

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE IN INDIA TODAY

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WHEN I BEGAN TEACHING SCRIPTURE in India some twenty years ago, the question of an Indian interpretation of the bible just did not arise. Historical criticism, which had emerged as part of the great intellectual revolution of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe in which the modern world was born, was then the dominant, indeed the only academically respectable method of biblical interpretation in use. And historical criticism does not allow for cultural variants. It is (or believes that it is) a 'scientific' method which, like science itself, is objective and universal, free from all cultural particularity. It claims to offer an objective, neutral way of reading a text independent of cultural prejudice or denominational bias. Properly applied it should lead always and everywhere (in Berlin, Birmingham or Bombay) to the 'true' meaning of the biblical text which, as historical criticism understands it, is its 'author meaning', that is, what the author intended to say.

As long as historical criticism remained the standard method of biblical interpretation, one could not, therefore, think of elaborating an Indian method of interpreting the bible, any more than one could hope to construct an Indian physics or a specifically Indian geometry. There was only one objective method for the interpretation of the bible (historical criticism), and this was always and everywhere the same. Cultural variations might determine the application of an interpreted text to a given situation, not the interpretation itself.

Today, twenty years later, in a 'post-modern' world, shaped by the 'masters of suspicion' (Nietzsche, Freud and Marx), who have taught us to doubt appearances and look for the hidden causes of things,¹ the situation of biblical interpretation is much more unsettled, and exciting. 'The peaceful days of exegesis understood as a straightforward disinterested philological exercise are long past; the fantasy has been dispelled that traditional historical exegesis is neither theoretical nor ideological.'² Historical criticism is no longer the dominant method in scholarly biblical exegesis, and its pretended objectivity and relevance are everywhere in question. One might

hesitate to go as far as Walter Wink who has said flatly that 'historical biblical criticism is bankrupt',³ but there is growing awareness that the method is not quite as 'neutral' as it pretends to be and that it is not really adequate for the study of a book like the bible which is not a scientific but a religious text; and which aims not at communicating historical information but at evoking a religious response.⁴ At best historical criticism is a useful method for answering historical questions (what really happened? what exactly was said?); it is not appropriate for answering questions of meaning (what does the text mean for us today?).

The basis for an Indian reading

Disillusionment with historical criticism which locks a text into the past and prevents it from speaking to our concerns today,⁵ has led to the exploration of new and more contextualized ways of reading the bible. These shift attention from the author to the text and the reader. Modern hermeneutical theory sees the text not simply as the repository of a static 'author meaning', which is to be dug out by the careful use of philological and grammatical tools, accessible only to the expert, but as an intelligible linguistic structure, a texture of words, with an autonomous 'text meaning' of its own. A text has, as Paul Ricoeur has said, semantic autonomy.⁶ Once written down it has, like a child that is born, a life of its own. Its 'text-meaning' (what the text actually says) may originate from, but is not dependent on, nor restricted to what the author intended to say. A text will outlive its author, the people for whom it was originally written, the situation it originally addressed. It will go on communicating new meanings to new readers in wholly new situations (like twentieth-century India!) undreamed of by the author who wrote it. It can do this because it is a piece of language, and language is always multivalent. It is many-splendoured, rich in possible meanings, always open to new interpretations. We remember how Stanislavski would train his actors by getting them to say 'Bring me a cup of tea' in forty different ways!

When the text is a religious text like the bible its capacity for communicating meaning is augmented by the fact that its language-structure embodies an originary experience of the Absolute which is inexhaustible, and which can be actualized in many different ways, none of which can claim to be definitive. If every text has a 'surplus of meaning' (a capacity to communicate new meanings in new situations well beyond what the author may have intended to say),⁷ a

religious text like the bible has this, I would suggest, to an eminent degree.

The 'surplus of meaning' which a text has is actualized by its readers, each of whom brings to the text his or her own particular perspective and his or her own particular concerns. The meaning of a text emerges from the interaction of the text and the reader, so that the paradigm for biblical interpretation is now no longer archaeology but dialogue. To interpret the bible does not mean digging out an original author-meaning supposedly hidden in the text under layers of subsequent interpretation (as historical criticism attempts to do); it means entering into a conversation with the text.⁸

It is along the lines of such a hermeneutical conversation between text and reader, where each is open to and respects the claims of the other, that an Indian reading of the bible is to be attempted. An Indian Christian reading will be a reading of the bible by an interpreter sensitive to the Indian situation and true to the biblical text. It will be, that is, a true-to-the-text reading made with an Indian pre-understanding and responsive to Indian concerns.

A reading that is true to the text

As a reading that is true to the text an Indian reading of the bible will respect both the historical distance of the text and the specificity of the religious experience it seeks to communicate. Fundamentalist Christian readings, a growing trend in India just now, fail to maintain the historical distance of the text, because they read the bible as if it were a work written directly for the contemporary reader; Hindu readings like those of Osho Rajneesh fail to grasp the message of the bible, because they overwhelm the text with their own Hindu pre-understanding. The eight volumes of the discourses of Osho Rajneesh on the sayings of Jesus make fascinating and at times inspiring reading.⁹ But they do not tell us what the text is saying because the Osho does not listen to the text; he drowns out its distinctive voice in the booming echoes of his own. Whether he is commenting on the Synoptics or on John—or for that matter on the Buddha or on Kabir—it is the same tantric-advaitic accents of the Osho that we hear.

That is why I believe that a genuine Indian Christian reading of the bible cannot dispense with historical criticism as easily as 'radical hermeneutists' like Ricoeur and Gadamer, or the new generation of literary critics who read the bible as narrative would like to do. All such attempts to dismiss the historical investigation of the bible as

impossible or unnecessary fail to distinguish, it seems to me, the specific character of the biblical text. Ricoeur's convincing demonstration that every text has semantic autonomy and a surplus of meaning needs to be refined by a differentiation of the kinds of texts that are being interpreted. Not all texts are equally autonomous; nor does a treatise on mathematics have the same 'surplus of meaning' as a poem. A piece of literature cannot be read as a scientific text; nor a religious book as (merely) literature. We cannot, then (as Christians), read the bible as we would read Hamlet, because unlike Hamlet the bible makes claims on us in virtue of an originary experience rooted in history which it supposedly embodies. A true interpretation of the bible must put us in touch with this experience.

This calls for historical criticism. An Indian reading of the bible will therefore not replace an historical reading but will complement it. In the universe of Indian exegesis there is room for a wide variety of methods—historical criticism to determine the origin and the transmission of a text, literary criticism to analyse its literary and linguistic structures, canonical criticism to find out what function the text had in successive believing communities. But all these must be completed, if the interpretation is not to remain barren, with a hermeneutical reading which will determine the significance of the text for the reader here and now, by engaging text and reader in a critical conversation, that respects not only the meaning trajectory of the text but the new Indian context in which the text is now read.

A reading that is sensitive to the context

This context is enormously complex, for India is a land of frightening complexity and startling contrasts. 'Whatever one says about India,' a French reporter is said to have remarked, 'the opposite is also true.' The eight hundred and fifty million inhabitants of India speak a thousand six hundred and fifty different languages and dialects, fifteen of which are recognized 'official' languages by the Indian constitution. These languages belong to at least four different quite unrelated language groups (the Indo-European, the Dravidian, the Austric and the Sino-Tibetan), which are so different from one another that a north Indian language like Hindi, which belongs to the Indo-European group, is closer grammatically to a European language like German than it is to a south Indian, Dravidian language like Tamil. When we remember that a language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but is 'the reservoir of tradition and the medium in and through which we exist

and experience the world',¹⁰ we begin to realize the problem that this linguistic babel poses for the interpreter of the bible in India today.

The linguistic diversity of India is accentuated by its astonishing religious pluralism. All the great religions of the world flourish in India, along with a large number of aboriginal tribal religions and a profusion of psychedelic new cults offering instant salvation, which are mushrooming in a bewildering variety of forms in every corner of the country. This exuberant religiosity flowers in a chill climate of great economic poverty, a poverty all the more shocking because it co-exists with ostentatious concentrations of great wealth. The scandalous contrast between the great masses of India's poor and the tiny minority of the very rich finds a striking visual expression in Bombay's sprawling slums, stretching out endlessly in the shadow of high-rise luxury apartments and five-star hotels. Such economic disparity can lead to amusing juxtapositions of incongruous technologies. Bullock-carts trundle past atomic reactors; fortune-tellers ply a busy trade just outside institutes of advanced scientific research; and scientists who split the atom and toss satellites into space arrange the marriages of their children by matching horoscopes, and celebrate them on astrologically determined auspicious days.

Yet, for all its endless diversity, its many regional differences, its growing religious tensions, and its tendency to political fragmentation so evident today, India shows a massive and resilient unity, which Jawaharlal Nehru describes movingly as part of his discovery of India:

Though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which has held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us. The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception for me: it was an emotional experience which overpowered me. That essential unity had been so powerful that no political division, no disaster or catastrophe had been able to overcome it.¹¹

This unity underlying the enduring pluralism of India (a pluralism which is, I believe, quite essential to its 'Indianness' and which will therefore resist all attempts at the imposition of a monolithic uniformity whether religious or ideological) was described by Nehru as due to common 'ways of living and a [common] philosophical attitude to life and its problems'.¹² It is a unity that shows itself in certain common social features which define as it were the 'outside' of

India (what I have called the Indian situation), and a certain way of experiencing life which defines the 'inside' of India (what I have called Indian mind). Both these have a part to play in an Indian interpretation of the bible.

The Indian situation

The complex social reality of India is defined by three conspicuous features, present everywhere, which together give the 'outside' of India its distinctive character. India is characterized by its massive poverty (eighty per cent of its rural population, and about fifty per cent of its total population live below a stringently defined 'poverty line');¹³ its pluriform religiosity; and its oppressive, all-pervasive, and seemingly immovable social structure of caste. These factors are closely interrelated. Poverty in India is not just an economic category, it is a religious value as well. Caste, even in its most degrading form of untouchability, is legitimized by India's dominant religion and tolerated by others, Christianity included! The social immobility which caste engenders is a major cause of India's poverty. Poverty—religiosity—caste thus make up India's *samsara*, its cycle of bondage, which is different from but just as destructive as the cycle of unbridled production—consumption which defines the bondage of the West.¹⁴

An Indian interpretation of the bible must be attentive to these determinative factors of the Indian situation, if it is to avoid the kind of irrelevance which, to Indian eyes, seriously afflicts academic exegesis in the West. Would it be an exaggeration to say that a single work of liberation theology, like *The theology of liberation* of Gustavo Gutierrez, has made a much greater impact on history than, say, the last five years' production of the brilliant, massively learned, painstakingly researched monographs on the bible (written by professors for professors) churned out by the ceaselessly humming presses of Europe and the United States? In India, a long, self-conscious hermeneutical tradition, unparalleled for its sophistication until the emergence of philosophical hermeneutics in post-Enlightenment Europe, has always maintained that the interpretation of scripture is a religious act whose goal is not the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake (nor of academic kudos for the interpreter!) but a quest for enlightenment or liberation (*moksha*). The interpretation of the bible in India cannot, then, afford the luxury of academic 'detachment'. It must be attentive to India's concerns.

An Indian mind

Attention to these concerns must be governed by the sensibilities which are Indian. An Indian interpretation of the bible presupposes an 'Indian mind'. It may seem odd to speak of an Indian mind in a country where the cultural scene is so immensely varied. But there is I believe a certain 'attitude to life', a certain way of experiencing reality, which is distinctively Indian. This Indian mind is the fruit of a long cultural tradition that has shaped Indian civilization and given it what the historian Vincent Smith describes as

a deep underlying fundamental unity far more profound than that produced by either geographical isolation or political superiority . . . a unity which transcends innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language, dress, manners and sect.¹⁵

This unifying tradition is basically Hindu. For Hinduism, as R. C. Zaehner has pointed out, is not only an organized religion like Judaism, but 'a way of life' like Hellenism.¹⁶ As such it has, as 'the intangible but none the less real national ethos of a whole people',¹⁷ shaped the sensibilities of everyone in India, whatever the religion to which he or she belongs. It has created the Indian mind.

What then is this 'Indian mind'? Do Indians experience reality in a special way? Is there a distinctively Indian way of thinking? In an unusually perceptive answer to this question, A. K. Ramanujan, professor of literature, poet, and translator of Tamil religious verse, has suggested that the Indian thinking does indeed differ from Western thinking in that it is context-sensitive rather than context-free. That is, Indian thinking always sees things as part of a whole. Everything is bounded by a context without which it cannot be properly understood. The archetypal model for Indian thinking, then, is not the context-free mathematics of Euclid (which serves as the paradigm for the thinking in the West), but the context-sensitive grammar of Panini, the fourth-century BCE Sanskrit grammarian who is rightly looked upon as the father of all scientific grammar. Indian thinking is grammatical, addicted to taxonomy and dependent on contexts.¹⁸ It perceives reality as an interconnected, interrelated and therefore an interdependent whole. A human being is perceived not in isolation, but always as situated in the social context of his or her family and caste; humankind does not stand alone, but must always be understood as part of the totality of the cosmos. Indian thinking is thus inevitably cosmocentric, not (like Western thinking) anthropocentric. Man is not the measure of all things in

India: the cosmos is. In its core metaphor Hinduism sees the world as the body of God where Christianity sees humankind as God's family.¹⁹

This makes Indian thinking holistic and inclusive. Because of its passion for wholeness the Indian mind is prepared to risk the chance of error rather than the loss of any part of truth.²⁰ It therefore thinks dialectically, is tolerant of ambiguity, and is able to hold together seemingly contradictory aspects of reality as complementary parts of a never fully to be apprehended whole. Indian thinking prefers the yin-yang logic of complementarity (both/and) to the Aristotelian logic of exclusion (either/or).²¹ It is this inclusive logic that the Indian interpreter will bring to the biblical text.

Problems of an Indian interpretation

In theory, then, an Indian reading of the bible seems simple enough. All one is asked to do is to read the bible with a critical awareness of its historical distance, and a fidelity to what the text is actually saying, bringing to this reading an awareness of the basic concerns of India and a sensibility that is Indian. This would seem an exercise as natural as breathing out and breathing in. In practice it is beset by so many problems that examples of a specifically Indian reading of the bible are very few, if there are any at all. Most exegetes in India still follow the historical criticism they learned in the Western biblical schools in which they were trained. Some have tried (with some success) to adapt Latin American liberation hermeneutics to the Indian situation.²² A few others have attempted to apply traditional Indian methods of interpretation to the bible,²³ or to interpret it in the light of classical Hindu teaching.²⁴ None to my knowledge has attempted an interpretation that would respond to the social concerns of India, and do so with a sensibility that is Indian, respecting the cosmic orientation and inclusive attitude of the Indian mind. The gap between the 'liberationists' who explore the relevance of the bible for the social aspirations of India's poor and outcast, and the 'ashramites' who are trying to relate the message of the bible to the religious traditions of India, is yet to be bridged. For as Robin Boyd, the noted historian of Indian Christian theology, has had occasion to lament, 'India has yet to develop any strong school of biblical exegesis'.²⁵

The main reason for this, I believe, is the alienation of the Indian interpreter from the Indian situation, and the Indian mind.²⁶ The Indian interpreter is alienated from the Indian situation because

biblical interpretation in India is not emerging from grass-root communities (as is happening in Latin America and the Philippines), but is the work of Westernized scholars, living in the seclusion of culturally isolated church institutions, patterned on Western models, and forming enclaves of a Western clerical culture in the alien vastness of India. In these far flung outposts of Western theology the alienation of the Indian exegete is complete. He (there are hardly any women interpreting the bible in India today) is cut off from the living concerns of his people; from the Indian academic world (for Christian theology is not part of the curriculum in Indian universities), often even from the masses of the Christian people whom he has little occasion to visit. His Western training, and the pressures of his guild (which while it may be incipiently international in membership has yet to become multi-cultural in its methods and concerns), intensifies his 'colonised consciousness' and totally inhibits his creativity. Little wonder that he finds himself incapable of elaborating a relevant Indian exegesis, but is content to imitate the academic exegesis of the West, the liberationist exegesis of the Latin Americans, or the Hindu exegesis of traditional India. He needs to be rescued by the people of India as the Latin American theologians were rescued by their poor.

The proper locus for an Indian interpretation of the kind I have described above, one which will respect both the Indian situation and the Indian mind, is not, then, the seminary but the basic community—that is a pluri-religious group of people, living by basic human (and therefore gospel) values, and striving for the transformation of Indian society in the light of these. What the basic Christian communities have achieved for theology in Latin America, basic human communities will hopefully achieve in India. Such groups have begun to appear, and they carry, I believe, hope for the future of an Indian theology and an Indian Church. Because they are inserted into the struggles of the people they will allow the bible to be read in the Indian situation, so that it can speak vibrantly to India's outcast and poor. Because they include people of different religious (and non-religious) persuasions, they will allow the bible to be read with the plurivalent Indian mind, which may disclose meanings that will be a corrective to the dualistic, patriarchal and aggressive theology which western interpretations of the bible have sometimes produced. They will thus be the seed bed for an Indian understanding of the bible, an Indian theology and eventually an Indian Church—for a 'local' exegesis creates a 'local' theology and a 'local' theology creates (and is created by) a 'local' Church. We may hope then for a new non-

sectarian understanding of the bible; a more profound and comprehensive understanding of 'liberation'; a more inclusive Christology; a more open theology of religions; and a much less militant understanding of mission. All this may not be comforting to the traditional Christian, any more than liberation theology was comforting to him or her when it first appeared. But unless such 'new' and 'strange' interpretations of the bible be brought to the community, how can the Church become truly catholic—catholic, that is, not just extensively, present everywhere the way the British Empire was present everywhere, but catholic intensively, that is, everywhere truly at home?

NOTES

- ¹ Ricoeur, Paul: *The conflict of interpretations: essays in hermeneutics* (Evanston, 1974), p 148.
- ² Phillips, Gary A.: 'Exegesis as critical praxis: reclaiming history and text from a postmodern perspective', *Semeia* 51 (1990), p 12.
- ³ Wink, Walter: *The bible in human transformation* (Philadelphia, 1975).
- ⁴ Soares-Prabhu, George: 'The historical critical method: reflections on its relevance for the study of the gospels in India today', in Amaladoss, M. (ed): *Theologizing in India* (Bangalore, 1981), pp 314–67.
- ⁵ Sanders, James A.: *Canon and community: a guide to canonical criticism* (Philadelphia, 1984), p 3.
- ⁶ Ricoeur, Paul: *Interpretation theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (Fort Worth, 1976), pp 29–30.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 31–32.
- ⁸ Gadamer, Hans-Georg: *Truth and method* (London, 1975), pp 321–24, speaks of hermeneutics as a dialogue or conversation between the 'I' of the interpreter and the 'Thou' of the text. This image is probably more useful though less well known than his other image of understanding a text as a 'fusion of horizons'.
- ⁹ Rajneesh, Bhagwan: *The mustard seed, vols I–II* (Pune, 1975); *Come follow me, vols I–IV* (Pune, 1976–77); and *I say unto you, vols I–II*. All three works contain the Osho's discourses on the sayings of Jesus, the first from the Gospel of Thomas, the other two from the canonical Gospels.
- ¹⁰ Gadamer, Hans-Georg: 'On the scope and function of hermeneutical reflection', *Continuum* 8 (1970), p 87.
- ¹¹ Nehru, Jawaharlal: *The discovery of India* (Delhi, 1981), p 59.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p 62.
- ¹³ Franco, F.: 'The structural nature of poverty in India', in Murickan, J. (ed): *Poverty in India: challenges and responses* (Bangalore, 1988), p 42.
- ¹⁴ Soares-Prabhu, George: 'Jesus Christ amid the religions and ideologies of India today', in *Ecumenism in India: essays in honour of M. A. Thomas* (Delhi, 1980), pp 8–9.
- ¹⁵ Smith, Vincent: *The Oxford history of India* (Oxford, 1919), p x.
- ¹⁶ Zaehner, R. C.: *Hinduism* (London, 1962), p 1.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, referring to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's understanding of Hinduism.
- ¹⁸ Ramanujan, A. K.: 'Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay', *Contributions to Indian sociology* 23 (1989), pp 41–58.
- ¹⁹ D'Sa, F. X.: *Gott der Dreieine und der All-Ganze, Vorwort zur Begegnung zwischen Christentum und Hinduismus* (Düsseldorf, 1987), pp 43–58. This is the best discussion of the difference between Hindu and Christian world-views that I know of.
- ²⁰ Organ, Troy: *The Hindu quest for the perfection of man* (Athens, Ohio, 1970), p 54.
- ²¹ Lee, Jung Young: 'The yin-yang way of thinking', *International review of missions* 60 (1971), pp 363–70.

²² For a representative sampling of such attempts see Amalorpavadass, D. S. (ed): *The Indian Church in the struggle for a new society* (Bangalore, 1981), pp 494–701.

²³ See the issue of *Bible Bhashyam* V/4 (December 1979) on the ‘“Dhvani” interpretation of the bible’ with articles on the theory of ‘dhvani’ in Sanskrit poetics by Anand Amaladas and Francis X. D’Sa, and a ‘dhvani’ interpretation of the stilling of the storm in Mk 4, 35–41 by George Soares-Prabhu and of the Samaritan woman in Jn 4, 4–26 by Matthew Vellanickal.

²⁴ See Vandana, Mataji: *Waters of fire* (Madras, 1981) for a significant ‘Indian’ commentary which explains the ‘water-texts’ in the Gospel of John by referring to parallels from the classical Hindu scriptures; H. Sharma and S. Hemraj: *Karunakariyam Updesamrtam [The First Letter of John in Sanskrit]* (Ranchi, 1987), for an extraordinarily authentic *bhashya* (commentary in the classical Indian mould) on the Sanskrit translation of 1 John; Cecil Hargreaves and Christopher Duraisingh (eds): *India’s search for reality and the relevance of the Gospel of John* (Delhi, 1980), for an assorted collection of essays on Indian interpretations (liberationist and ashramite) of the Fourth Gospel; and George Soares-Prabhu (ed): *Wir werden bei ihm wohnen: Das Johannesevangelium in indischer Deutung* (Freiburg, 1984), for a revised and expanded German version of the above.

²⁵ Boyd, Robin: ‘The use of the bible in Christian theology’, *Indian journal of theology* 22 (1973), p 158.

²⁶ I have developed this in some detail in my ‘From alienation to inculturation: some reflections on doing theology in India today’, which is to appear shortly in John, T. K. (ed): *Bread and breath: theological essays in honour of Samuel Rayan* (Anand, 1991).