

S.N. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in his Blindness: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Delhi: Manohar, 2005 (1994). xii + 503 pages.

S.N. Balagangadhara, *Reconceptualizing India Studies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. 288 pages.

Much of *The Heathen* and *Reconceptualizing* are devoted to uncovering how the West produces knowledge of the world in general and about India in particular. Balagangadhara argues that it is necessary to dissect how the West experiences the world in order to clear the ground before the contribution of Indian culture can be assessed. For a few hundred years, academic contexts have been dominated by questions Europe has asked. This way of asking questions means that it has not asked questions in other ways. Whether adopted by Western intellectuals or non-Western intellectuals, who parasitically formulate problems according to it, that way is tied to Western culture. Only by understanding this can we discover how Indians could ask different questions, and what contribution Indian culture can make. Balagangadhara's work establishes how little we understand Western culture. Speaking a Western language does not mean we understand what it is.

Balagangadhara's research programme is centred on founding a comparative science of cultures. For him, a culture is how a particular social group, as it goes about in the world, generates a process of learning as well as a process of learning to learn (meta-learning). What distinguishes and gives shape to a culture are the ways of learning and meta-learning that dominate and crystallise, structuring its way of going about. These learning processes dovetail into teaching processes so that they can be transmitted to future generations. The structuring of such processes stabilizes over a period of centuries, and cultural differences are tied to these configurations of learning. As *The Heathen* discusses, for the West, religion lends structure to its way of going about in the world. Religion generates the dominance of theoretical knowledge and creates a way of going-about predominantly guided by knowing-about. For Indian culture, ritual lends identity to its configuration of learning, this culture imparts practical knowledge, and performative knowledge dominates there.

In *Reconceptualizing*, Balagangadhara elaborates what it means to be 'cultural', showing how this adjectival use allows us to individuate culture when considering how a person uses the resources of his socialization. The difference between individuals is a cultural difference if it entails a specific way of using the resources of socialization. This allows distinguishing what is a cultural as opposed to a psychological or social difference. In *Reconceptualizing*, this is the opening for Balagangadhara to embark on a series of case studies evaluating how the encounter between Western and Indian culture tells us something important about both. Produced nearly two decades earlier, *The Heathen* meditates on the same question through the problem of religion and, specifically, the claim that religion is a cultural universal. In *The Heathen*, Balagangadhara furnishes a major set of insights, identifying key components of Western culture through his study of religion, and demonstrating their importance in structuring the Western experience. He persuasively shows that there is a discontinuity of epistemology between Western and the pagan cultures of Greece, Rome and India. It is the kind of epistemological discontinuity that depends on very different configurations of learning.

The key is religion. Religion is an explanatory intelligible account of itself and the cosmos. As such religion fuses a causal and an intentional account. The reason why the universe came about is because God intended it to be so. God's intention is also the reason why religion came about. Judaism, Christianity and Islam share such a claim, which is why they are the only instances of religion we have. They are also the best instance of what a worldview is; it seems that only religions have worldviews. Those who have religion think

that other cultures have rival religions, whether or not they have religion at all. As the West explored, colonized and expanded, religions were found elsewhere. This did not depend on empirical investigation; Westerners found what they already expected to. The dominant configuration of learning meant that no society was permitted to be without religion, although different kinds of religion could be admitted. The heathenism Christian theology spoke of Indians practising was later developed into the different religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

If religions were thus ‘constructed’ in India and other parts of the pagan world, what is the ontological status of such constructions? If members of one culture consistently claim that another culture has religion, does that give rise to the existence of religions in that culture? Prior to contact with the Semitic religions, Indian culture possesses neither explanatory intelligible accounts nor worldviews. The multiplicity and inconsistency of stories of ‘creation’ in Indian culture is testament to that. While the West must experience other cultures as having religion, it does not follow that those cultures are endowed with it. Those who proclaim the existence of Hinduism require that the imagination of one culture have the effect of constituting religion in another. Many Indians, including those in the diaspora today, talk as though Hinduism exists and is a religion, but they do not know what this means to Westerners.

Constructing religions in Asia is merely a part of what Orientalism is. As *Reconceptualizing* shows, Orientalism is the structuring in the experience of one culture, the West, of the Orient, which is the experiential entity. As such, it tells us something about how the Western culture structures its experience. This is how Balagangadhara offers a re-reading of Said’s *Orientalism*. Orientalism does not provide factual descriptions of Oriental societies and cultures, but reveals how the West brings together certain phenomena, according to how it structures its experience of the world. Just as Western accounts put together unrelated items to constitute Hinduism, so it was with other dimensions of knowledge. Differing from Said, however, Balagangadhara argues that the current practice of social sciences cannot correct Orientalism as they are tied to Orientalism. It cannot be corrected by adducing factual evidence because the basis of its structuring enterprise lies elsewhere. Doing better studies of Hinduism will not disrupt it but merely decorate it.

The structuring process takes us back to Christianity. It lends identity to the Western culture and acts as its root model of order. The explanatory intelligible account which religion is acts as the model of learning, teaching that humans are intentional beings and that beliefs lie behind human practices. In *The Heathen*, Balagangadhara locates this manoeuvre in Christianity’s early encounter with the Roman pagan milieu, when it had to defend itself against pagan criticism. Christianity, it was said, was novel, and not like the ancestral practices of the pagan traditions, which went back to the ancient past. Christians responded by claiming that their *doctrines* were ancient. In so defending themselves, Christians completely transformed the pagan question regarding tradition. The pagans argued on the basis of the antiquity of their *practices*. Christians took a stand on the antiquity of their doctrines. The reference for *religio*, which for pagans was *traditio*, was thereby transformed by Christians. Belief and doctrine dominates, explains and justifies practices, a way of knowing about human beings that became rooted as Christianity did.

Religion thus requires practices to be justified, founded and defended by reference to doctrines. The ancient pagan and the Indian traditions that Christians encountered did not justify or ground practices in that way. Behind their traditions lay ancestral practices, passed on from generation to generation, changing in the process. When cultures that have religion speak of human practices they refer to something different from those which do not have religion. *The Heathen* shows that when Christians encountered India, they sought foundations for Indian practices in their doctrines, and the content of Indian beliefs in their scriptures.

Different religions sprang out of the earlier framework that had merely told of the heathenism and idolatry of the Indians. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism became distinct, albeit false religions. Hinduism became identified as the false religion of India. Brahmins got identified as the 'priests' of this religion. Christian theology had said that all peoples were given the revelation; the Vedas were the Indian version. Brahmins corrupted it by fooling people into following idolatrous practices, worshipping the false gods of Hinduism.

Brahmins were also identified as preventing people from converting to Christianity. The caste system, believed to have been instituted by the Brahmins, served to underline the corruption of Indian society and culture. As *Reconceptualizing* indicates, it remains a mystery what made the caste system into a system and what kept it in place, but yet believed that such an evil exists, underlining the corrupt social structure of Indian society, and making obligatory the immoral practice of caste discrimination. From this framework sprang explanations of Buddhism as a protest against Hinduism and its caste system. *The Heathen* shows that this does not square with how caste was presupposed in dialogues attributed to the Buddha. Still the protest version of Buddhism is the frame according to which it is widely understood. So with various *bhakti* movements, viewed as protest movements against 'Brahmanism'.

The Christian-Orientalist story about non-Western cultures on its own was never actually convincing on cognitive grounds. *The Heathen* and *Reconceptualizing* both show how Christian accounts of Indian society were resisted by Indian interlocutors who argued, from within their framework, that it was not necessary for them to accept the Christian story or to convert. That religion suited Westerners just as the Indian traditions suited Indians. At some point, the Christian-Orientalist account became acceptable to Indian intellectuals. How can we explain this? Balagangadhara deploys the concept of 'colonial consciousness' in *Reconceptualizing*. He shows that whatever else colonialism is, it is also an educational project, forcing the colonized to accept the Western experience of his culture as his own. The Western experience is made acceptable to the colonized by force or violence, thereby making it an immoral project. To the colonized, neither his own experience nor that of the colonizer is truly accessible. Indian and Western culture are both alien to him. Balagangadhara exhorts Indians to first accept the fact of being colonized in this sense. Indians have to mount a critique of colonial consciousness. Simply mimicking the West, as post-colonials might argue for, is also immoral because it accepts, justifies and celebrates what the colonizer story that the colonized is untrustworthy.

The asymmetrical relationship between the Indian and Western cultures is concretized further in *Reconceptualizing* through a series of studies of contemporary descriptions of Indian culture. These accounts also refer to dialogues in the context of asymmetry and violence, exemplified in the psychoanalytical interpretations given in books by American academics, Courtwright on Ganesha and Kripal on Ramakrishna. Balagangadhara explains why the kind of dialogical moves Courtwright and Kripal engage in silence Hindus even as they are provoked into outrage. He shows that the argumentation involves a certain moves that also prove why the burden on the Hindus is asymmetrical. In such situations, dialogues may not be antidotes to violence; they may provoke it.

There is much more in both books which cannot be discussed in a short review. *The Heathen* told us how a comparative science of cultures would look like by plotting the differences between the Western and an Asian culture, the Indian. *Reconceptualizing* takes that project further by recasting a number of contemporary problems as part of a larger comparative science of cultures. The promise of the first is partly fulfilled in the second, but much more remains to be done. The books under review should constitute a serious challenge, but they are also an inspiration. There are good grounds for thinking that it is among Asian scholars that his challenge will primarily be taken up.

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