Reflections on Hindu Theology

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Sri Ramakrishna compared our possible understanding of the supreme godhead in terms of blind men groping different parts of an elephant and concluding that their limited perceptions of the parts were indeed the whole elephant. Theology, which is the study or knowledge of the godhead, is akin to Sri Ramakrishna's portrayal of our efforts to think of God.

Defining Theology

Theologians, generally speaking, try to understand the workings of the supreme godhead within the times they are born into. The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines theology as 'the study of religion and beliefs'. This is a very broad definition spilling over into many disciplines not considered theology. There have been different definitions of theology and it has been generally talked of in connection with Christianity, more than any other religion.

However, Hindus have also theologised throughout their histories. For example, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, saw various forms of attraction between dyads of people in the light of the supreme godhead: 'Verily, not for the sake of the husband ... is the husband loved, but he is loved for the sake of the self ... Verily not for the sake of the sons, my dear, are the sons loved, but they are loved for the sake of the self.'[1]

This is theology at its best—in this Upanishad, even our attraction to wealth is described in terms of the supreme godhead or the Brahman of Advaita Vedanta. This explanation of all conceivable areas of life through one's faith in God is the proper domain of the study of theology. Another way of defining theology is St. Anselm of Canterbury's classic proposition that '*fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding'[2] is theology. St. Anselm ties up theology with a particular *faith community*. Theologising is religion specific and concerns itself primarily with the religious traditions of the faith community that the theologian aligns with. Moreover, theology is done with reference to a faith tradition; generally the sacred scriptures of a faith community. Pope Pius XII had explained the works of theologians thus:

> It is also true that theologians must always return to the sources of divine revelation: for it belongs to them to point out how the doctrine of the living Teaching Authority is to be found either explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures and in Tradition. Besides, each source of divinely revealed doctrine contains so many rich treasures of truth, that they can really never be exhausted. Hence it is that theology through the study of its sacred sources remains ever fresh; on the other hand, speculation which neglects a deeper search into the deposit of faith, proves sterile, as we know from experience.[3]

This article is part of an ongoing discussion on 'self-reflective Hinduism'. Sister Nivedita says in her introduction to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*: 'For the first time in history ... Hinduism itself forms here the subject of generalization of a Hindu mind of the highest order. For ages to come the Hindu man who would verify, the Hindu mother who would

teach her children, what was the faith of their ancestors will turn to the pages of these books for assurance and light.'[4]

This is what is meant in this article by 'theologising': not writing sectarian commentaries on scriptures, but reflecting on Hinduism itself. And not just philosophizing, either. For instance, it is one thing to explain philosophically the concept of the incarnation of God. It is another to 'theologise' about Sri Ramakrishna or other incarnations. To make the distinction clearer, to philosophize about the incarnation is to show conceptually in philosophically objective terms what incarnation means, and to argue for or against its possibility.

To theologise about Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation is to start from the standpoint of faith—accepting that Sri Ramakrishna is an incarnation, as millions of people have already done—and to explore the implications. It means in part to speak to the faith community. It also means to make Hinduism self-aware by conceptualising it for the faith-community, as Swami Vivekananda did, which is pointed out by Sister Nivedita above; and that includes looking at Hinduism as a whole, not from a sectarian vantage point. And it also means, making the Hindu community self-aware so that it can defend itself in the community of religions. This article could be seen as the beginning of a discussion, with points to agree with and points to disagree with: that is what makes it a discussion.

Theology and Religion

Since theology is religion specific, it would be proper to inquire into the meaning of religion to comprehend the nature of theology as an academic domain. Religion has many meanings, depending on which the meaning of theology fluctuates:

> 'Religion' and 'theology' are not terms with fixed meanings and invariant applications. They are rather topics or commonplaces—not in the sense of the familiar and the trite, but in the classical sense of linguistic variables, terms ambiguous and capacious enough to house a vast diversity of meanings, arguments, and referents. The interconnection of such topics constitutes neither a determined problem nor an exact proposition.[5]

Thus, doing theology without defining what is meant by religion is impossible. Religion, as has been pointed out by Buckley above, signals so many different things to so many branches of learning that we would want to give up the project of naming qua defining altogether. For instance, Sigmund Freud defined religion in terms of totems and taboos, of compulsive repetition of rituals,[6] through what we today know as psychoses. On the other hand, for Karl Rahner, religion will mean nothing without the reality of God:

> In the last resort all it can settle with respect to religion remains enclosed within the brackets of God's free sovereignty and the knowledge of this sovereignty, at the disposal of which man must put himself by obedience in true *religio*, and in which God either denies himself to man or bestows himself in free grace. And on this either-or rests the final decision as to the concrete shape taken by a truly and existentially significant religion.[7]

The contemporary meaning of theology depends on our understanding of what religion is: religions can be, on the one extreme, atheistic, being only a meta-narrative constructed by us or, it can be seen as coming into being through divine providence. Both these views about religion are Continental and it may be more useful to define religion more moderately—it is simultaneously invested with transcendence, while being always worked on by human agency.

Theological Traditions

The point of the above discussion is that theology is dependent on our understanding of what religion is or is not. Yet the etymology of 'theology' is deceptive and gestures towards a possibility for understanding God. This is impossible since God qua Brahman is beyond the grasp of the intellect; beyond the trappings of the *guna*s. Thus theology concerns itself with the consequences of the workings of the *nirguna* Brahman within the woof of history.

Keeping in mind the multiplicity of theologies, we can for the purpose of this essay define theology as the effect of the *praxis* of being aware of the transcendence of life in the here and the now. It is accepted within both Judaism and Christianity that Yahweh acts within a linear history, punctuated with the fall of man, the resurrection of the Messiah, and the imminent second coming of Christ, parousia. The expression and explication of this chronicity is the subject matter of the academic study of Christian theology.

An example will clarify this: Oscar Romero, an Archbishop at El Salvador, who called on Salvadoran soldiers to stop violating human rights, was gunned down for his pacifist stand; Jesuits at their university campus in El Salvador too were killed. The Peruvian Roman Catholic priest Gustavo Gutiérrez and later the Jesuit priest, Jon Sobrino who worked in El Salvador reacted to the poverty and violence in Latin America and begun doing a new kind of theology. Before them, Christian theology had often been speculative and philosophical. Gutiérrez[8] and Sobrino[9] reinterpreted the *Gospels* in the light of the lived realities of their environments. Their new theologising came to be known as 'liberation theology'.

Christian theology thus veered away from meditating on God to the more mundane, yet more urgent need for uplifting the living conditions of the people of Latin America and then, of the entire world. It is important to note that now there is no mention of a particular religion—the Catholic theologian Sobrino now is concerned not merely with the Roman Catholic faith tradition he had inherited; but with all peoples of the world.[10] But he tries to solve various crises plaguing us through the hermeneutics of Christology. Since he is a Catholic priest, he theologises from the context of being a Spanish, white Christian, placed by Yahweh in El Salvador. It is in this sense of being missioned to heal the world that we can call the economist Bernard Lonergan SJ, a theologian—albeit a theologian focussed on Christ's role in the global movement of capital.

Theology therefore arises out of the contingencies of both time and space. Theology is culture, geography, and time specific. Hindus have been doing a certain kind of theology for centuries before Thomas of Aquinas wrote his *Summa*. For example, Advaita Vedanta has meditated on the cause, nature, and the verity of the *being in time*. Hindu acharyas have systematically studied the nature of the godhead or Brahman and the relationship between the jiva and Brahman. Therefore, Hindus along with the Christians, the Buddhists, and atheists have practised systematic theology.

Countering Doubt

The need for theology within Hinduism is to create a bulwark for those who are faith pilgrims. It is not for those whose careers depend on exploiting the doubts and insecurities of the devotees. Otherwise those who do not belong to the faith community of the Hindus will through knee-jerk reactions reject the very idea of Hinduism and a united India as facetious and hegemonic. They will label any talk of God, nation, and ethics as being right-wing and conservative. It is not proper to decry them from within the hermeneutic of Hindu theology since from the

Hindu faith community's perspective, these people do not have the intellectual rigour to rise above philosophy and have lost sight of the goal of human life—Self-realization. Therefore, it is wrong on the part of the Hindu faith-community to respond meaningfully to them.

Thus we find that historiography for the history of Hindus by people outside of the Hindu faith community, though called scientific, is entirely based on materialist dialectics. They do not see God or any other transcendental force informing their hermeneutic. As it is a matter of faith it is imperative for Hindu theologians to see historical events as being entirely willed by the Brahman with qualities, a concept first thought of in Hinduism.

A simple illustration will suffice: why is it that a certain kind of Hindu historiography needs to be done as against Western modes of historicising? We need to see the huge corpus of literature on India's partition. They definitively locate the event of the partition within the paradigms of colonialism and the British Raj. While this specificity is logically valid being structuralist in nature; this whole schema discounts the partition as an event within the continuum of the Hindu understanding of history. Hindu historiography sees history as definitively circular, infinitely repeatable, and more Nietzschean than it is acknowledged. The quasi-historical event of the partition did not merely rise out of social, economic, political, and normatively religious factors. It was also transcendental and metaphysical; it was God's will.

Another clichéd field is psychoanalysis: do we divide the mind as Freud did or do Hindus treat the neurotic individual in terms of Hindu theories of psychology? While Freud posits the unconscious; Hindu metaphysicians of the mind insist on the blissful Atman behind each of us. These two very separate issues have important practical ramifications: the destiny of India and the sanity of mentally disturbed Indians.

Hinduism conflates the idea of religion with that of the goals of human life and stresses the value of human prowess. Therefore, for Hindus, religion signifies the totality of being human in relation to their revealed scriptures and God. Hindu cosmology is based on the One becoming the many—everything, every possible action is from within dharma and inseparable from dharma. And Hindu dharma is the way of the Brahman qua the Godhead. This is in contrast to say, Buddhism, which does not see religion in terms of God: 'The Buddha ... [refuses] to admit any metaphysical principle as a common thread holding the moments of encountered phenomena together, rejects the Upanisadic notion of an immutable substance or principle underlying the world and the person and producing phenomena out of its inherent power, be it "being", atman, brahman or "god"'.[11]

A Hindu Theology for Our Times

Now, we need to turn to liberation theology to underscore the need for doing theology in India, amongst Hindus. A religion can remain alive and not be mythical if its adherents adapt to the signs of the times. Thus, the Roman Catholic curia rejected Latin for English in its liturgy during the Second Vatican Council. Today scholars within the Roman Catholic tradition theologise not by first studying Old and New Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew. Roman Catholic theologians depend on acceptable translations of original or source texts. For example, without Benedicta Ward's translations of the sayings of the Desert Fathers,[12] one cannot do Christian desert theology.

There are scholars who have to be experts in ancient languages like Sumerian to first translate the primary Judaeo-Christian texts. Further, Christian desert-theology speaks to us because

of its praxis by Charles de Foucauld in our times. In this world of social networking leading to constant connectivity with hundreds of friends, the practising Roman Catholic will find means to keep one's life in order through desert spirituality and theology. Thus in a sense the work of the Christian theologian is to keep alive the message of Jesus by helping each generation of Christians to understand the Gospels within their times and locales.

Hindus have long meditated on the nature of Brahman, the Atman, and causality. They have constructed moral theologies which enforce categorical imperatives. But the urgent work which needs to be done is to start theologising for the twenty-first century. The demands of this century are unique and there is a need to have theologians who can help us in realizing the god-experience in *the here and the now*. Hindu theology has to be bipartite—there is a need for experts to address the faith community of those who accept the Sanatana Dharma and then, there is a need for others who will theologise in a more global and plural manner.

Jacques Dupuis in his magnum opus, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* has this to say of our ideas of that reality which can be only normatively identified but never really entrapped by language or even religions:

> One of the main objections raised against the theocentric paradigm was its uncritical assumption of a concept of the Absolute Reality akin to the monotheistic and prophetic religions of the Western Hemisphere, one totally alien to the mystical traditions of the East. How could a preconceived idea of God be imposed upon all in a bid to show how in their differences they do converge in the same Divine Center? This situation forced the protagonists of theocentric pluralism to propose further models which, however, amount to little more than new variations on the same theme ... Sharing as they do in this universal search, all religious traditions have, in their differences, equal value; none has precedence over the others or is privileged with a special divine revelation ... The notion of 'myth'... must also be applied to the idea of the Divine Ultimate, whichever be the form under which it comes to be known in the different religions: the Hindu Brahman, the Allah of Islam, the Yahweh of Judaism, the *Abba* of Christianity ... To speak of 'Our Father in heaven' is to refer in the Christian mythical key to that which is 'the Real'.[13]

Dupuis sets the tone of respect that doing theology demands of the contemporary theologian. Instead of building and examining scholastic idols, Hindus need to begin with assuming that their ideas of the supreme Godhead are best understood by that which Dupuis calls 'The notion of "myth"' (ibid.). Since we perceive the supreme Godhead, the Brahman, only through a dark glass, we need to materialize the *notion of myth*. The transformation of Dupuis' *myth* demands making the intangible, tangible. When the mythical is constrained by time and space, it becomes a religion open to theological scrutiny.

Just as Acharya Shankara streamlined different modes of worship and organised different monastic orders, the present need is to develop a fresh and cogent system of theological doctrines that can be followed by devoted Hindus. Who is an avatara? What is grace? Who can be called a saint? Though such questions have been addressed time and again in Hindu religious texts, often such texts belonged to a particular sect within Hinduism, which may not be accepted by many other Hindu sects. The present need is to have a system to answer these questions from an overall perspective, giving broad outlines accommodating the variety and catholicity of Hinduism, which would be acceptable by all sects and traditions within Hinduism. This would help lay devotees identify and affirm the true practitioners and saints of the faith.

The very idea of a 'Hindu Theology' could be a jarring note to many. However, the word 'theology' is used here for want of a better word and does not mean the adopting of any framework outside of Hinduism. In due course, this discipline could be accommodated under the wide ambit of 'Adhyatmika Shastra'.

In this context, 'Hindu Theology' would mean the systematization of various beliefs within the Hindu tradition, from the perspective of a believer of the Hindu faith that will affirm and defend the Hindu religious tradition. This would be in effect a reconceptualising of Hindu theology received from the tradition of scriptures and would help the average Hindu better understand one's faith and also the other religions, defend or justify the faith, and help in applying the resources of Hindu tradition to present-day needs. This need becomes accentuated now when believers of major world religions that have established theological systems also feel that the theological doctrines and the practice of their faiths have become disconnected.

Hindus need to have a clear understanding of their theology for their own sake and not to position others as 'anonymous' adherents of their faith, that is, not to claim non-Hindus as 'actually being Hindus without knowing it'. The concept of the 'anonymous Christian' is now clichéd in Christian circles. The term was put forward by Karl Rahner SJ, arguably the best twentieth-century Catholic theologian. He mistakenly thought of labelling all non-Catholics as Catholics; the non-Catholics just did not know that they were in fact all Roman Catholics. Hindu theologising will enable Hindus to respond to such marginalization effected through Christian theology. The necessity of such a response will be evident from what Rahner writes, 'the "anonymous Christian" in our sense of the term is the pagan after the beginning of the Christian mission, who lives in the state of Christ's grace through faith, hope, and love, yet who has no explicit knowledge of the fact that his life is oriented in grace-given salvation to Jesus Christ.'[14] It is notable that Rahner called non-Christians 'pagans'—a derogatory term—when the structuralists within the social sciences were making revolutionary critiques of Christianity.

Conservative Hindus may object to theologising as a cultural work because it would mean relying too heavily on Western hermeneutics and paradigms. Nevertheless Hinduism needs to reconceptualise its indigenous theological system based on its scriptures but not limited to glossing. It is an existential need—the Catholic theologians mentioned above started vigorous theologising when their own faith was in jeopardy. A religion which cannot adapt itself to reality is doomed to extinction. Therefore, it may be prudent to begin a concerted effort to reconceptualise theology within Indian and Hindu paradigms.

So, what could be the context of doing theology in India for Hindus? India is not yet poverty-free, most Indians neither understand Sanskrit, nor do they speak English. Thus, they are at risk from religio-cultural amnesia and at the same time, through lack of English language proficiency, they miss out on technologically informed paradigm changes. With each technological paradigm shift, huge numbers of Indian Hindus are pushed further back economically and culturally.

For instance, many Indians in present-day businesses throughout the country speak fake Americanese and have no conception of the Sanatana Dharma. Thus they feel dislocated and often, inferior to persons with more secure jobs, and at the same time, inferior to the Americans with whom they have to interact. Often American clients make fun of Indian accents. This phenomenon was non-existent even two

decades ago. It will not do to thrust a copy of Bhagavadgita to those in need; neither will hatha yoga cure them of their systematic exploitation by huge corporations.

Present-day Challenges of Hindu Theology

Economic Challenges • The need of the hour is that Hindu theologians frame economic policies which redress the skewed wealth distribution patterns and further, have in place an educational apparatus which equips a Hindu to harness the tectonic shifts happening as a result of technological advancement. Unlike politically informed policies, Hindu theologians will have to base their recommendations based on the Hindu canon. Only if there are Hindu theologians addressing their culture specific social and moral ills, can the Hindu faith community appreciate the importance of Sanatana Dharma.

Social Challenges • Hindu social structure inculcates slavish obedience—a remnant of colonial rule—to caste injunctions, to our elders, and to our imagined regional linguistic communities. Theologians need to address these issues thereby making caste prejudices in marriages and other social observances, irrelevant. Hindu theologians have to be socially sensitive. Maybe there is a need to emphasize the importance of the individual over the collective since India needs entrepreneurs to revitalize the Indian economy. It will not do to merely sing the glories of India's or Hinduism's past.

Biological Challenges • Hindu dharma encompasses the totality of life: thus Hindu theologians need to take a hard look at issues like euthanasia, abortion in the case of congenital neo-natal diseases, and of course, at India's burgeoning population. Hindu theologians will now not have the luxury to contemplate the nature of *being*, of God, of even Hinduism itself—lest such self-reflexivity gives way to mere intellectual gymnastics. They have to know genetics, carcinogenesis, and the relative merits and demerits of genetically engineered crops—otherwise India cannot feed her people. As Swami Vivekananda insisted, empty stomachs are not conducive either to national rejuvenation or for spiritual endeavours.

National Challenges • Hindu theologians have to address India's huge fiscal deficits leading to poverty. They have to deal with the onslaught of the Semitic religions and tricky conversions of marginalized Hindus to other religions. Swami Vivekananda too reacted to colonialism and the dismal state of India's economy under British rule. He also reacted against our seductions by foreign religions.

Educational Challenges • Hindu theologians have their work cut out for them—they have to get educational institutions up and running on a par or better than the best organizations around the world. Hinduism does not need mere pundits who can mouth by rote parts of the Hindu sacred scriptures. Hinduism needs a missiology of action. There is a need for theologians who can prepare, train, and support persons who will take the message of Sanatana Dharma to every part of the world. In short, Hinduism would do well to adapt to the signs of our times or Hinduism as a religion will become—like the religions of the Egyptians and the Greeks—merely mythical.

Thus there is a need for Hindu theologians who will create a hermeneutics of interpreting the actions of other faith communities in terms of Hindu metaphysics. For instance, what do the Hindu sacred scriptures have to say about the rise of extremism in the Semitic religions? Why cannot disputes based on religion be settled for good? Hindus as a faith community cannot settle for political answers, since politics is partisan. Hindus need to know why

God allows such disputes to endure. Once they understand Hindu theodicy, they will know how to react to global conflicts and to conflicts with neighbouring nations.

Maintaining the Faith Community

A systematic Hindu theological corpus is needed if we are to ensure that the Hindu faith community is helped in practical matters. For example, like every other faith community, Hindus also need family support systems like counselling. It is the laity who need the theology for it is from within this Hindu world view that will arise the community leaders of the future. Service in Sanatana Dharma is not akin to social work; it is a transcendental mission of living out faith in daily service. Thus the inner life is prioritized over social concerns. Hindu theology will enable this resituating of daily living.

We now need to turn to two concepts: Hinduism and Hindu theology. Hinduism has been rejected as not meaningful through etymological and cultural analyses. Disciplines such as Asian studies, South Asian studies, and Indian studies have been successful in popularising in academic circles the foreign origins of the term 'Hindu'. The scholars in these disciplines do not accept the existence of Sanatana Dharma, leave alone any idea of being Hindu. Again this whole project of systematising Hinduism runs the risk of being conflated and thus Othered, with the high-handedness of the political polemicists.

Naysayers miss the intellectual enterprise of Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, and Martha Nussbaum. They are Jews writing on or glossing the Torah, and thus what they pass off as modernism or cosmopolitanism comes from their own rootedness in Judaism. They are speaking of accepting the 'gentile' who is anathema to kosher Jews. Thus what they understand by secularism is not what Hindus mistake as secularism. Hindu intellectuals have paved the way for moral relativism. A renewed approach to Hindu theologising will correct the tendency of many scholars, within both Indian studies and Hindu studies, to reduce Sanatana Dharma to structuralist critiques devoid of either lived experiences of being Indian and Hindu or failing to understand the value of Hindu rituals. The latter are scrutinized through mainly European Enlightenment hermeneutics. The irony is that the European Enlightenment was derisive of Indians for being colonial subjects.

Training of a Hindu Theologian: A Possible Path

Now the time is ripe for training persons to become Hindu theologians in *the here and the now*. The first condition to be met while theologising within the Hindu religious traditions is to have Indologists translate two types of source texts: the Sanskrit corpus and the vernacular, including dialectical, texts into English. There is no bypassing the English language. Further, these prospective theologians will have to be experts in various disciplines. Only then can these persons of faith access fruitfully Hinduism's huge religious corpora and reinterpret them according to the needs of present times.

The first requisite to do Hindu theology will now be presented at the end. Only those who through the grace of God, believe and live out the realities of the Sanatana Dharma can become Hindu theologians. Without *shraddha*, there cannot be Hindu theologians. Karl Rahner SJ, Bernard Lonergan SJ, Thomas of Aquinas OP—the doyen of all Christian theologians, were all first men of deep faith and then from their God-experience they began to lay out their systematic theologies regarding their Catholic faith, the social conditions prevailing during their own times, and the life-world.

Hindu theologians should be first trained in the crucible of their own families who practise the truths of Hinduism. Then arises the need for social and economic support. Finally, Hindu monks and ascetics should teach these novice theologians what it means to realize God in the present moment. It is with this training that a young person will begin to look at the world with eyes tempered with Hinduism's doctrine of universal tolerance and be able to sift the grain from the chaff.

One can do philosophy in a bottom-up manner; beginning from preliminary inquiries into the meaning of the universe to arrive at certain conclusions, which may or may not be true. The theologian, on the other hand, begins with faith and then shows to the world that her or his faith is verifiable as true. Unlike the philosopher, the knowledge of the theologian is borne out of her or his prior fidelity to the truth, to natural justice, and the laws of God. That philosophy is theology which has been confirmed finally by women and men renunciates as being helpful to the journey in God-realisation. What the Hindu theologian proves must be first ratified by those Hindus who practise a spiritual life and have these qualities defined in Hindu scriptures: 'Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in knowledge and yoga, charity, self-control, and sacrifice, study of the scriptures, austerity and uprightness.'[15]

Christianity has survived since it has allowed inculturation; Hinduism too can rise over the crimson tide if Hindu theologians learn from the history of religions. There is no harm done to the Sanatana Dharma in reaching out to those who remain oblivious of this great religion. This reaching out can be set in motion by vigorous Hindu theologising in every aspect of Hindu lives.

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