HERMENEUTICS OF RELIGION

Domenic Marbaniang

Ancient Indian philosophy generally accepted three sources of knowledge: *pratyaksha* (immediate experience), *anumana* (reason), and *sabda* (verbal testimony). We know things either directly through experience or through reasoning[1] or through hearsay. Much of our knowledge, we must confess, comes from hearsay; what we learn from our parents, friends, teachers, books, etc. Whether one chooses to believe or challenge the information is another issue. Yet, one can't deny the fact that the choice to either believe or challenge the information is preceded by the ability to understand what is said. One has to interpret and understand the words before one can accept or reject them. That is one reason why some schools of Indian philosophy denied *sabda* to be a distinct source of knowledge but consider it to belong under the class of inference or reasoning. The Buddhists, for instance, argued that the ascertainment of the meaning of a verbal statement in no way differs from the inferential process. The Vaisesika also agreed with this point of view.[2] Interpretation was seen as nothing much different from inference; and hermeneutics is considered to belong to the class of logic.

A deeper look, however, unravels more problems. There is thus, for instance, the realist view of interpretation called *srishtidrishtivada* or the idealist view of interpretation called *drishtisrishtivada*. Both these views have implications for hermeneutics, as G. P. Deshpande shows:

> "There are two texts by Shankaracharya: one is called *Sarirakabhasya* while the other *bhasya* is a commentary on *Gaudapadakarika*. There is a basic contradiction in both….*drishti-srishtivada* and *sristidrishtivada*…. These two terms represent the schools within which the Vedantins are divided. The problem is whether what you see defines reality (*drishtisrishtivada*) or whether what exists defines your vision (*srishtidrishtivada*).
>
> "It is a typical theatre problem…. Suppose you take that text to be a *srishti*. Then the director looks at it in a particular way, and the actor looks at it in a particular way. When happens next is the case of *drishtisrishtivada*. The vision or the way the text is looked at ultimately decides its character. And that is why you have different productions of the same play, productions apparently using the same text but so different that they appear to be based on different texts."[3]

However, independence of text doesn't imply arbitrary interpretations. The objective (text) and the subjective (interpretation) must be meaningfully related, of course. However, meaningfulness is a subjective experience and one can only understand something else from his own framework or horizon of meaning; one can only understand something if it is meaningful

---

[1] For instance, if I see smoke on the mountain, I also know by reasoning that there is also fire there.
[2] M. Hiriyanna, *Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993), pp. 209, 257.
[3] G.P. Deshpande *Dialectics of Defeat* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2006), p.124.

to him (and not nonsensical), of course. Yet, doesn't it require that one should enter the world of the author in order to look at the text from the author's perspective? And, though such an attempt would not be, perhaps, entirely possible; it would at least help to get one person to come out of his horizon to encounter the word at its horizon.

Such considerations seem to help one come out of one's static pit and be transformed through encountering and beginning to understand the other. Doesn't it then appear possible that proper inter-religious understanding and communication is to a great extent determined also by the way one does hermeneutics of religion?

Meaning as Contextual

A word is only meaningful within its particular context. While the dictionary may give the meaning of a word, its meaningfulness depends on the context. For instance, the word "give" has a particular meaning in the dictionary; but its meaningfulness varies according to its usage. Thus, in "I give this to you," it implies a declaration, while in "Give it to me right now!" it signifies a command – but, it may even be signifying a request (we do not know whether it was spoken in an imploring or a demanding voice – the same thing can be spoken in two or more different ways).

The word "context" is self-explanatory. It is something that co-exists with (*con-*) the text. If suppose I find a ripped note with the words "kill him" on it, I may read into it (*eisogesis*) a number of things that may not be true to the intent of the writer who wrote them. For instance, I may start thinking "It should be an order given by someone to kill somebody." Especially, if I had lately been reading a number of crime or war stories, that meaning might be the first that would occur to my mind. However, after walking a bit further, I find two other pieces of the note and by joining them together read it as follows: "The noble lady had no desire to kill him with her words." Suddenly, the whole thinking undergoes a shift. And yet, that single sentence is not enough to fully grasp who or what the note is all about. One has to know the story in order to understand what is going on. Secondly, one is to know what the words are being used to indicate in the context in which they occur; for the meaning of a word practically depends on the way it is used, in its usage.

The same rule applies to understanding religion. Just because "sacrifice" means "appeasement of deity" in one's religion doesn't mean that it means the same in another religion. Further, the validity of a particular practice (its meaningfulness) cannot be fully appreciated apart from the logic (rules) of the particular religious world of which it is a crucial part. Thus, referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein's remarks on Sir James Frazer's criticisms of other religions in his *Golden Bough*, Anthony Thiselton notes:

> Wittgenstein complains that Frazer's "explanations" of the beliefs and practices of other cultures and religions relate exclusively to "men who think in a similar way to himself. Thus, on the basis of a positivist a *priori* or of his own experience of life, practices such as the killing of the priest-king "are finally presented, so to speak, as *stupidities.* It will

never be plausible, however, that men do all that out of pure stupidity. . . . One can only describe *(nur beschreiben)* here and say: human life is like that (so *ist dus menschliche Leben).*Wittgenstein concludes: "What narrowness of spiritual life we find in Frazer! And as a result: How impossible for him to conceive of a different way of life from the English one of his time. Frazer cannot imagine a priest who is not basically an English parson of our times with all his stupidity and feebleness." The result is that, far from being "historical," Frazer's explanations of primitive practices "are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves."[4]

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was the one who coined the term "language-game" to explain the interweaving of language and actions (responses) in particular linguistic contexts.[5] Each language-game has its own rules and expressions that have validity and meaningfulness within that particular language-game only. One cannot make a judgment about the validity or meaningfulness of another game that he is not acquainted with based on the rules and expressions of a game he knows – for instance, one can't be an umpire in a cricket game just because he was a referee in soccer; he needs to first also be a cricketer in order to be qualified to make judgments in a cricket game. Similarly, one cannot make judgments about other cultures and religions unless one has first entered their forms of life. Thus, it would be a hermeneutical violation to interpret a text from the scripture of any other religion with reference to the context of one's own theological understanding. For instance, the statement from Old Testament "Ye are gods" and the statement from the New Testament "I and the Father are one" are not proofs for monism or non-dualism. Also, the same expressions may have totally different meanings. For instance, "born-again" in Christianity refers to the experience of conversion, while "born-again" in popular Hinduism refers to reincarnation (*punarjanma)*; in the former, to be born-again is the solution to the problem of sin; in the later, it is the result of sin.

On the other hand, attempting to absorb or adopt elements of any other religion and impose one's own meaning (*eisogesis* again) onto them would be like changing the meaning of words within a language. Thus the contention that "Diwali" should be adopted as a festival of lights or the saffron robe must be adopted as the clergyman's color has a motive-issue involved. If the motive is to make an exclusivist appeal in a familiar garb, usually the appeal is already lost in the first place. However, if the motive is pluralistically oriented then one can certainly sell pizzas in India only if one makes it taste Indian. One doesn't have to abandon samosas in order to also eat pizzas after all – the appeal is pluralistic.

Now, the very issue of what religion is or what makes a form of life religious has itself been a matter of debate. For instance, there are those who claim that their religion is not a religion at all but a way of life. Take for instance these two quotes:

---

[4] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), pp.78-79

[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edn. (Trans. G.E.M. Amscombe, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1958), No.7, 5e.

Failure to differentiate between Christianity and "religion" has caused many to lump Christianity together as just another "religion" in the study of comparative world religions. Their criteria for the consideration of a "religion" is merely sociological, psychological, creedal, liturgical or organizational, all of which are inadequate to consider the radical uniqueness of Christianity.[6]

Hinduism is a unique faith! The most obvious misconception about Hinduism is that we tend to see it as just another religion. To be precise, Hinduism is a way of life, a dharma. Dharma does not mean religion. It is the law that governs all action. Thus, contrary to popular perception, Hinduism is not just a religion in the tradition sense of the term.[7]

According to the Christian writer, the word "religion" itself etymologically indicated a binding to certain rules and regulations (it comes from the Latin, *religio* or *religare*, both of which meant "to tie, to fasten, or to attach"), which is not what Christianity is originally all about. "The purpose of Jesus' coming was not to "bind us" or "tie us" to anything or anyone, though it might be argued that in the reception of Jesus Christ by faith there is a spiritual attachment of our identity with Him. Jesus clearly indicates that He came to set us free…"[8] The second writer argues that since Hinduism does neither have a founder nor commonly accepted scriptures like other religions do, it is not a religion but a culture. It is "cultural, not creedal". In response to the former one's argument, we can reply that the meaning of a term is not usually based on its etymological roots but on its practical and contextual use. For instance, as Thiselton points out "The etymology of a word is not a statement about its meaning but about its history… The word "nice" etymologically comes from *nescius*, ignorant. But no one would claim that when Englishmen spoke of a "nice doctor" they "literally" or "basically" meant "an ignorant doctor.""[9] The word "nice" in popular usage means quite different from the original root word. Perhaps, the same principle can be pointed out with reference to controversies governing the use of terms like "Christmas" and "Easter" and practices such as cutting the cake and wearing a wedding ring. However, if the practice is void of meaningful significance in modern usage, it is a meaningless addendum – in other words, it is useless, a vanity. However, if etymological roots were to seriously decide the meaningfulness of words then we would have no present-time justification for calling "Sunday" as "Sunday" (the day of the Sun) and "January" as "January" (month of Janus). But, nobody usually thinks about Janus when speaking of January. The word simply identifies a month in the calendar in the same way that the word "brick" indicates a brick without etymological concerns of any kind. What matters is how the word is used. In response to the second kind of arguments that focus on the essence of definitions, one must ask if dissimilarity in certain points frees one from a genus. For instance, do we say that cricket is not a game because it is different from all other games?

---

[6] James Fowler, "Christianity is NOT Religion," 1998. http://www.christinyou.net/pages/Xnotrel.html. Accessed on Feb 7, 2013

[7] Subhamoy Das, "Common Myths about Hinduism," http://hinduism.about.com/od/basics/a/hinduism.htm. Accessed on Feb 7, 2013

[8] James Fowler, "Christianity is NOT Religion".

[9] Thiselton, "The Two Horizons," pp.125-126

Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all,* but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ballgames, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.[10]

It certainly isn't right to contend, for instance, that rock music is not music but bizarre just because one has been nurtured in classical music all the time. Similarly, vice versa.

Does that mean that we have no absolute standards for ascertainment of meaning? Also, does it mean that language-games don't change? Surely, there are ways in which bridges of meaning can be built through assimilation and accommodation. Thus, while the early Church preaching in the Synagogues and among the Jews made prodigious use of Old Testament prophecies as evidence of the Messiahship of Jesus Christ, later preaching among the non-Jews had to build other bridges between themselves and those who didn't know the Jewish scriptures. The Apostles certainly didn't say, "We must first teach them Moses and the Prophets or else they can't appreciate the Messiah!" They respected the religiosity of other people's faith and approached them by finding conceptual bridges between them. At the same time, however, they also challenged the irrationality of certain practices based on the logic that was the grammar of the particular religion (language-game). Thus, Paul didn't quote Moses on Mar's Hill; he quoted Epimenides and argued why God cannot be compared with things of creation – for, "in Him we live and move and have our being" and "we are His offspring."

Meaning as Fore-Having
One important contention of modern hermeneutics has been that the interpretation of a text is grounded in pre-understanding or a fore-having. The Hermeneutical Circle principle, in short, states that the text can only be understood with reference to the whole and the whole can only

---

[10] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, No.66, pp.31-32e

be understood with reference to the text. In other words, that implies that the text is already understood before it is interpreted. In the words of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), "Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted."[11] Also, "Interpretation is grounded in *something we have in advance – in a fore-having (Vorhabe)*. . . . In every case interpretation is grounded *in something we see in advance – in a foresight (Vorsicht)*. . . . It is grounded in *something we grasp in advance-in a fore-conception* (Vorgriff)." And again, "An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us."[12]

Even if one suddenly encounters a new word in the text, suppose "unicorn" which he never knew, the only way one can understand the word is by looking it up in a dictionary and finding its explanation in words already understood (e.g. "a white horse with a long horn growing from its forehead"; one must already be knowing what a horse is and what a horn is; if not, their description must find some other analogy in the reader's experience). Meaning is fore-having.

Also, even as understanding the context helps understanding the text; so does understanding the text helps understanding the context; therefore, "This is why a really difficult text which deals with new or seemingly strange subject-matter may require a second or even a third reading if satisfactory understanding is to be achieved."[13]

A principle of the same kind is also given in Indian philosophy. It is referred to as the principle of antecedent probability and is considered to be one of the criteria for the canonicity of revelation (divine *sabda*). The principle of antecedent probability (or rational anticipation) is the third principle of the criteria for revelation that M. Hiriyanna explains in his *Indian Philosophy*.[14] According to this principle, reason should foreshadow what revelation teaches. The revealed truth must appear probable. In other words, there is a "rough forecast of the truth under consideration by means of analogies drawn from the empirical sphere."[15] This principle establishes the rational understandability of revelation as already anticipated by reason. This understandability is a function of the whole logic of grammar of the religious form of life. In other words, the inherent logic of the religious system accepts a revealed truth (a *kerygma*, news) as rationally probable or improbable. Thus, in Don Richardson's *Peace Child* story, the inherent logic of the *Peace Child* tradition in which one tribe makes peace with another tribe by giving one of its sons to it functioned as the antecedent probability principle for the acceptance of Jesus Christ as God's *Peace Child* to man when Don Richardson preached Him so to them (the Sawi people). Earlier, their logic had found Jesus to be a sad victim of the hero, Judas Iscariot's trick (because in their culture, trickery was a heroic feat). But, after the discovery of the *Peace Child*, of course, Judas was denounced as evil – for it was impossible to think that someone could betray the *Peace Child.*

---

[11] As cited by Thiselton, *The Two Horizons,* p.166
[12] *The Two Horizons,* p.165
[13] *The Two Horizons,* p.104
[14] M. Hiriyanna, *Indian Philosophy,* pp.180-181
[15] *Indian Philosophy,* p.181

Meaning as Dialectical

Pre-understanding, however, is not without problems of its own, especially when it is brought to the interpretation of a text; because the world of the interpreter is usually quite different from the world of the text, and if the text is ancient, it faces the problem of historical distance. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) called this the problem of horizons. The solution he believed was in a "fusion of horizons."[16] The problem of historical distance has been a key problem in hermeneutics. For instance, note the following excerpt from Thiselton:

> From the standpoint of the practical problems of Christian theology, this point has very recently been urged with considerable force in a report prepared by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, published under the title Christian Believing. It is worth quoting two or three sentences in full. The members of the Commission ask: "Can we today genuinely share the thoughts and feelings of the first readers of St. Paul's epistles as they were urged to see in the events of the gospel their own liberation from the total determination of their lives by astral or planetary powers? Can we even begin to enter into the spiritual experience of a first-century Jew whose imagination was fired by detailed visions of an imminent apocalyptic end to the existing created order? And if we cannot, can we really be sure that we are understanding even the words of Jesus in the Gospels in the spirit in which they were originally intended?" .The writers of the Report conclude: "The whole difficulty of standing alongside the men and women of the past and of understanding what they say by entering at least in imagination into the whole world of thought and feeling in which they say it, is the really fundamental problem in creating a living relation with the past-far more fundamental than the more generally recognized one of what to do with ideas from the past which we now see to be mistaken.[17]

However, Gadamer doesn't think that the solution lies in our abandoning our own historical horizon (which itself is dynamically changing) in order to enter the historical horizon and looking at the text from the eyes of the past. The solution is found in exposing the unity to what at first glance is taken to be two distinct horizons, that is, the past and the future. Of course, this is not to deny that the horizons exist; or else, the talk of "fusion" would be out of place. And, certainly, we cannot "listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard"[18] if we do not respect our own historical distinctiveness and also at the same time our foregrounding from the past.

> Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. On the other hand, it is itself, as we are trying to show, only

---

[16] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 2nd Rev.edn. Trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p.305

[17] *The Two Horizons,* pp.51-52

[18] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.304

something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines with what it has foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires.

Projecting a historical horizon, then, is only one phase in the process of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon understanding. In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. To bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task of what we called historically effected consciousness. Although this task was obscured by aesthetic-historical positivism following on the heels of romantic hermeneutics, it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of *application*, which is to be found in all understanding.[19]

Gadamer also notes that this fusion of horizons is nothing but the achievement of language.[20] Understanding occurs in a dialectical conversation with the text. And, as no conversation can take place without a common language that is understood by both of the persons in the conversation, so hermeneutics is impossible without having or creating a common language. Thus, "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were."[21] A meaningful dialectic between the horizons is bound to transform both our language and us.

Hermeneutics is dialectical and the role of an interpreter is much like the role of a translator from one language to another. There cannot be something like a literal translation if understanding is the goal; so, the words are first to be understood and then translated into words that convey the spirit or meaning of the words in the other language. Thus, "every translation is at the same time an interpretation"[22] and "every translator is an interpreter."[23] This problem is done away with if the conversation is in the same language.

Now, in the hermeneutic situation, texts are "enduringly fixed expressions of life". As such, the interpreter takes on the like role of a translator and his engagement in the act of interpretation can be called as a "hermeneutical conversation." The interpreter's own horizon expands and undergoes dynamic change as it fuses with the horizon of the text; since the two horizons are actively in conversation through him. He not only tries to listen to the text as it wishes to make itself heard but also tries to understand what he hears and render it in his own words through interpretation. Thus "understanding and interpretation are ultimately the same thing."[24] The process gives rise to an expansion of the interpreter's horizon and the working out of a common horizon which functions as the framework of understanding. Once there is a common

---

[19] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.305-306
[20] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.370
[21] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.371
[22] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.386
[23] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.389
[24] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.390

language, there is understanding and "where there is understanding, there is not translation but speech."[25] – the horizons are fused. Thus, "linguisticality of understanding is the concretion of historically effected consciousness."[26]

Now, religious texts as well as traditions have a historical context of their own. Whether we belong to a particular religion or to another one or to none, we can't understand text or tradition unless the dialectic has come up with a common horizon where conversation can be possible. This common horizon is a horizon of understanding.

Conclusion

To study religion is nothing but to interpret it, and interpretation and understanding are ultimately the same thing. However, one cannot understand any religious element apart from the religious whole of which it is a part. Similarly, one cannot understand the whole apart from the part. Thus, the hermeneutical circle is unavoidable. The religious element is part of a context or a form of life, and the validity, reasonability, and meaningfulness of it cannot be appraised apart from the logic inherent to the context. However, this doesn't mean that truth is relative; it only means that meaning is contextual. Secondly, we have seen that no interpretation is possible unless there is some form of pre-understanding, a fore-having, already present prior to the act of interpreting. Something must make some sense or else it is nonsensical. This is significant to any situation of inter-religious communication. We can't expect understandability unless we respect the fact that understanding is impossible without fore-having. Finally, we saw that meaning is dialectical. The fusion of horizons in religious studies doesn't mean a compromise of doctrine or metaphysics; the fusion is only epistemological and hermeneutical and is the framework of understanding.

To have a theory of religion before studying religion would make the study superfluous unless there is openness for change, openness for new horizons emerging. However, we need to understand that contextual meaningfulness is not the same as relativism. The search for a common framework presupposes the reality of and possibility of the same. Men can determine the rules of a particular language-game; but, they cannot create the laws of logic. So, while hermeneutics must pay attention to both content and context, it must also watch to keep to the principles that are universal and absolute – that are common.

References
Deshpande, G.P. *Dialectics of Defeat*, Calcutta: Seagull, 2006
Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method,* 2nd Rev.edn. Trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and
      Donald G. Marshall, London: Continuum, 2004
Hiriyanna, M. *Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993
Thiselton, Anthony C. *The Two Horizons*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980

---

[25] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.386
[26] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.391

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edn. Trans. G.E.M. Amscombe, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1958