

The Doniger Controversy And The Need For Hindu Theologians Anantanand Rambachan

The decision by Penguin (India) to withdraw Wendy Doniger's controversial book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, has, not unsurprisingly, elicited a huge volume and range of responses. On one side are those who see the issue solely as one of freedom of expression and worry that Penguin's capitulation undermines free speech. On the other side are supporters of Shiksha Bachao Andolan, the group that filed the lawsuit against Doniger's book. They welcome Penguin's decision on the grounds that her writing offends and hurts Hindu religious feelings. They question Doniger's reading of Hindu texts and narratives and the assumptions of her methodology. In the middle are many, scholars and lay-persons, who are not in favor of book-banning and pulping, but who raise legitimate issues for discussion that include power inequality, the history and nature of scholarship on Hinduism and the relationship between scholar and religious community.

Shiksha Bachao Andolan resorted to Article 295A of the Indian Penal Code (1860), which punishes deliberate acts of religious insult, to deal with Doniger's book. Other religious communities in India, including Muslims and Christians, have used the law also to ban books that they consider offensive. Although Doniger identified the law as the real villain, the recourse to book banning by some Hindus to deal with the matter of contentious scholarship highlights a critical need in the community for Hindu theologians.

"Theology" and "theologian" are terms that have a long history of meaning within the Christian tradition, but are now more widely employed by persons of other traditions, after critical reflection and clarification, to describe their own work. The same critical appropriation is possible for a certain kind of Hindu scholar and scholarship. The functions of the contemporary Hindu theologian will not be entirely novel ones, but connected deeply and creatively with historical roles and resources within the tradition.

Traditionally, the theologian worked from a place of commitment to a tradition. There are several parallel terms in Sanskrit that identifies such commitment, and *sraddha* is prominent among these. Commitment implies a responsibility to clarify, explain and, when necessary, to defend the core teachings of the tradition. The theologian clarified the meaning of the tradition in the face of critiques and sought to explain its coherence and consistency. Such commitment

and the work that flows from it distinguish the Hindu theologian from the scholar of Hindu theologies. The scholar of Hindu theologies is not motivated by the desire to affirm the truths of the tradition. It is even possible that a scholar of Hindu theologies may have a commitment to the Hindu tradition. The distinguishing mark of the Hindu theologian today must be a willingness, when necessary, to explain its claims in respectful dialogical engagement from a place of deep learning, reason, and a willingness to be self-critical.

In current Hindu scholarship, both in the west and in institutions in India influenced by western approaches, theological commitment is a rarity and the reasons are many. First, most of the instructors about the Hindu tradition in higher education in the western world do not personally identify with its worldviews. South-Asian ancestry, it must be noted, does not equate with commitment. Second, in the study of the Hindu tradition, the religious studies approach, especially as exemplified in the historical and social scientific methods, prevails. These methodologies have deepened and enriched our understanding of the history, character and workings of the Hindu tradition, but give much less attention to the claims of the tradition to transmit important truths about the nature of reality that contribute human well being and to the evaluation and normative implications of such claims. Some in the Hindu community seem to expect from such instructors a rational exposition and defense of the tradition that is associated with the historical role of the theologian and not the teacher of history, anthropology or sociology. Of course, one expects the teacher of religion, whatever his or her methodology, to be fair, balanced and self-critical, but there are constructive theological tasks that only the committed Hindu theologian is invested in undertaking. Third, many Hindu scholars, for complex reasons, choose to describe their work as philosophical in nature and not theological.

As far as the training of the contemporary Hindu theologian is concerned, we may employ and expand a powerful traditional model. The Mundaka Upanishad (1.2.12) describes the qualified teacher as one who is both *strotriyam* and *brahmanistham*. *Srotriyam* (knower of the *sruti*) is the requirement of deep training in the authoritative canons of the tradition, as well as in traditional principles of reading and exegesis. Such training is undertaken under the guidance of a competent *guru* and there is much to commend in this mode of embodied learning. This classical training must be expanded today to include familiarity with modern academic modes of inquiry and approaches that include historical-critical and social scientific methods. There are many traditional Hindu teachers with vast and impressive learning in the canons of their respective traditions, but who have not had opportunities for training in contemporary

academic methods. Many are unwilling, uninterested or unable to participate in current debates.

The quality of *brahmanistham* (rooted in the limitless) emphasizes, among other things, the dimension of commitment in the theologian and the expression of this in a particular way of being. It is the bridge between theology and practice, the transformative dimension of theology. For the Hindu theologian, theology is a mode of understanding that expresses itself in a way of being. The Hindu tradition has had a long and distinguished heritage of the integration of learning and commitment. Some of its most creative and influential teachers, past and present, embody this unity and we see in their lives the abundant fruits of this synthesis of mind and heart, learning and spirituality.

In controversies, like the one that rages in the Hindu community over the writings of Wendy Doniger, the Hindu theologian will be located ideally to participate and even lead. The commitment to the tradition connects the theologian intimately to the life of community and offers the opportunity to understand its concerns and to represent these in the religion academy. The theologian's immersion in the world of scholarship enables her to represent this perspective to her community and to convey the concerns of her peers. This bridge-building role is admittedly fraught with tensions and risks and there are times when the theologian will need to challenge one or the other constituency and even both. Freedom and the trust of both are necessary for the proper fulfillment of the Hindu theologian's role. Lawsuits address the matter of whether a community feels insulted or offended by a scholar's writings; the court does not pronounce on matters of truth. When a religious community feels that a certain kind of scholarship undermines its truth claims, the proper response is critical inquiry and, when justified, a vigorous contesting of this scholarship with reasoned argument and alternative readings. A tradition learns, not only from those who are committed to its worldview, but also from those who question it. There is a long history of such responses within the tradition. The evaluation of interpretations and truth claims is one of the traditional roles of the theologian.

The need for Hindu theologians is indispensable. In their absence, the gap will be filled by many who lack training, classically or academically, who are limited to the rhetoric of personal denigration and who do a disservice to the theological universality, profundity and diversity of the tradition. Even the Doniger controversy, in the finitude of time, will pass but not the necessity for Hindu theologians who are vital to the rejuvenation, renewal and elucidation of tradition in the context of change and challenge. The Hindu community, interested in the

flourishing of a dynamic tradition has an obligation to foster and support the scholarship and commitment of the theologian. Whatever one thinks of Doniger's scholarship, it is obvious that the trust of the community is a casualty, and this growing erosion of trust and the alienation of the community must be a concern of all scholars, with or without personal commitment to the tradition.

(I am grateful to all my friends who helped me to clarify the thoughts expressed here and to refine my language).