational. Nevertheless, Beinorius rightly points out that ‘many of those figures who are frequently described as mystics, such as Plotinus, Augustine, Ibn Arabi, Kūkai, Asanga, Śankara and Abhinavagupta, have produced intellectual systems and literary works of a highly sophisticated and erudite nature’ (p. 100).

Why is this question so important? As the author states, the tendency to describe Hinduism and Buddhism as irrational and mystical systems that are antagonistic to Ancient Greek or post-Kantian Western culture works for political and racist purposes. The kind of romantic or idealistic imagination of Indian ‘spiritual’ philosophies, as proposed by Anquetil-Duperron, Arthur Schopenhauer, and others, does not add to the impartial and correct scene of diverse Indian spiritual schools and practices either. How ‘normative characterization of “mysticism” as quietistic, amoral and experientialist’ has been invented is very well demonstrated by Beinorius’ critical analysis of Rudolf Otto’s work, *Mysticism East and West*, ‘now generally acknowledged to be a classical work in the comparative study of mysticism’ (pp. 106, 107). The question is whether such works can be truly considered classical if they have one purpose—to prove Eastern doctrines to be ‘second-rate’ and empty of ethics and in that way to create a caricature of Indian culture as in this case? Even from a short extract of the book it seems as if Otto does not perfectly know the basics of Vedānta or Śankara’s system: ‘Śankara’s goal is quietism, *tyāga*, surrender of the will and of doing, an abandonment of good as well as of evil works’ (p. 106). It seems that Otto takes *tyāga* for *sannyāsa*. For example, in *Bhagavadgīta* it is stated that *tyāga* is better than *sannyāsa* because *tyāga* is *inner* renunciation of the results of works, but not of works as such. On the contrary, the warrior like Arjuna, not thinking about the fruits of his deeds, must fight and work in the world to be a *tyāgī*, but not a *sannyāsi*, or monk.

By investigating examples of Dīthe gnāga, Dharmakīrti, Kamalāśīla, and Tibetan dGe-lugs-pa tradition of Buddhist scholasticism, Beinorius refutes the notion of Steven Katz, who says: ‘There are no pure, unmediated mystical experiences’ (p. 112). ‘Buddhist scholars discuss in detail the potential deceptiveness of states of awareness, including Yogic states, and they try to determine criteria such as *sphuṭatva*, “clarity”, which can help distinguish true Yogic perception (*yogipratyaṣa*) from mere hallucinations’, argues the Lithuanian scholar (p. 113). Surely, the scepticism of

contemporary Westerners is utterly comprehensible, knowing the long history of positivistic and rationalistic thought, but Beinorius rightly makes the concluding inference: 'To accept modern Western epistemological theories without highlighting their cultural and social particularity is to remain within a long and well-established tradition of Western arrogance about the superiority of Western ways of understanding the world' (p. 115).

The next chapter 'On the Linguistic and Psychological in Indian Religion', deals with concepts like *Vāk* and *Śabda-Brahman*, as presented by *Sphotavāda* and *Vaṇṇavāda* doctrines. The author pays great attention to the cosmological hermeneutics of the Hindu Tantras, reviewing the mantric system of Kashmiri *Śaivism*. This part of Indology often escapes research. The scholar analyses the treatise of Abhinavagupta *Tantrāloka* and later commentators, thus actualizing the refined and elaborate theory of sacredness of divine sound and word, in which *Śakti* plays a crucial role.

Somehow naturally Beinorius comes to the play of subconscious in Classical Yoga psychology, trying to 'examine and classify the various conceptual issues related to the problem of the unconscious in Indian philosophy' (ibid.). Here he gives a general characterization of some relevant concepts, then goes into some problems regarding the functions of these concepts in a more detailed way, concentrating mainly on Patanjali's *Yoga sūtra* and related commentaries (p. 153). Despite the minute and helpful description of the functioning of *saṃskāras*, *vāsanās* and *kleśas* as understood by Patānjala and Sāṃkhya schools, I suppose that it is not enough to investigate the problem thoroughly and to elucidate all the differences between Yoga psychology and Western psychoanalysis regarding the nature of the subconscious. There are many more recent schools of Yoga and psychology, and they find more and more features in common using consciousness and altered multilevel states of consciousness as a keyword, like integral Yoga or the psychological system of Ken Wilber. The differences between schools of Yoga are significant because they can have diverse methods and aims or accentuate them variously. For example: 'Consciousness (*mahat*) is the pure *sattva* where *rajas* and *tamas* exist as subordinate elements. It is the *tamo guṇa* that in the depths of our mind (*manas*) accounts for all false notions and for all inertia and idleness and other vices such as narrowness, jealousy, etc.' (p. 158). From the standpoint of integral Yoga, *sattva* is not absolutely pure and it can be as egoistic as other *guṇas*; only when it is transformed into *jyoti*, the authentic spiritual light, can it be said that it is pure; *tamogūṇa* as a force of in-consciousness is responsible for obscurity and inertia, whereas *rajogūṇa* is the quality of vital passion and such feelings as hatred, pride, jealousy, lust, drive for possession, etc. Integral Yoga, as it seems more than other yogic disciplines investigates the possibilities lying in the subliminal region of sub-consciousness. Sri Aurobindo in his system of nine levels of consciousness proposes a more detailed plan of particular qualities characteristic to

the mental, vital and physical mind. It was evidently not the author's goal to review all of them. They must be the subject of separate monograph.

The fifth chapter, 'The "Postcolonial Turn" in Indian Studies' is the shortest but very important, because it brings us back to the problem of Oriental studies. In it Beinorius uses a critical approach when commenting on Said's book *Orientalism*, pointing out that he 'avoids problems related to his own position by refusing to outline an alternative conception of the Orient' (p. 173). According to the author, the most distinct deficiency in Said's work is that 'he places too much emphasis on the passivity of the native and that he does not really discuss, not even allow for, the ways in which indigenous people of the East have used, manipulated and constructed their own positive responses to colonialism using Orientalist conceptions. Such a transformation can be seen in the Hindu context, where Orientalist presuppositions about the "spirituality" of India, etc. were used by reformers such as Rammohan Roy ... in the development of anti-colonial Hindu nationalism and a renescent intellectual movement which might more accurately be labeled "neo-Hinduism" or "neo-Vedanta"' (p. 174). This could have been said more distinctly in the preceding chapter. Also, he seemingly does not sufficiently evaluate Said's positive remarks about so-called 'affirmative Orientalism'. At the end of the book and in additional articles on the subject shortly before his death, Said pays attention to the new, 'affirmative' approaches and apologizes for not addressing the problems mentioned above and others because he had different goal. Anyway, as Beinorius rightly points out, 'Orientalism is often caught in a dialectical tension between the extremes of universalism and pluralism' (p. 181).

Beinorius' project to demonstrate in scientific terms the 'imagining otherness' as a postcolonial perspective to Indian religious culture is timely and important to further studies in Indology. The affirmation of this conclusion might be found in closing sentences of the afterword: 'The development of "Indo-critical" approaches should be grounded on a commitment to a comparative dialogism both between and within cultures... The truly global hermeneutical engagement among peoples must therefore be seen in the postcolonial era as a universal phenomenon that cannot be artificially confined to mutually closed-off traditions, but must be conceived as having boundaries that stretch as far as the limits of human experience and languages themselves' (p. 138).

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