State of the Art

The Study of Religions in Australia : 2

Indian Religions

Since the advent in 1974 of the academic study of religion in Australian higher education institutions, the division of resources allocated to research and teaching on religion has been spread roughly over what one might call Western (= Semitic) religions and Eastern (encompassing primarily Indian and Chinese) religions, with a sprinkling of resources being offered on the margin to the study of Melanesian and Aboriginal religions. Under this kind of tacit arrangement the financial and personnel resources devoted to the study of Indian religions have certainly been of a greater quantity than those which have been assigned to other areas of the East. Each department of Religious Studies in Australia has felt compelled to appoint a specialist in Hinduism and/or Buddhism with the brief of teaching in both areas and the conducting of research in one of them. Whilst this has meant that undergraduate students have had access to teaching about these two religions, it cannot be denied that the teaching of Indian religions in Australia has, with a few exceptions, not moved beyond the offering of large scale survey subjects which package an entire religious tradition into a set of lectures and tutorials delivered over a single semester or academic year. In contrast the teaching of Christianity, the other single largest area covered in the curriculum, has always been undertaken in terms of much more specific compartmentalization, usually historical, so that much greater specialization at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level is available. Reasons for this relate to the greater availability of resources for the Christian area, the likely greater student demand for such subjects and an apparent perception that it is reasonable for a teacher in Christianity to have expertise in one or two clearly defined areas, wheras the delimited area of expertise in the Indian area is the entire religious tradition itself. The expectations held of respective scholars teaching Indian religions and Christianity have influenced the state of the art, as it were, of the respective areas of study in the Australian context, in that the former are more conscious than the latter of practising an art that renders them simultaneously as specialists and

First a note on the term "Indian religion". The use of the singular implies a commonality in ideology or praxis transcending the differences between the six main religions — Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity — which are presently represented in India in reasonably large numbers. This commonality might be conceptualized as a grammar of religiosity in India, and the most likely content of the rules of which this grammar is composed would be the deep structural principles defining bhakti (or "devotion" to an object of devotion) and the controlling relationships attendant upon this. A university level course or a programme of research could easily be built up around the proposition of the existence of such a grammar, but this is not how the term "Indian religion" is understood in the Australian context where it has the sense of "religions found on the Indian sub-continent", with the added implication that this will be restricted to Hinduism and Buddhism. Apart from the inconsistency between a singular word and the plural meaning attached to it ("religion" here being a kind of collective noun), the term Indian religion has considerable utility, not least because it conveys the ambiguity between the recognition of the existence of several religions in India and of a series of common features that they share.

In Australia, as elsewhere, the study and teaching of Indian religion has occurred beyond departments of Religious Studies. It has, and continues to be, undertaken in departments of History, Anthropology and Asian Studies, and because Indology is not in itself a unified discipline, but exists only at the mercy of other disciplines, its development in Australia has reflected the ideological currents flowing from the different departments where it has been taught, currents which have defined the conceptual problems to be studied as well as the mode in which these are studied. Traditionally, Indology (under the rubric of which the study of Indian religion was exclusively undertaken until about 1960) restricted itself to the study of antiquity, where the limitations of source material meant written texts and archeological relics were the only objects of study. It meant also that the greater themes of humanity could always be studied in the ideal and the abstract (which they could not have been had more concern been shown for the testimony of eye witness reports from 1800 onwards).

Indology has tried to resist any departure from a methodology where the pre-eminent place is accorded to the philological study of texts, the definition of text being restricted to something that is written text. Under this methodology as much attention has been given to the question of the language of the text and its diachronic stratification as has been given to the treatment of the content and style of the text. Wherever the context of a text has been given a sustained treatment, it has been one characterized by a strongly positivistic approach to its subject matter. The principal result of this philological Indology has been the production of a large number of editions and translations, and though the results of this might seem satisfying in numerical terms, this satisfaction must be tempered in the knowledge that there exist about thirty million unstudied manuscripts still lying around in manuscript collections in India. Nevertheless, the continuing

production of editions and translations has been intensely valuable in increasing the range of raw data available for the study of Indian culture in general, as also for promoting the practice of a very close reading of a delimited group of texts rather than a superficial reading of many texts, a practice all too common among some practitioners, one not restrained by the stringencies of philology.

In Europe and North America philology has been the dominant method used in reconstructing ancient and medieval Indian religion for the last one hundred and sixty years, but in those institutions in Australia where Indian Religion is taught and studied, the influence of philology has been apparent usually only where Sanskrit is taught as well. Thus since 1965 J.W. de jong and other scholars in the former department of South Asian and Buddhist Studies at the Australian National University, as well as their students, have done much valuable work in the editing and translating of Buddhist texts in several Asian languages. This has been done in conjunction with a strong teaching programme in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and Hindi. A very substantial linguistic competence has informed all this work, but it has been primarily applied in a philological mode and has not given rise to the application to Indian texts of the more recent forms of cultural analysis which have been adapted from structural linguistics and transformational grammar. Important contributions have been made in the understanding of the textual history of many Mahayana Buddhist texts, in the precise clarification of the meaning of technical terminology in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism and in the reconstruction back into Sanskrit of texts extant now only in Chinese and Tibetan translations. Also at the same university one could not omit the name of A.L. Basham, a scholar who had expertise in most areas of Indian civilization and who at various times published substantially on Indian religion, perhaps best exemplified in the very learned and fluently written section on religion in his celebrated *The Wonder that Was India* (London, 1954). Besides his deep philological acumen Basham also evinced a strong humanistic leaning in his writings which enabled him to take Indian thought out of the texts in which they were so often entrapped by purely textual scholars and to demonstrate their universal import in the development of human thought generally. Finally, one should mention the work of R.K. Barz, a specialist in Hindi who also has a strong interest in medieval bhakti movements as evidenced in his book, *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhācārya* (Faridabad, 1976).

The only other university in Australia which has a substantial programme in Sanskrit and where philological methods are used is La Trobe where Eli Franco, who has previously worked extensively on Sanskrit texts concerned with scepticism, is now completing an annotated translation of a portion of Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*. In addition, Greg Bailey has almost completed an annotated translation of the first book of the *Ganeśapurāṇa*, but his methods owe as much to structuralism as they do to philology. Some of this work has been inspired by the example of the late Ian Kesarcodi-Watson in his treatment of key questions in the study of Indian philosophical texts.

Mention should also be made of

three other scholars whose work falls within the philological tradition, but who are not connected with a Sanskrit teaching programme. Ian Mabbett of Monash University has published extensively on the Indianized states of South East Asia and is now engaged in a new translation of Nagarjuna's famous *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as well as other more specific topics within Buddhist studies. In the area of Theravada Buddhism, Peter Masefield, formerly of Sydney University, has published a translation of the *Petavatthu*, an important monograph: *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), and is currently working on a translation of the commentary on the *Udāna*. Finally, mention should be made of David Templeman who has published a number of translations from Tibetan Buddhist texts over the last ten years.

Since about 1960 the dominant position held by philology in the study of classical Indian texts has been called into question by methodologies deriving in the first instance from social anthropology. A critique of the positivist reading of the classical texts was mounted especially by anthropologists who had done field work in Indian villages and were intent on going beyond a crude surface reading in order to find deeper semantic patterns that transcended individual texts (including non-written and oral texts) and gave insights into some of the fundamental structural patterns which defined ancient and modern Indian culture, patterns which could help define the meaning of rituals, daily life, laws about kingship, etc. as these were actually practised, not just how they were presented in texts.

Of these insights probably the most fertile in terms of a new focus in the study of Indian culture was the conceptual opposition between the values of the world-renouncer and the world-affirmer so eloquently advocated by L. Dumont in 1960, an opposition, the exposition of which, led to completely new analyses of whole genres of Sanskrit literature and replaced the excessive emphasis on developing absolute and internal chronologies for texts and crude taxonomies of ideas devoid of an all-encompassing conceptual frame of explanation.

In addition, whole texts and genres of texts became treated as objects of scholarly investigation itself, as mirrors of stages in cultural development, not simply as pieces of raw material that have a univocal relation to the culture out of which they are produced and to the scholar who studied them. Part of the problem here has been the discrepancy between what the classical texts have said about the religion, what actually happened and what anthropologists have actually observed and thought had happened. No longer do written texts have the position of privileged information bearers that they have for the philologists, but must now take their place besides other sources of information, the singularity of each reflecting a particular cultural imperative. To date, philological methods have been applied only to Sanskrit and Tamil texts thought to be composed before the eighteenth century (after which date direct observation became a prominent source of knowledge about Indian culture), sources to which philologists have voluntarily restricted themselves.

Independently of this intrusion of anthropological method and aims into the philologist's arena, but aware of its

ramifications, another set of scholars in Australia has utilized written sources to study various problems of Indian religion, but they have not relied on a philological methodology to inform their work. Most of these scholars have come to the study of Indian religion only at intermittent times during their careers and have brought with them methods they gained in their initial training, which was as historians of the Raj, and a deep familiarity with the various types of official records of the British government in India, which, for the kind of work they undertake, are their equivalent of the philologist's primary sources. If the philologists who are reading Sanskrit texts can be regarded as working from primary sources composed by indigenous members of the culture, these historians of the Raj must be considered as utilizing secondary sources in the sense that they are working from official reports written by officials of various rank and position, coming from many different parts of India and alien to the culture. These reports contain the descriptions, comments and reflections of officials on many aspects of Indian life and culture, to put it in the broadest possible terms. Many of them are very detailed and if their authors were to be loosely categorized, we could call them "amateur anthropologists" whose ideological accoutrements were the imperialistic vision they derived from their times and the administrative stringency assumed from their roles as officials in a strongly hierarchical service. What this means for contemporary Indology of the kind practised by the historians of the Raj is that they are writing their own scholarly work on the basis of a whole range of secondary sources. To coin a phrase: they are the observers of the observers. But the value of these sources, in contrast to those used by the philologists, is that they give us a picture of events that were actually witnessed, not of events that are studied after they have been constructed into a mythic plot and inserted into a fictional narrative, something which is revelatory more of deep cultural attitudes than of actual events. True enough, both types of sources require decoding, yet the colonial records do enable us to reconstruct something of the praxis of Indian religion, a praxis which is copiously described in a variety of ways in the classical texts, but which allows of no empirical verification. However, if the colonial sources are used in conjunction with the classical Sanskrit and Tamil sources, it is possible, and certainly desirable, to engage in some creative ethnographic history.

Prominent among historians who have availed themselves of the sources offered by the officers of the Raj is G. Oddie of Sydney University. Over the past twenty years he has published extensively on the history of the nineteenth century Protestant missions in South India and the attitudes the missionaries revealed towards what they considered to be the more grotesque and popular manifestations of Hinduism. In utilizing the archives of the various missionary societies he has most effectively demonstrated their considerable value for the reconstruction of Indian religious history in that century and has cast light on such aspects of Hinduism as hookswinging, one of the most spectacular rituals to attract the critical attention of the missionary. In his most recent book, *Hindu and Christian in South*-East India (Curzon, London, 1989), he

utilizes both kinds of sources to present a picture of religious change as it affected certain aspects of Hinduism and Christianity in the nineteenth century in a specific region of South India. Several of his postgraduate students have also done valuable work on the history of Christianity in South India.

Other scholars whose work is less centrally concerned with, though having implications for the study of Indian religion, are D. Wright of the University of New England and A. Roy of the University of Tasmania, both of whom have worked on Bangladeshi politics, a subject which has many implications for Hindu/Muslim interaction. On this very subject Roy has published *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983), making use of a wide range of sources in Bengali. Similarly, using primary sources in Hindi plus colonial sources, J. Jordens of the Australian National University has published books on two prominent nineteenth century Hindu reformers, Dayananda Sarasvati and Swami Sraddhananda, both books contributing to the history of ideas as well as to the political history of India in the nineteenth century.

Another scholarly concern has been the attempt to relate Hinduism and Buddhism to other world religions in a theological manner. This has been the aim of R. Reat, a Theravadin Buddhist specialist of the University of Queensland, in his forthcoming book, *A World Theology*. Perhaps this is an enterprise more consistent with the aims of Religious Studies departments which study religion per se as well as religion as it is specifically manifested in a range of cultures. Also at the University of Queensland is R. Bucknell, who in conjunction with M. Stuart-Fox, recently published a well received book on Buddhist meditation, *The Twilight Language : Exploration in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism* (Curzon, London, 1986). Falling as much in the realm of history of ideas as in the exposition of a central practical aspect of Buddhism, this and the other books mentioned illustrate the diversity of scholarly work presently being undertaken on Indian religion in Australia. All the work I have so far described can be characterized by a clearly defined methodological program and its attendant scholarly conventions. From time to time, a tendency emerges in the production of Indological texts in this country that marks an intent to go beyond traditional scholarly conventions. Such texts reveal on the part of their authorial tradition some philological and historical awareness, but this authorial tradition is equally foregrounded in the history of ideas and the application of these ideas to contemporary Hinduism, if not to contemporary Australian culture.

Perhaps attracted originally by the exoticism of the East, some writers have developed an implicit hermeneutic which seems partly motivated by an agenda which includes a re-invigoration of Western religious values as much as the development of a hybrid position in Indian Philosophy and Religion. I use the latter two terms because of their vagueness and to call attention to the danger inherent in the essentialism implied by their generality, which is sometimes allied with a strongly imperialistic reading of Indian culture and an uncritical acceptance of the sanctity of certain texts, most notably the Bhagavadgita and the Upani2sads. The debate here is concerned with the

extent of disguised Orientalism (just as the religion of the Ramakrishna mission can be seen as a form of Occidentalism). The best teaching and scholarship in Indian Studies is sensitive to these issues, the first being informed by the ideal of teaching about Indian religions with the goal of increasing Asia-literacy and general tolerance of cultural difference without distortion of the traditions under scrutiny.

Of the state of the art of scholarly work on Indian religion it is not possible to do more than catalogue the various types of methodologies that have been employed in studying the raw data of Indian religion and the way that the problems involved in this study have been conceptualized. The scholarly study of Indian religion is an art in the sense that it privileges certain methodologies over others, that it asserts the authority of certain problems and fails to recognize others, that it is subject to fashions and that it sets certain standards which its practitioners are required to meet. Moreover it cultivates snobbery, cliques, academic lineages and mythology. All of these are necessary for the cultivated development of a particular scholarly enterprise that lacks a substantive disciplinary base and yet seeks to establish its place as a specialist field of knowledge. Not so much in Australia, because here the study of Indian religion remains in its incipient stage, but in North America and Europe these qualities have tended towards reification. However, the prevailing orthodoxies are on the verge of change and like all scholarly discourses and reified ideologies of the late twentieth century, Indology too is being forced to reassert its presuppositions under the pervasive influences of the de-constructive tendencies which have constituted the major force of cultural change in the later part of this century, at least in the West. Thus the state of the art will inevitably be altered, as it always must be over time, during the next decade and whilst philological methods will continue to produce new primary sources upon which interpretative work will be done, it will be from the more speculative fringes of Indology that the direct impetus for changes will come.

Any kind of comment on the present status of the "State of the Art" would have to begin with the concession that the vision of Indian religion that has been propagated in teaching and research in Australia is a highly derivative one. It is possible in very broad terms to associate broad methodologies with the Indological production that has come from particular countries, such that whilst a philological rigor is common to all of them, the French have made much use of structural analysis, the British and Americans (though, like the Australians, the Americans tend to lack their own identity) have utilized anthropological method, the Germans have stuck to philology and the Russians have been strongly influenced by semiotics. Australians are derivative because they have remained faithful to the methods inculcated in them during their post-graduate training, undertaken at many different centres throughout the world, but this at least has the advantage that the study of Indian religion here is not dictated by one strong academic tradition as it tends to be in European countries. Thus Australian Indologists are in the enviable position of being able to assess critically all existing scholarly discourses as they have been applied to the collection, classification and inter-

pretation of the raw data of Indian culture. Inevitably this will involve a recognition of the dialectical relation between their own implicit predilections towards the object of their study and those discourses such as philology etc., which have been reified into cultural positions over the last century or so, but which are now coming increasingly under attack because of the over confidence and scholarly myopia they can tend to induce. The groundwork has already been completed for the full synthesis between Indology and Anthropology to take place and the methodological insights generated by this and the techniques of the historians of the Raj add a further dimension of which scholars of Indian religion can and must avail themselves.

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