

# ON THE WISDOM OF RETICENCE AT THE CROSSING OF SPIRITUAL BORDERS

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I HAVE GIVEN CLOSE TO 1500 HOMILIES since my ordination to the diaconate in 1977 and the priesthood in 1978. During much of this time, I have also been deeply engaged in research, writing, and teaching on India and on the Hindu religious traditions. Between 1973 and 1975 I was teaching in Kathmandu, Nepal, a country rich in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. After ordination I pursued doctoral studies in Hinduism (1979-1984), and had the opportunity to study with several Hindu teachers in India. Since 1984 I have taught at Boston College, and my career has centred on the study of Hinduism and what Hinduism might imply for Christian theology. Since I have never believed that intellectual and spiritual pursuits could be neatly separated, my study has also transformed my sense of identity as a Catholic Christian and as a Jesuit priest.

But in all these years I have explicitly introduced Hindu themes and parallels perhaps only 20 times. This reticence, a seeming neglect of a potentially rich homiletic resource, surprises people, and even myself. One might expect my interests and study would lead me regularly to enrich my preaching with examples from India. But I almost never do. Why not?

## *Homilies and Hinduism*

Certainly there are good reasons for bringing the wisdom of Hinduism and other religions into one's homilies. For a start, pluralism is here to stay. The proximity of other religions makes interreligious encounter hard to avoid, and what happens outside church should be acknowledged inside church too. While Christians do not (or at least normally should not) come on Sundays for lessons in comparative religion, it seems also legitimate to point to religious pluralism as a sign of our times. We might as well respond to it well, in an integral

spiritual manner. If the preacher knows something about the other religions, all the better is the chance for making sense of pluralism in an integral religious way. Making connections with other religions and spiritualities need not be thought of as an individual's idiosyncratic preference. Many churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, encourage their members to engage in dialogue, and to learn from other traditions as well as spreading the Christian faith. Pope John Paul II has invited Roman Catholics to integrate the values of dialogue and of evangelization; if priests and deacons take this encouragement to heart, it might well mean that preaching too will be rich in the spirit and fruits of dialogue. Such reflection can be very useful if we are to understand what we believe and what we mean by our belief. Commitment to the gospel does not give us an excuse to avoid reflection on the meaning of other religions; preaching the Word of God should certainly not be a rarefied enterprise in which biblical texts are expounded in pristine purity.

Although Hinduism is in many ways unlike Christianity, themes drawn from Hinduism are not especially difficult to integrate into preaching. In their diversity the Hindu traditions comprise a rich and engaging world of religious experience, images and practices, much of which can be fruitfully appreciated by intelligent people who are interested in spiritual growth, and who appreciate the opportunity for instruction in a prayerful communal setting. More specifically, Hindus and Catholics actually have much in common. Most Hindus believe in a supreme deity, a divine figure who creates, speaks, visits and protects human beings. Both traditions are marked by similar appreciations of ritual, tradition, the arts, and sacred stories richly narrating the sacred potential of human life. In a way, Hinduism offers something for everyone; it gives fresh perspectives on almost any issue of contemporary spiritual, even explicitly Christian, relevance. A prayerful homily may be just the right setting for meditation on what one learns from Hinduism and how it is to be integrated into a Christian faith and life built around the Word of God.

Nonetheless, I have rarely introduced Hindu insights into my homilies, and there are also good reasons for this reticence. One practical consideration is that it is certainly unwise to introduce too many ideas into a reasonably short homily, and then be forced to handle them all poorly. Focus is important; were issues of comparative import to be introduced, they might be addressed inadequately and not explained with due concern for the complexities involved. Ideas about interreligious similarities, differences and sharing, offered without an

adequate opportunity for reflection, do not help people, and may even cause harm. Moreover, the homily at Mass fits within an organic structure of the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist, and it ought normally to focus on the readings of the day. There are many interesting and important topics which might be appropriate for parish discussion but which are not proper material for a homily. Interesting as Hinduism may be, perhaps it too simply does not fit into the typical homily.

So too, crossing the borders before one has found what it means to be 'at home' may not be helpful, even if it remains true that one probably cannot understand 'home' until one has been away from it. Nor should we give the impression of claiming that the Christian path is in need of supplement, as if Christ is not enough. Hindus do not and need not concede deficiency in any particular Hindu path, and nor should we make any such concessions. It follows that there is no need to complicate Christian liturgy with reflection on other paths. We do of course enrich our reception of Christ by attention to resources not specifically Christian; and just as we read Aristotle or Shakespeare or German philosophers, so also we can read the Hindu scriptures and the Chinese classics. Nevertheless, it would surely seem far-fetched to assert that Christians at Sunday Mass need to hear something other than the good news about Jesus Christ. Most of the time, Christians find what they need quite simply within Christian tradition.

Nor are Hindus likely to disagree with the view that the most important thing is to speak well about one's own tradition, and to draw on one's own tradition's specific resources, rather than cast about for pearls of wisdom from elsewhere. Most Hindu teachers teach on Hindu themes drawn from Hindu texts. Though most of them also have a strong sense that there are many paths, they share with Christians a sense that treading one path at a time is quite sufficient. Since one can and must reach God from 'here', from where one is, now, on this side of the border, neither tradition puts any strong pressure on its adherents to move across the border, to another religion, to 'there'. There are good reasons, therefore, for not talking about Hinduism when preaching in a Christian community on Sundays.

### *On Learning Not to Say Everything*

For the past 25 years, then, I have preached with a concern for what I might say fruitfully within the context of Christian worship. At the same time, I have been richly aware of how important it is to learn

from other traditions, and to integrate their wisdom with Christian life and identity. Nevertheless, believing that the Sunday homily should be simple and to the point, and help people in the Christian community who are seeking a more intimate union with Christ, I have generally felt that it would not help to talk of India in that situation. Thus I have lived with an awareness of what I cannot say in a homily, indeed of what I must not say—even when this includes matters of great spiritual relevance to myself. Moreover, though I must leave some things unsaid, integrity and truth require that what I do say should not imply that the things I leave unsaid are unimportant. Accordingly, I have been compelled to learn how to speak in a way that does not entirely obscure the value of what I have not said, lest my listeners confuse what they hear with the entirety of what is important for the life of the Christian. Preaching thus demands a particular skill of evocative reticence.

The need to learn this skill has driven me back to first principles. The unsaid has an important role in Christian experience. Often I have had to remind myself that much in the Christian spiritual journey cannot and should not be completely verbalized. Experiences must be allowed to reach beyond confident words—words that explain to us in advance what our experiences of God are going to be like, and then reassure us afterwards that we have experienced nothing which had not been said nicely before. Words must sometimes be held in abeyance if the listener is to encounter the living God here and now.

The wisest advice I have been able to give in homilies has therefore been simply to encourage listeners to enter their encounters with God in a temporary wordlessness, in order to see and hear freshly, before enunciating again the words by which we explain how our experiences are Christian. This attentive, evocative reticence is a skill to be cultivated. Homilies shaped by this skill refrain from saying everything and allow for incompleteness. They enable people to encounter Christ authentically, spiritually, in ways that are somehow new, more than a repetition of what happened on previous occasions. And this kind of encounter with Christ, unencumbered by too many words, prepares us also to learn spiritually from other traditions as we encounter them. We can cross spiritual borders without becoming too quickly entangled in arguments about comparative truth and meaning. As I have learned to be reticent in my reflection on the Word of God and in my preaching, I have been able, I think, to help my listeners to respond more freely to religious pluralism, and cross religious borders themselves. People are

quite capable of exploring the new terrain in their own way, at their own speed, without worrying for the moment about whether they are being too Christian or, alternatively, not Christian enough.

In what follows, I illustrate how this works in practice by referring to three of my homilies from the Christmas season 2001, drawing on texts from Matthew's gospel. I will also point to a parallel text from the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*. In each homily, what is not said, whether in the text itself or in the exposition of the text, makes a crucial contribution to the meaning.

### *Deciphering Matthew's Reticence*

On the Sunday before Christmas 2001 I preached on Joseph's dream as reported in the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 1. The angel Gabriel tells Joseph not to be scandalized, but to accept Mary as his wife even though she is pregnant. As is my custom (and as the parish expects by now), I explained the text in my own idiosyncratic way, attending as much to what is not said as to what is. I began by pointing out that Joseph is clearly portrayed as a man of high moral standards, who is nevertheless gentle when it comes to implementing them. He knows his tradition and has read the prophets of Israel; he already knows Mary, surely one of history's most holy and edifying persons. Once Mary is pregnant, he becomes one of the first humans to stand in close proximity to Jesus conceived in her womb. Joseph is indeed blessed.

I went on to note, however, that none of these advantages, nor all of them together, enabled Joseph to know what precisely to think or do at that moment. It was a real question for him whether or not to send Mary away. He went to sleep unsure of the future, perhaps even with the wrong plan in mind. He needed a dream, a voice in the night, to tell him what exactly God's plan was to be. The entirety of his tradition was a good preparation, but not a replacement for what still had to happen in the privacy of his own experience. And the same is true for Christians today. We have many advantages in the Church, the Bible, the sacraments, our traditions of Christmas, but we still need to keep our ears open, we still need to be attentive to voices that come to us in the night.

Joseph's dream, I suggested, showed us that it is only the moment of encounter with God's messenger—alone, in the night, in our dreams—that makes the difference, even when everything is available and ready. Only then will we catch fully the word of God that is being given to us

right now. By implication, this openness attunes us to wider religious possibilities, since our tradition too does not foreclose the possibility of encountering God in a new way.

Then there is the homily I did not give on Christmas Day 2001. I was in New York, at a parish that had had 32 funerals of people who died at the World Trade Center on September 11. I preached on the challenge of celebrating Christmas in the shadow of that tragedy. But under other circumstances it would have been good to preach on the reticence the Gospel according to Matthew demonstrates in talking about the birth of Jesus:

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (1:24-25)

Skilled in words and confident in learning, the Gospel according to Matthew seems quite deliberately and noticeably not to be telling us about the birth of Jesus, nor about Mary. Its concern is with the preparation before the birth, and the naming afterwards. If there is anything to be known directly about the child's birth, it lies between the lines; the listener must go there and see, uncovering what might be learned. Had I preached on this Gospel, I would have asked my listeners to enter the space the gospel according to Matthew leaves open by not speaking: go there, find what it is that the Gospel according to Matthew chose not to write down. This attitude and this mode of exploration would, I believe, also have helped my listeners better find their way when faced with the prospect of finding true spiritual benefit in occasional and more prolonged investigations of other religions and their spiritual paths.

Even when pluralism is an explicit issue and a liturgical feast invites us to ponder how Christ is to be known universally, it may still be better to attend to what the evangelist leaves unsaid. When I preached about the Magi on January 6 2002, I pointed out some unusual features of the passage from the second chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. I noted how Jesus is the Word of God but nonetheless an infant, silent (the Latin *infans* means 'not speaking'). Mary and Joseph, too, say nothing as the Magi visit. For their part, these three strangers come and find him without anyone having to say anything, since they seek a light shining in the darkness and know enough to ignore Herod's mean-spirited advice. They are allowed to look and then go

home without anyone demanding that they change, without anyone saying ‘no more star-gazing, no more magic!’ No-one tells them that an encounter with Jesus should have done away with all that. The Magi returned to where they had come from; they were left to connect what they had discovered with what they already knew in their own way. The Gospel according to Matthew trusts them to learn for themselves. Later in the Gospel, true discipleship will be presented as something wholly absorbing. Nonetheless, the Gospel according to Matthew gives us no grounds for dismissing people like the Magi who simply explore, glimpse, ponder, and then go their way in good faith, without themselves or anyone else ever really stating definitively the meaning of their experience. To celebrate Epiphany today, and Christ present in today’s world, I found it wise to encourage listeners to make their own journey, like the Magi, to find the still wordless Jesus, to rejoice, and to return home keeping their thoughts to themselves, unencumbered by advice from those standing around Jesus.

### *What Yajnavalkya Did Not Say*

Like the author of Matthew’s gospel, Hindus and Buddhists too know when to let something remain only partially said. I do not mean simply the great traditions in Hindu and Buddhist India which stress the value of silence and teach how the greatest truths are beyond words. Rather, I am thinking of skilled users of words who nonetheless chose to leave certain things unsaid, or to make a point of noting what is not said. The Buddha, for example, is justly famous for his ability to know when to be silent and not to explain himself thoroughly. Here, however, I turn to a single example from the Hindu tradition.

In chapter 2 of the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (before 700 BCE), the sage Yajnavalkya—who will be known in the Upanishad as wise, witty, eloquent, fierce in debate—comes home one day and announces to his wives Maitreyi and Katyayani that he is about ‘to depart.’ It is not clear whether this means that he is about to die, or about to wander off to reside as a solitary in the forest. Katyayani seems content simply to receive her share of the property, but Maitreyi asks for some spiritual teaching. Yajnavalkya explains to her the nature of love, and the omnipresence of self in every relationship; we subsist in relation, for in our ‘other’ is also our own self; yet the self is elusive, impossible to understand fully, whether before or after death. Was Yajnavalkya departing because he felt he could not grasp this self in the life he was

living? Or was it because he had indeed grasped the self, and thus could no longer live the life he had been living? We are not told.

In the subsequent chapters, before his departure, Yajnavalkya engages in intellectual contests with eight Brahmins about the meaning of ultimate reality. Much is said, but Yajnavalkya answers all the Brahmins' questions. He then questions them further until they can neither ask nor answer any more; and so they lapse into silence. (Only one Brahmin refuses to be silent, and his head falls off.) But there is one interesting variation on the general pattern, when Yajnavalkya speaks with Jaratkarava Artabhaga. The latter has asked about the nature of sense knowledge, and then (somewhat obscurely) about death and how a person is to be thought of after death. Yajnavalkya declines to answer the questions about death in the public assembly; the matter cannot be discussed there. He takes Jaratkarava by the hand and they walk off to a quiet place for a private conversation which no one else hears. When they finish, we are told that Jaratkarava falls silent, with nothing more to say. In two ways, therefore, the text is reticent about his dialogue: it takes place away from the public arena as something only reported rather than heard, and it issues in Jaratkarava's consequent lapsing into silence. The privacy of the conversation is highlighted, only its gist reported, as reticence is carefully affirmed by the narrator.

When the dialogues are over, Yajnavalkya has another conversation with Maitreyi (seemingly the same as the first), and then departs, lapsing into a final silence which the narrator resolutely fails to explain. Perhaps Yajnavalkya is dying; perhaps he is seeking peace in the forest; perhaps his insights have made ordinary life unlivable for him. The author is by choice reticent, lest words about reality divert us from the task of noticing reality itself. The listener is left to figure the matter out, imagining for themselves where Yajnavalkya's teachings seem to lead. Whoever wants to learn more must cross over into a place unreachable by words. As a preacher, I have tried to take such advice to heart. My task is to say enough to start my listeners on a journey. They must finish that journey on their own.

### *Reticence at the Borders*

Joseph in need of a dream; the Magi searching for the light; Jesus appearing first as an infant with nothing to say; the Gospel according to Matthew saying enough but not too much; Jaratkarava falling silent; Yajnavalkya saying many things but not telling us why he is

leaving—all these are people attuned to a spiritual encounter for which there are no ready words, which eludes full verbal expression. They teach us that not even the richest of religious traditions can predict entirely what we are to learn in our own encounters with God. By extension, understanding the incompleteness of words and appreciating the need to see for ourselves serves us well when we feel called to cross the boundaries between religions, into places where no sure and final explanations map our path.

Or so I have found to be true. The longer I have lived as a Jesuit priest, the more I have felt at home in Hindu temples; the more I have read the Bible, the more I have found it fruitful to take Hindu texts to heart. Conversely, the more I have realized that God is present in Hindu practices, images, and holy places, the more I have become aware that Jesus Christ is everywhere too, even when no words are required to announce his presence. He does not mind arriving unannounced; he does not take exception if we find him among people who quite consciously choose not to call themselves Christian. All of this has shaped my preaching over the past 25 years. There are borders between my ordinary life and more immediate, graced encounters with Christ. There are borders between being called to companionship with Jesus and being called to take to heart everything I learn from India. When I cross these borders, the experience is most fruitful when I can do so without rushing to explain things (or explain them away). There are some who are impatient to have things stated properly and with entire consistency; they may find this attitude confusing. But in my own experiences of being on the edge myself, I have found it more honest in preaching to follow the Gospel according to Matthew and the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*, and leave open the possibility of intervals where words remain suspended.

It follows that I cannot write down in any straightforward manner the main features of a spirituality that crosses boundaries, and so have written this essay by way of indirection. If there were a well documented spirituality for such situations, it would probably be false. It would most likely fail to preserve the reticence and attentiveness required when the borders are real and not already worn down and made familiar by frequent travel. True borders remain open; they are not entirely mapped; words can be used in subtle ways to point the way across. But then they fall back, leaving us in a position where we must actually cross over, on our own. This is not to deny or replace tradition; there is still plenty of room for theological explanations and ecclesial

pronouncements, and these are things for which we can at other times be grateful. But when we are standing at the border, we do best to recognise that whatever we say there is still more that lies unsaid. Our tradition teaches us the difference between knowing Christ and knowing about Christ. There is a similar difference between talking *about* spiritual experiences across religious borders, and our actually making the journey ourselves. If we can learn to observe this difference, ours will be a way of spiritual living that does not repeat what has been said before, nor a complete prediction of what others will find, after us. If we can learn to observe this difference, then what we say will leave us—speakers and listeners alike—just where we need to be: on the edge of experiencing God’s real presence, in a way that has not been told before.

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