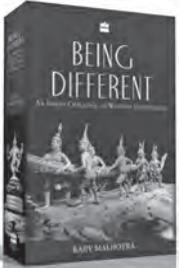


REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications



***Being Different:
An Indian Challenge to
Western Universalism***

Rajiv Malhotra

HarperCollins, A-53, Sector 57, Noida
201 301. Website: www.harpercollins.co.in. 2011. viii + 474 pp. ₹ 599.

It is now clichéd that Western metaphysics and epistemic discourses agree that their continuous endeavour is to ‘search for an elusive stability’ (52); therefore, this search is doomed to failure, since such a Logos cannot be in truth found anywhere in the world, leave alone the very societies that produced such Logocentric philosophies. Rajiv Malhotra, in this magisterial work, deconstructs with extreme care the nuanced structures of Western philosophy and successfully shows how they are incapable of managing the economies of ‘more fluid categories of social and political identity’ (ibid.) encountered within the ideological space created by Indian philosophers. For example, Malhotra looks at Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’ through the *Manu Smriti*. This is perfectly justified: it is now time to interrogate the whole of Western ethics through the lens of Indian Shastras, since the West has time and again seen India through its own religious and philosophical corpus—Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism* exposed the West’s malicious project to dominate Indians in the guise of an ideology-free scholarship of Oriental theologies and philosophies.

The need to resist Western undermining of Indian culture is still relevant. Historians like Niall Ferguson keep reiterating about the good that imperialism supposedly did Indians. Malhotra’s book is an effort at subverting this hegemonic narrative of epistemic superiority. He speaks of the need for the ‘Indian gaze upon the West itself’ (53). This reviewer finds the phrase ‘Indian gaze’ felicitous and much needed for future scholarship within

Indology as well as such diverse fields as European and American Studies. Malhotra’s book problematizes the very act of reading and *doing* area studies, since reading, as we know it, is now a Western praxis that prioritizes the individual over the communal substituting once for all the value of *shruti*, listening, and *manana*, cogitation, both of which are integral to Hinduism, with a misplaced solipsism. This point needs to be kept in mind since orality and the effect or aural religion are important to any worshipping community—Walter Ong had written eloquently about the power of the spoken word, and Jacques Derrida built his reputation by writing about Western Logocentricity or the lack thereof. Can Western metaphysics be practised without recourse to Eastern hermeneutics? This is the main challenge posed by *Being Different*.

Though South American theologians like Fr Gustavo Gutierrez OP and Fr Jon Sobrino SJ have tried to contextualize Western metaphysics and Catholic theology, yet their very efforts have been circumscribed by the Vatican, often enough to force Western metaphysics into an epistemic retreat. Susan Neiman, a Shoah scholar, who extensively talks about the problem of evil in Western theology and philosophy, points out this exact failing of Western philosophy in tackling the lived experiences of cosmopolitanism, which is more evident in multilingual India than in nations like Canada and the US, which are at most bilingual. Thus Malhotra’s intellectual context and equivalence are Kwame Appiah and Martha Nussbaum. Whereas they plead for the embracing of cosmopolitanism, tracing this concept’s roots to the rise of the Greek *polis*, Malhotra, without mentioning the term ‘cosmopolitanism’, shows how it is *already* intrinsic to Indian society and what he calls the dharmic religions. His justification for writing the book is to use the ‘dharmic tradition’ to mimetically show the errors of Western historiography and history of ideas, thereby to clean it of

years of misrepresentation and distortion.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition finds a personal God acting within the here and the now of history, a meta-narrative oriented teleologically. Malhotra instead, in the second chapter of his book, speaks of this very problem of history and puts forth the canon of yoga as a valid register for comprehending the world. Instead of relying on limiting enlightenment ideas about history, Malhotra urges us to use the term *itihasa*, which is more ontologically sound and inclusive of subjective states—like the mythopoetic urges, which are common to all of us, much in the manner of Carl Jung's 'collective unconscious'.

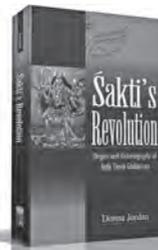
Malhotra also makes a very important point in this book: he distinguishes between history and *itihasa*; the latter is 'fundamentally pluralistic' (66), proving Western historiography as implicitly ossified and inflexible in its insistence on fixating on one particular version of the past. This leads us to rethink historiography and how contemporary empirical drives within the specialized field of historical scholarship the world over are tainted with the errors that motivate fundamentalism. Once again, by referring to the ancient Indian corpus, Malhotra not only comes out as a cosmopolitan himself but also locates the source of cosmopolitanism in our own past. What Emmanuel Lévinas calls 'hospitality', Malhotra shows already being present within the Indian traditions, since in India 'there are no infidels' (135). Everyone is welcome within the dharmic religions.

It is important to repeatedly contextualize Indologists within the matrix of scholarship of other religions, especially with those termed as 'the people of the book'. Malhotra's only shortcoming is that he fails to synoptically read Indian theologies with those constructed by the likes of the Rahner Brothers, both Jesuits, Fathers Lonergan SJ, and the Cistercian Thomas Merton—maybe Malhotra will contemplate these authors and Hinduism in the future. Within the Indian context he could have compared the works of Father Amaladoss SJ with contemporary Hindu thinkers; but then these are wishes of the reviewer since the need of the hour is syncretism, which requires interdisciplinarity rather than earlier methods of focussing on only one area of study.

Books of this sort tend to be visually unappealing, with scant notes, innumerable typos, and shoddy cobbling indexes generally done at the last moment. Rajiv Malhotra's book thankfully has none of these faults; it is a pleasure to see and hold this book, which has a crisp printing on environment friendly paper. The appendices are inclusive; for example, they reproduce Jain sources. The notes are detailed and the index extremely well done. It is recommended that this book not only be made compulsorily available to South East Asian Studies' departments but also in humanities departments where Indian literature in English is taught. It provides a corrective to the reductionist works of such scholars as Wendy Doniger and exposes literature students to the reality and scope of Indian metaphysics—a student will hardly know how to tackle the issue of Advaita and 'time' in the novels of Raja Rao unless he or she reads this sort of text. Avowedly, this is a philosophical and historical treatise, but it is also invaluable to other fields of social sciences trying to remap the ideological terrain of India. We have already had too much of materialist subaltern studies. This book is a new alternative to spiritless history books that rob India of established truths.

Subashish Chattopadhyay

Assistant Professor of English,
Government College, Vishnupur



Sakti's Revolution

Donna Jordan

Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers,
PO Box 5715, 54 Rani Jhansi Road,
New Delhi 110 055. Website: www.mrmlbooks.com. 2012. xxxiv + 481 pp.
₹ 1595.

Religious beliefs have always been integral to human culture. These beliefs, like culture, have been dynamic, changing according to the development of the human mind. From religious beliefs have sprung art, myth, folklore, and of course the scriptures, which have constantly enriched the cultural milieu. Today, in the academic world, studies on the subject of Shakti or goddesses do not always take a comprehensive view and carry unfortunate overtones on fertility and sex. No doubt the studies ought to see how the ideas of