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By Subhasis Chattopadhyay -

Liberation theology^[xviii] , which as a theology, continues to expose:

“how traditional Christologies made possible and even encouraged an image of Christ that could be used by the powerful and in such a way that the poor had no alternative but to cling to the one-sided suffering image...[we need to] analyze them also because this is not just past history; these images are reviving and [are] being encouraged in various ways [even] now.”

(Sobrino, Jon. *Jesus the Liberator: a Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*.

Translated by Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh. Kent: Burns and Oates (originally published by Orbis Books at Maryknoll, USA), 1994. p.14)

Liberation theology remains important to any theologising in India, be it Hindu or Christian. For finally, religions are supposed to be emancipating whereas they are in fact, stifling and deeply exclusive. Whereas the Old Testament prophets are radical, and the Beatitudes of the Galilean address the marginal throughout history; lived Christianity like all other religions, is contaminated by aporias which the Christians term systematic sin. Any Biblical exegesis is an unravelling of this systematic sin but, always keeping in mind the pitfalls of materialism that goes with a wholehearted acceptance of Marxism, even that Marx who has some very

important observations[xix] for both religious studies and Biblical scholars, we need to heed this warning[xx]:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of freedom and a force for liberation. In recent years, this essential truth has become the object of reflection for theologians, with a new kind of attention which is itself full of promise.

Liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin. Its end and its goal is the freedom of the children of God, which is the gift of grace. As a logical consequence, it calls for freedom from many different kinds of slavery in the cultural, economic, social, and political spheres, all of which derive ultimately from sin, and so often prevent people from living in a manner befitting their dignity. To discern clearly what is fundamental to this issue and what is a by-product of it, is an indispensable condition for any theological reflection on liberation.

Faced with the urgency of certain problems, some are tempted to emphasize, unilaterally, the liberation from servitude of an earthly and temporal kind. They do so in such a way that they seem to put liberation from sin in second place, and so fail to give it the primary importance it is due. Thus, their very presentation of the problems is confused and ambiguous. Others, in an effort to learn more precisely what are the causes of the slavery which they want to end, make use of different concepts without sufficient critical caution. It is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to purify these borrowed concepts of an ideological inspiration which is compatible with Christian faith and the ethical requirements which flow from it.

*The present Instruction has a much more limited and precise purpose: to draw the attention of pastors, theologians, and all the faithful to the deviations, and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, **in an insufficiently critical manner**, concepts borrowed from various*

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currents of Marxist thought. (boldface mine, as I point out in my endnote xx, the caution is not about Marx but about an insufficient exegesis which precludes even the idea of the Holy[xxi]; the Instruction is by the then Cardinal Ratzinger who is now Pope Emeritus, Pope Benedict XVI[xxii])

It is within this framework of liberation theology, often disregarding all caution, that Biblical exegetes have embraced the hermeneutical methods of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Through Gadamer's Heidegger informed philosophy, exegetes have reclaimed the radicality of the Bible. But these some of these readings come at the cost of the means being rejected for the end. Therefore, they are morally dubious intellectual exercises in Biblical hermeneutics. For instance, if we need only turn to Biblical theodicy to show the pitfalls of contemporary exegetical methods. Exegetes argue that the *Book of Revelation* is only metaphorical but the Christian Faith demands a reading which is both metaphorical and yet, true. This last book of the Bible is not about truth-claims but is true. The problem with truth-claims as against an absolute truth is that truth claims are speculations:

[Friedrich] Schlegel suggests a partial difference from [Richard] Rorty when, while asserting, like Novalis, that "There is no absolute truth," he also claims that "this spurs on the spirit and drives it to activity." To counter the obvious objection to such assertions, Schlegel also admits that "If all truth is relative, then the proposition is also relative that all truth is relative." Any proposition has, as Rorty also suggested, to introduce relativity into the absolute, because, as Novalis puts it, in relation to "A is A" as the statement of the absolute, "The essence of identity [of the "ideal" and the "real"] can only be established in a pseudo-proposition [Scheinsatz]. We leave the identical in order to represent it." Schlegel therefore claims that "For a positive criterion of truth the truth itself would have already to be present and be given—which is therefore a contradiction," because we would have presupposed what the criterion is supposed to enable us to discover. What lies behind Schlegel's assertions is apparent in his declaration elsewhere, which brings him close to Gadamer, that "In truth you

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would be distressed if the whole world, as you demand, were for once seriously to become completely comprehensible.” Complete understanding would render the pursuit of better— or other— ways of understanding redundant and the world would therefore become meaningless, because postfoundational meaning in this sense resides precisely in the idea that there is always more to be revealed, not in the convergence on a “ready-made world.”

Bowie, Andrew, “Chapter 4: Gadamer and Romanticism,” in Gadamer’s Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 72. I have removed the citations provided by Bowie.

In a certain sense, the act of reading the Bible thus becomes an act of divine violence. Divine violence is a term used by Walter Benjamin^[xxiii] within a very different *realpolitik*. Be that as it may, it is important to note that the act of reading the Bible in the Western world is through the lens of Marxism, phenomenology, Heidegger’s ontology reworked through Gadamer’s interpretative acts and separately, through deconstructionist strategies of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida.

John D. Caputo is a very powerful practitioner of the art of hermeneutics who accommodates within his work all these strains of Biblical exegesis; though Caputo is loathe to call himself a theologian. Christian theologians, in contrast to Christian philosophers (Caputo is an instance of being both and thus germane to our discussion here), have read the Bible through the lens of St. Augustine of Hippo^[xxiv], St. Thomas Aquinas and nearer to our times, through Biblical theologians like Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann and Raymond E. Brown^[xxv]. This is the extant tradition of Biblical exegesis and of course, there are standard etymological and historical methods of reading the Bible. For instance, we know that Heraclitus has influenced the Gospel of Glory^[xxvi]:

οὐκ ἐμοῦ, ἀλλὰ τοῦ<δε τοῦ> λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν· σοφόν ἐστὶν ἐν

πάντα εἰδέναι.

“Listening not to mine, but to this logos, one must agree: wisdom consists in knowing all things as one.*

Intentional syntactical ambiguity admits alternative translation: “Listening not

to mine, but to this logos, one must agree: there is only one Wise being (i.e.

god) to know (or to control[sic]) all things

*i.e. to the visible “book of nature”, the Universe conceived as text.”

(For the best extant translation of Heraclitus see, Andrei Lebedev’s new critical translation which I have given here and see endnote xxiv) Lebedev, p.7 of PDF downloaded from Academia.edu.

Gadamer’s importance to Biblical exegesis becomes important when we read his footnote 29 in p.28 of his Chapter *Heraclitus Studies* (13-55) in *The Beginning of Knowledge* (Bloomsbury Revelations, 2016, Chennai, India) translated by Rod Coltman: “Aristotle does well to leave things [the truth claims about “*eôn logos*”, same footnote by Gadamer.] undecided where no decision is necessary”. This uncertainty is the domain of the fictograph of contemporary Biblical exegesis. It is within this fictograph that I will have to necessarily work as a Hindu for reasons which will be clearer later.

But there are foundational problems with reading Christianity through Hindu/Buddhist/Jain lens. Let us now survey these problems:

1. Karma and cyclical births. Nowhere in the Bible including the *Apocrypha* do we have the notion of Karma or samsara or cyclical rebirth. In the *Dhammapada* it is said:

“For a bad act done does not coagulate

Like freshly extracted milk.

Burning, it follows the childish one,

Like fire concealed in ashes.”

(Carter, John Ross., and Mahinda Palihawadana, trans. *The Dhammapada*. Reissued. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 14)

2. The concept of all living beings having souls. This is conflated by Christian thinkers with pantheism and panentheism. Christianity does not admit of souls in all sentient beings.
3. The soteriologies and eschatologies of Christianity and the Indic religions are distinct and have nothing in common. Moksha/nibbana ≠ Salvation/Redemption.
4. Churches and synagogues are not built around the Sri Yantra. The architectural housing of the Old Testament Holy of Holies and the Sanctum Sanctorum of Hindus are different. Even Buddhist and Jain temples are built based on Yantra structures and mandalas.

Douglas Renfrew Brooks's *Auspicious Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of Srividya Sakta Tantrism in South India (SUNY series in Tantric Studies)*, 1992, is an indispensable and authentic source of our knowledge in the Yantric nature of Hindu temples which lead to the experience of Advaita or non-qualified, non-dualism. The very architecture of (large) Hindu temples precludes the idea of theism in the final analysis. Churches are sacred spaces where one communes with God. Hindu temples are sacred spaces where one sees (darshana) Oneself as one with God. The notion of a theistic personal God is slippery within Hinduism. “Be a god, to worship God” rings throughout the Hindu canon, especially within the Tantric canons. Such non-dualism is not admitted in Judaism and Christianity. The Yogi and especially, Tantric practitioners within both Hinduism and Buddhism practise deity visualisation through which there remains no difference between the practitioner and the

invoked representation of the Supreme Godhead. Gavin Flood's *The Tantric Body*, 2005 remains till date the best study on Hindu worship involving deity visualisation.

5. Dependent Origination is a reworking of Advaita Vedanta[xxvii], but say, according to the *Yoga Vashishta*, this world and everything in it, the subject interpreting on a screen this content/object, is a dream. A dream which will not end till we (there is agency in Hinduism[xxviii]) make an effort to end this dream, which is more of a nightmare if one truly cognizes reality. There is no external help available to end this dream. The textual register 'nightmare' is devoid of value within Indic concepts which deny duality. Western languages including Latin are theistic languages which cannot convey the monadic nature of Indian thought.

Western exegesis and even the deconstructionists, de Man and Derrida are Heraclitan. The main mode of Biblical exegesis as practised now is thus, Heraclitan, all said and done. They all believe, as distinct from know (this epistemic uncertainty plagues Western thinkers and has been repeatedly illustrated above), that there is an ontic beginning. Whereas within Hinduism/Buddhism/Jainism there is no ontology possible because time is non-teleologic and non-ontic[xxix]. According to Advaita Vedanta, which is the telos of the various Hindu and Buddhist Tantras, there is no subject-object distinction. Thus the question of interpretation does not arise. Even the question of trans(lation/mission) does not arise. Yet Indologists who live by Advaita Vedanta do translate. This is not ironical in the original Greek sense of *eirōneía*; this is the exact problem which Gadamer points out in the second edition of his magisterial *Truth and Method* (first published in 1960, we refer here to the 2004 authoritative Continuum International Edition, available to me, translated by Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall; Gadamer passed away in 2002). Gadamer in this edition pointed out that his 'method' within the human sciences was being wrongly applied, being wrongly read in the first place. In my opinion, none should read Gadamer without pausing at his comment on Aristotle mentioned above. What Gadamer wanted and propagated, is a Heraclitan-Heideggerian foundational reading of texts (which is also the inscribed body of Gavin Flood

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mentioned above) where texts and life and lives spill over into one another , with the caveat that from Heraclitus down to Heidegger, to Gadamer, the ontic foundation of being/dasein is constrained only to the human subject as has been pointed out in point 2 above. So the world views of the Bible and of the Indic religions are entirely different and cannot be reconciled, nor should they be reconciled. Otherwise, we give into religious and moral relativism. Thus I have to read the Bible with caution that I do not disrespect its traditional exegesis; and then resist the temptation of appropriating it to Hinduism. Christian exegetes in the past tried to appropriate Hinduism and thus, they failed to really begin a dialogue. Dialogue can only happen when we agree upon our differences. We may not agree with foundational truth-claims but we have to agree with the foundational truth (and not truth-claim) that we need to explore other religions as far as possible from our situatedness within our own faith traditions (this is the view of Raimundo Panikkar and Jacques Dupuis, as also of Michael Amaladoss). This now leads me to speak of faith traditions.

The Heideggerian supplement, which is Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, has been applied to the Bible (without heed to Gadamer) and thus we have specific textual (qua reading) problems with the Bible. The hermeneutical error in contemporary exegesis is when we change what is meant to be a certain thought-object into an applied real life construct, as Gadamer pointed out also in his 'Hermeneutic Access to the Beginning' (11-23) in his *The Beginning of Philosophy* translated by Rod Coltman, published from Chennai, India by Bloomsbury Revelations in 2016 . Thus, this appropriation of the hermeneutical method by religious studies' scholars needs to be e-labor-ate(d)[xxx]. Through a few examples, this error of applying mind-objects to real life will become clear within comparative religious studies.

Sheldon Pollock[xxxi] has done extensive work within Sanskrit. But the anecdotal charge against him is that he has erased the numinous from his exegesis of Hindu canonical texts. Pollock is also perceived to have reduced the concept of Rasa to one of Western (read First World) aesthetics. Yet he knows Sanskrit and Hinduism as few else alive today know both. Also, we have the Wendy Doniger controversy. Doniger is a scholar of Hinduism par

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excellence but she has chosen to focus on what is libidinal in Hinduism[xxxii]. It is akin to a Hindu scholar of the Bible choosing to focus on *The Song of Songs* as primarily an erotic text. Doniger and Pollock have been led to their conclusions because they adopted the hermeneutical method which began with Heidegger and in a very narrow sense, ends with Gadamer. But unlike Pollock and Doniger, Heidegger and Gadamer were aware of the problems of applying their method(s) to real life situations. Contrary to the methodologies of Pollock and Doniger, we have the works Francis Clooney SJ who is also an authority on Hinduism. Fr. Clooney has not thrown the baby out of the bathwater. He has ethically embraced the Other of Hinduism and has been enriched by the same Hindu texts which both Doniger and Pollock glossed with infamy. Clooney being a Roman Catholic priest understands the need for rituals and therefore, the limitations of (the) hermeneutical method(s). Biblical Studies as a discipline today is misunderstood and has become contentious because of this and other foundational errors. Biblical scholars (of Doniger's and Pollock's stature within Hinduism) now have unfortunately conflated the human sciences with the Bible. In short, in their rush to situate their discipline within the firm (de)constructionist modes as one of the human sciences they have tamed the radical nature of the Bible's message. While it is important to know of Numibia to know the Old Testament, or Heraclitus to understand the *Gospel of John*; it is more important to know that the Bible for millions of people is the one text which gives them solace. To put it another way; the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Vedas* and much Sanskrit literature, like Hebrew literature which includes portions of the Old Testament, brings solace to millions of Hindus and even non-Hindus. To apply the Heidegger-Gadamer hermeneutical methods to these texts without circumspection is to disrespect them.

Unlike hermeneutical praxes in First World classrooms, we need to approach the Bible after cleansing ourselves of dross. We must effect a *bhutashuddhi* and then read the Bible and then alone will we know that Jesus of Nazareth really was, and it is possible to return from the dead. If I were to believe in Doniger, and within the historical Jesus movement, John P. Meier SJ, then I would have lost something essential within religious studies. That is, the sense of the holy. It is with this *mysterium tremendum*, that we must read the Bible. The Bible is a

living text which need interpretation because it is mysterious and holy. The opacity of holiness will allow only theological exegesis of the Bible and one should not sell one's soul for academic or any other sort of transient fame. One cannot approach the Bible without fear and trembling[xxxiii]; without the knowledge that the Bible cannot be interpreted by human agency. Yet interpret we must, and that too in the shadow of the logic of late capitalism and within an economy (of the Pharaoh) effecting divine violence. The epistemic break has occurred and thus we are called to read the Bible from the margins. René Girard understands the marginal nature of the Biblical corpus when he comments on the Johannine Logos:

The Johannine Logos is foreign to any kind of violence; it is therefore forever expelled, an absent Logos that never has had any direct, determining influence over human cultures...The Johannine Logos discloses the truth of violence by having itself expelled...in a more general way, the misrecognition of the Logos and mankind's expulsion of it disclose one of the fundamental principles of human society. (Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World, Bloomsbury Revelation, Great Britain, 2017, p.260)

When Girard speaks of the expelled Logos and its non-influence in human society he clearly speaks of the erasure of the peace that the Bible proclaims and the lived reality of our deliberate erasure of this peace. Much later, the Kashmiri Shaivite, Sri Utpaladeva will speak of the philosophy of recognition (re-cognition). It is the job of Indian exegesis and hermeneutics to enact a *refoulement* of this expelled Logos and to (re)cognise it much in the spirit of the *Recognition Sutras* of Sri Utpaladeva. The aim of Indian Biblical exegesis should not be to repeat the subaltern bind of R. S. Sugirtharajah (mentioned in the first instalment in this series, in this website), but to chart relevant territories which re-cognises the Logos and makes it a “determining influence over human cultures”. As we proceed we will have ample scope to review extant understanding of the Biblical corpus and we will necessarily have to create a dictionary of specific words and concepts and reframe Eurocentric and other First World conceptions of the Bible. The challenges of doing so are explicated by Rudolf A.

Makkreel:

Interpretation becomes important when direct understanding is either lacking or inadequate. But even when we think we understand the meaning of our experience, interpretation can contextualize what is given in experience to also assess it as evidence for possible truth claims. Hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation must bring judgment to bear in explicating the tasks of understanding and consider whether they have been fulfilled. Because there are distinctive normative modes of assessing evidence, it will be useful to distinguish between an observational understanding and a reflective understanding. Observational understanding is primarily theoretical and can be aligned with the Kantian faculty of Verstand (the understanding as intellect) that legislates order and aims at explanative judgments. Reflective understanding is more encompassing in being equally theoretical and practical: it is the process of Verstehen that establishes the meaning of things by putting them in their appropriate context. For this kind of reflective understanding, as examined by hermeneutical philosophers such as Dilthey and Ricoeur, judgment will be both assertoric and evaluative in that it takes human ends into account. (Interpretation, Judgment, and Critique in the Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics edited by Niall Keene and Chris Lawn, 2016. p. 236)

In other words, the project at hand is to interrogate as far as reason allows us, to un-hide 'Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World'.

To be continued...

Also read:

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[xviii] For standard readings on liberation theology the best books are Gutiérrez Gustavo. A

Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation. Translated by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014. This is the book which, as it were, began the movement which is now known as the Liberation Movement in the Roman Catholic Church. But a more accessible book is Sobrino, Jon, and Ignacio Ellacuría, eds. *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996. Sobrino remains a more balanced author for understanding the far reaching consequences of Liberation Theology.

[xix] “At present, the French will immediately pounce on the book [*The Essence of Christianity* by Feuerbach], for both parties — priests, and Voltairians and materialists — are looking about for help from outside. It is a remarkable phenomenon that, in contrast to the eighteenth century, religiosity has now passed to the middle and upper classes while on the other hand irreligiosity — but an irreligiosity of men regarding themselves as men — has descended to the...proletariat. You would have to attend one of the meetings of the [manual] workers to appreciate the pure freshness, the nobility which burst forth from these toil-worn men. The English proletariat is also advancing with giant strides...But I must not forget to emphasise the theoretical merits of the German artisans in Switzerland, London and Paris...” (Marx, Karl. “Letter to Ludwig Feuerbach.” *Letters: Letter To Ludwig Feuerbach* August 11 1844. Marx Engels Archive. Accessed May 8, 2019. https://marxists.catbull.com/archive/marx/works/1844/letters/44_08_11.htm.)

[xx] The letter to Feuerbach quoted in the previous endnote is undercut by Marx’s fear and disbelief in anything transcendent/numinous in this very letter quoted above. Further, we now have Antonio Negri’s popular but dense *Time for Revolution* (2003) which sincerely reaffirms with an atheistic zeal that there is nothing but a Hegelian-Marxist materialist time. Time, within the human sciences, is no longer a time for and by God. Negri very strongly opposes transcendent time. Thus we need to be careful in using Marxist hermeneutics in assessing religious texts. For the beauty of time as a gift from God/YHWH, for replenishment and as a corrective to Negri’s misunderstandings see Walter Brueggemann’s *Sabbath as*

Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now (2014).

[xxi] This phrase which derives from Rudolf Otto needs no citation, being repeated everywhere within the human sciences.

[xxii] See

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html accessed 7th May 2019 , 9 pm Indian Standard Time.

[xxiii] Signe Larsen calls Benjamin “messianico-marxist” and in my yet unpublished review sent to *Prabuddha Bharata*, I have shown Benjamin as a theologian. When I wrote that review I had not come across Larsen’s reading of Benjamin. See

<http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/10/11/notes-thought-walter-benjamin-critique-violence/> accessed on 9/05/2019 at 16:50 pm, Indian Standard Time.

[xxiv] Caputo, John D., and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*. Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. This is an exquisite anthology on both St. Augustine and Postmodernism.

[xxv] Protestants had been great Biblical exegetes but a cursory Google search will reveal how the Catholics have caught up in this matter of exegesis.

[xxvi] A.V. Lebedev, *The Logos of Heraclitus: a Reconstruction of his Thought and Word* (with a New Critical Edition of the Fragments), St. Petersburg, “Nauka” Publishers, 2014, 533 pp. I found this on Academia.edu, uploaded by Lebedev himself. I find his work better than extant translations. I have kept Lebedev’s citation and deviated from my style here. Date of download: 8/05/2019.

[xxvii] For synoptic readings of Buddhist ‘dependent origination’ (पञ्चस्वयंभूतार्थसंज्ञा) and

Advaita Vedanta see, Sharma, Chandradhar. *The Advaita Tradition in Indian Philosophy: a Study of Advaita in Buddhism, Vedānta and Kāshmīra Shaivism*. 4th ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2016.

Chandradhar Sharma is less cited than other Indian philosophers, but he is the one to read if one wants to know the sources of Indian philosophers. S. N. Dasgupta's volumes are hyped and, therefore it is time we read Sharma for epistemic grounding in Indian philosophy.

[xxviii] See Dasti, Matthew R., and Edwin F. Bryant, eds. *Free Will, Agency, and Selfhood in Indian Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. This is a avant garde book which includes essays by Jonardon Ganeri among others. Ganeri's grasp of Navya-Nyāya is the most incisive today.

[xxix] See my *Chronicity and Temporality: A Revisionary Hermeneutics of Time* published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, October, 2015. p . 606-9.

[xxx] This neologism I found in Gayatri Spivak's *Readings* published by Seagull Books, 2014.

[xxxi] See Pollock, Sheldon I. *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. & his earlier *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Pollock, without doubt, knows more Sanskrit and Hinduism than even Hindu Sanskrit scholars. But the problem with Pollock as has been pointed out to me by ekadandi sannyasins is that in both the books mentioned here, Pollock has denuded the classical texts of their spiritual roots. In other words, in his scholarship he did not bother about hurting the sentiments of millions of devout Hindus.

[xxxii] See

<https://livesinletters.blog/2018/04/22/tantra-and-yoga-an-egg-and-the-hen-problem/> for a discussion on Doniger's worth as a scholar of Hinduism. There I point out that she is "is

obsessed with the libidinal within Hinduism much in the same manner that some scholars of the Bible stress on Biblical sexuality and spiritually regressive questions like whether Jesus had coitus with Mary Magdalene”. (accessed on 9/5/2-19, 10:39 pm Indian Standard Time).

[xxxiii] This phrase hardly needs citation. It is of Kierkegaard’s coinage.

Subhasis Chattopadhyay is an Assistant Professor in English at the (PG and UG) Department of English at Nara Sinha Dutt College, affiliated to the University of Calcutta, Howrah. He is a reviewer with the Ramakrishna Mission’s Prabuddha Bharata from 2010 onwards, & his reviews have been appreciated by Ivy League Presses. He has also studied Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. Till 2010 he wrote for the Catholic Herald, published from Calcutta. He has been a contributor to ICM since 2017. He was the judge of an international literary festival for two consecutive years.

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