

A Response to Wendy Doniger's "The Repression of Religious Studies"

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I think I should respond to the piece by Wendy Doniger in the Chronicle of Higher Education entitled "The Repression of Religious Studies", as I am the "Hindu" whose piece on Hinduism was substituted for her own by Encarta in 2003. As it was put to me, some Hindus complained that they could not recognize themselves in the entry in the encyclopedia and therefore it was being replaced. The substitute entry could have conceivably been written by a non-Hindu as well, who presented Hinduism in such a way that the followers of Hinduism could relate to it, as is sometimes the goal of the phenomenological method in the study of religion. This is a point to which I shall also advert later.

The essay by Wendy Doniger contains many useful insights and I would like to build on some of them. One of them is the distinction drawn "between pious and academic ways of talking about religion". Another is the distinction drawn between interreligious dialogue and religious studies. A third is provided by her account that after she delivers a public lecture on Hinduism, an Indian often asks her "Do you meditate?", and when she confesses that she does not, says "Then you cannot understand the Upanishads". Let us pursue these points in that order as they hold the promise of elucidating the issues involved.

To take up the first point, it could be argued that the clash is not between pious and academic ways of talking about religion but rather between two academic ways of talking about it - one which is faithful to the self-understanding of the followers of a religion and another which is not. This corresponds to the distinction, often drawn in religious studies, between reductive and non-reductive methods of studying religion. To the best of my knowledge, the criticism of Doniger's representation of Hinduism does not relate to the distinction so usefully drawn by her between interreligious dialogue and religious studies, but rather is directed at the fact that most of her work on Hinduism seems to present it in a reductive frame of reference, which is simply not the way most Hindus see their own religion.

A lot is at stake here. There is a fundamental controversy in religious studies around the question: is the ultimate nature of religion "religious" or not, that is to say, does it really involve a transcendental dimension. According to the reductive methods in the study of religion, the ultimate nature of religion is not "religious" but rather psychological, or social, or political, or geographical, or something else. According to the non-reductive methods in the study of religion, the ultimate nature of religion "is religious" - the manifest assumption of theology. There is however another method in the study of religion in which the issue is bypassed by a process

often referred to as “bracketing”. This is a key element in the mainstream version of the phenomenological method in religious studies, more elaborately known as the phenomenology of religion. Perhaps what those Hindus who object to Doniger’s representation of religion are trying to say is that they would prefer a phenomenological presentation of Hinduism, not necessarily a pious one. An insider’s perspective does not mean that only insiders can teach a religion, nor does it mean that the person presenting the insider’s perspective shares that perspective. A phenomenologist believes that the believers’ believe, without necessarily believing what they believe.

The point could be illustrated with a hypothetical example. It is well known that Shiva is worshipped in Hinduism in the form of a linga, (often referred to as the Shiva-linga), whose shape is sometimes considered to be suggestive of the phallus. If, on the basis of this, the Hindus are described as worshippers of phallus, then it invites protest because Hindus do not worship the linga with this awareness and even an academic would be wrong if such a statement were made by him or her. If, however, they were described as worshipping a symbol of Shiva which may be interpreted as phallic in nature or origin, then the objection would be far less serious. Finally, if it were stated that the Hindus worship a symbol of Shiva, which some have suggested represents a phallus, then the objection would be minimal. And if the following line were added, that ‘the Hindus, however, in actual worship betray no awareness of its phallic nature’ then only the very pious would be inclined to object. Most Hindus, however, would wonder why the phallus was brought up at all, when no Hindu they know ever considered it so.

To turn to the next point, arising from Wendy Doniger’s comment that she is asked whether she meditates or not and if she does not, then she cannot understand the Upanishads. Perhaps the issue should be viewed not in personal but professional terms, namely, as indicating that a certain kind of knowledge or practice may be a professional requirement before one can undertake the duties of the profession. This is a concept with which most Hindus are familiar either consciously or unconsciously, on account of the doctrine of adhikara within it. The word is often used in modern Indian parlance to translate the English word “rights” - as in human rights, but in the traditional context it means the requirements one must fulfill before embarking on the study of a spiritual text, such as dispassion, tranquility, and so on. So here the closest English word is not rights but rather qualifications, as when we ask, “Is he or she qualified to be a doctor?” Many Hindus feel unhappy that Sanskrit texts are often translated by scholars who may have a good knowledge of Sanskrit but do not speak Sanskrit. They ask: would you trust a translation of Shakespeare into French by a French scholar who knows English but cannot speak it?

This is not a purely theoretical consideration. Some years ago a professor of Sanskrit at an Ivy League school was asked a question in Sanskrit by a lay follower

of Hinduism and the professor replied that he would answer the question in English, a statement the audience thought risible. Therefore at least issues of credibility are involved if Sanskrit texts are translated by people who are unable to speak and converse in that language.

The essay ends with a plea for defending academic freedom with which I agree. The problem, however, arises when academic freedom is seen as degenerating into academic licence, and academic licence degenerating further into what some might consider academic licentiousness. Other disciplines, such as anthropology, take care of this by having a code of professional ethics for their field but so far as I am aware the American Academy of Religion has no such code in place. After all, freedom is highly desirable but with freedom comes responsibility. One cherishes the right of freedom of speech but there are libel laws, and shouting “fire” in a crowded theatre will perhaps not be considered an exercise of freedom of speech by the courts. I should clarify that I am not suggesting a legal restriction on academic freedom but I am afraid that it might come if academic norms do not suffice to restrain what might be considered egregious abuses of such freedom. For if that happens on a sustained basis then we will have repression by religious studies. And if that leads to the repression of religious studies, then who is to blame? Such an outcome is undesirable but might become inevitable.

But what do I mean by responsibility? An encyclopedia is a text consulted by people at all levels, from experts in Hinduism to those who are acquiring knowledge of Hinduism for the first time from the entry in the encyclopedia. If such an entry was to describe the linga as phallic, and the reader uncritically accepted it as such, then this ‘phallacy’ might cause serious misunderstanding with the Hindus they meet. The following parallel may help clarify the point: suppose I am invited as a scholar of religion to submit a piece on Christianity in an Indian encyclopedia and I proceed to describe the Eucharist as a cannibalistic ritual in which raw flesh and blood is consumed to establish communion with the son of God. In this context both Hindus and Christians would be within their rights to object to such descriptions in an encyclopedia, which would not be the case if such statements were being made in a panel discussion at the American Academy of Religion.

Finally, there are a few points in the piece with which I am in total agreement. One of them is that India has not developed a tradition of religious studies in its schools, colleges and universities, and that it should. I am also in agreement with the general thrust of the piece that the study of religion cannot be restricted to just the believers and that anyone of any religion or none should be free to pursue the study of any or all religions. The reason is obvious. Religions make such enormous claims on us that the least they can do is to allow everyone to examine them from all possible angles.

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