

WHITHER HINDU STUDIES?

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by

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In taking up my duties as Hindu Studies Chair Professor at Concordia University, I feel it proper at the very outset to thank, on behalf of myself and on behalf of the five hundred million and more of the Hindu community at large in the world, the Steering Committee and especially its leader, Dr. M.N.S. Swamy, whose legwork, among other factors, was mainly responsible for the creation of the Chair. The endowment of a Chair in Hindu Studies is, needless to say, an event of considerable significance, and believe me when I say that it has no precedent, either in the Western world or even in India itself, strange as it may sound. There have been chairs relating to Indian Studies in general, the well-known Spalding Professorship at Oxford, the no less important Sayaji-Rao Gaekwad Professorship in Indian Civilization and Culture, and the Mayurbhanj Professorship in Sanskrit at Banaras, to name but a few of them, but none, to the best of my knowledge, in Hindu Studies as such. There is, of course, the Hindu University at Banaras (in which I taught for two decades) which was founded, like the Aligarh Muslim University, as a national institution and in which there are, as constituent colleges, the college of Sanskrit, the College of Indology, among others, but no department earmarked as Hindu Studies.

The endowment of a Chair in Hindu Studies in Canada, even though it is an unprecedented occurrence, also represents for me what can best be described as a supreme act of faith. It is an expression of faith in the task of the appropriating and advancing of a Tradition as distinguished from the study of the area, its history and geography, its languages and literature, or any other aspect of culture that a person of Indian origin identifies with. It is the task of appropriation and inculcation of the general awareness of the Hindu Tradition as such, and what it entails in the context of contemporary life and thought, in the context of a community of discourse as a necessary part of a vision of and participation in a larger community life.

The endowment of the Chair is also an expression of the faith the Hindu community in and around Montreal have in Concordia University as a suitable channel through which to make the Hindu Tradition and its vast spectrum known more widely and in greater depth. The policy of multi-culturalism is unique as almost the defining characteristic of what it means to be Canadian. The Chair set up with the concurrence and support of Concordia University, and the enthusiasm of its Rectors both old and new, is rightly perceived as offering unique educational opportunities for Indo-Canadians, as well as providing a better appreciation and understanding among all Canadians, of the cultural and religious traditions of India. In particular, it is seen as providing access to the history, language, culture and philosophy of the Hindu Tradition in all its compactness and differentiation.

To know the Hindu Tradition in a way at once disciplined and committed - that is what bringing a subject within the walls of academia means; It is a step in the direction of appreciating a Tradition on its own terms, that is to say, in this case, in terms of Hindu self-understanding, as well as Hinduism, indeed is and has been understood and interpreted from the perspective of the West. I will presently say more about this concept of Hindu self-understanding, but let me first say the following about understanding of Tradition. Self-awareness of the need for comprehending 'tradition' as such, one's own as well as others', is indeed a concern that, today, stands across the board of different religious traditions as the great question underlying the academic study of these traditions. The discipline of Religious Studies may be said to have come of age, I even venture to think, but only to the extent that it is able to address and isolate this question. The Department of Religion at Concordia is renowned for its promotion of Jewish and Catholic Studies and for including among its members those whose interests and expertise extend to the fields of India, Islam and Hindu institutions, not to mention some graduate students whose research relates to India. I cannot congratulate the Hindu community more for having the endowed Chair located as integral to the Department of Religion at Concordia. It is my hope that with this introduction of a new element of intellectual encounter between representatives of diverse traditions Concordia will be continuing the process already begun at universities such as Chicago and Harvard.

One more observation before I come to the theme of my address. The endowment of the Chair in Hindu Studies accomplished at no small cost and sacrifice on the part of the thoughtful members of the community, also bespeaks practical good sense and vision about the future, a future in which one is enabled to cope with the strains of living in the modern West, but also to go beyond modernity! The ultimate purpose of the Chair I visualize is to build up in the university

a permanent interest in the great religious system(s) of the Hindu tradition, to set forth its development and spiritual meaning and interpret it through discourse, discussion and research, by comparison and contrast with the religions of the West with the aim of bringing together the world's greatest religious traditions in closer understanding, harmony, and friendship. It is only when India - I mean the India of religious and cultural geography - can meet the West on equal terms that the West can and will have a thorough understanding, not only of her beliefs, but of her way of life and, above all, the way of thought engendered by those beliefs. Even though the modern West has somewhat notoriously departed from its own religious past, and setting the pace for modernity has paved the way unwittingly in this regard for what has aptly been described as the "Europeanisation of the earth", the time may come when the old values will reassert themselves, perhaps in another guise, and these values in India even more than Europe are religious values.

Now about the theme 'Whither Hindu Studies?' Bernard Lonergan begins his book *METHOD IN THEOLOGY*, by referring to two notions of culture, the classicist and the empirical. The former holds to its unchanging ideals and norms to which the uncultured aspire, and the latter, that is the empirical concept of culture, merely stands for a set of meanings and values that inform a way of life without normative stipulations. When the classicist notion prevailed, theology was viewed as a permanent achievement, and then one discoursed on its nature. But when culture is viewed empirically, one discourses on its method. The study of Hindu tradition as part of the programme of Religious Studies, which approaches religion in the context of empirical scholarship, will naturally entail a shift of focus from the essence question to one of method. The shift is away from 'What is Hinduism?', 'Who are the Hindu people?', to Hindu Studies. Not what is 'Hindu Studies' a study of, but what should 'Hindu Studies' study? The naming of the endowed Chair as one of Hindu Studies instead of being a chair of Hinduism or of the religion of some ethnic group, therefore, is significant.

It is, nevertheless, important that one has some understanding of the sense of the term 'Hindu' in Hindu Studies. Elsewhere when I had to grapple with the problem while editing a volume on Hindu Spirituality, I wrote saying in effect that the term is a descriptive and not a prescriptive one, used as a convenient term to refer to an undifferentiated whole which includes, pre-eminently, as if like a defining characteristic, the circumstance of the Vedas as the point of departure, but really allows no assignable time of beginning and includes the archaic-classical Hinduism of the Veda and the Vedanta, the neo-classical and post-classical transformations, as well as modern Hinduism, inclusive of every conceivable concern that has found expression in the recent history of the tradition. Viewing Hinduism under the aspect of

spirituality, I proposed to generalize about the Hindu character, somewhat tendentially perhaps, as consisting in making one live spiritually as if time were not 'history'. By that I meant to say not that tradition is a stranger to 'history' or change, but that for the tradition uniquely these notions are enfolded in a timeless meaning. I want to say something similar in the present context in support of my proposal that the future direction of Hindu Studies must reflect the self-understanding of the tradition, in spirit though not in letter. Whatever difficulties one encounters in rendering the 'Hindu' as a viable concept of history, the fact remains and cannot be gainsaid that it denotes a vibrant, living tradition. It is not only the representation by modern Indians of themselves which the West is eager to categorise and criticize as Neo-Vedanta, but also the representation of those who visited India in the past. The Greeks, the Chinese, the Arabs and, of course, the Europeans all by a striking consensus experienced the sense of a living culture conscious of its continuity and unity in terms of an underlying vision and way of life.

A statement about a religion, observed Professor Cantwell Smith, who is both a great Canadian and a distinguished historian of religions, in order to be valid must be intelligible and acceptable to those within. Needless to add, it must also be meaningful to the 'outsider' who makes it. The issue of insider and outsider is, of course, a moot question, and I may even say is somewhat against the grain of the true Hindu sensibility, the Hindu philosophers' penchant for arguing and refuting notwithstanding. I have learnt to understand the distinction made, which is heuristically significant from the point of view of study and scholarship, in a manner which shifts the attention away from the so-called spokesmen or representative - a dubious and obscure notion I concede, to attitudes involved in interpretation. Scholarship is a moot problem in the general context of modern Indological writing established by the labours of the Western Indologists and, more recently, if also more spectacularly, by the efforts of Western and West-inspired social scientists. The 'outsider' will be typified by the modern Western approach (not the same as the Westerner) with its unquestioned objectivism and historicism which refuse to accord due recognition to the reality of a living tradition or its claims as integral to the approach. The 'insider' will be the one who finds such an objectivist approach and its negative posture toward the tradition questionable. To restate the distinction in the language of another eminent Canadian (George Grant, who considered the modern scholar an 'outsider' to the classical studies before the Enlightenment): The true 'outsider' is one for whom the past becomes what we learn about, not something we learn from. The equation of objectivism with an outsider's perspective is not without warrant from ancient Hindu thought. In one of the historically and geographically defined expressions of Hindu religion, the labels of inside (antaram) and outside (bahyam) are utilized borrowing from Tamil literary tradition, where

speaking about the love experience which is non-objectifiable and yet discernible, is classed as 'interior discourse' and everything else as extrinsic, public and scrutable discourse.

I am not here decrying the relevance of the various dimensions of objective scholarship that have been developed in the past several centuries in the West to the task faced by Hindu Studies. Textual and historical scholarship of the last century on the part of Western Indologists has indeed laid the foundations for our present access, including that of the Hindu laity as a whole, to ancient and classical Hindu sources. Likewise, the ongoing study of Hinduism by anthropologists and other social scientists which is a phenomenon which coincides with the birth of an independent India and includes major figures working in this part of the world, have thrown great light on questions like 'What is the relationship between the legacy of norms, concepts and beliefs contained in the great textual traditions of India and the everyday religious lives of the people?' 'How does religion in India affect social structure?' These are extremely significant questions to ask and answer and I have myself a modest share of collaboration as a member of supervision of these laudable efforts on the part of eager and energetic North American scholars. If I am critical of them it is in the cause of envisaging the possibilities of study, historical as well as social scientific, of the more imaginative kind contributing to an in-depth understanding of the tradition, as hermeneutics from within, as well as an ordering of facts from an objective perspective from without. An objective approach and history in the sense of interpretation can be seen as dimensions of a reflective awareness of a total experience within the Hindu tradition.

Let me now become more specific and less equivocal. The Hindu religious tradition is no longer a mere object of Western study, as in the case of the elephant by a zoologist of the Life Sciences Faculty, but speaks back to the West. It questions the very ground on which the Western historical researcher stands, calls into question in an odd way, through its not clearly articulated disapproval, the basic presuppositions of social sciences. It insinuates a philosophic objection even to the more liberal postures of hermeneutics and phenomenology as still typically Western forms of objectivism and historicism, and proposes, however inadequately, an alternative to the modern Western perception of the religious and philosophical situation of the world. In sum, Hindu Studies as an autonomous enterprise purporting to speak from within and at the same time speak intelligibly, must involve questions of hermeneutic conditions, religious commitment as well as overarching philosophic vision and reflection based on the experiential dimension of consciousness and its invariable correlation with the texts and contexts that are studied as integral to the undertaking.