

## Review of

**Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine, eds. *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion* (Springer, 2009), 350 pp.**

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This multi-authored work, *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*, is the first collection of its kind. The authors re-examine colonial experience in India and the Americas, offering discussion of broad methodological issues, critical re-readings of influential Western interpreters of religion, and exploring blind spots and insights typical of colonial difference when viewed through “non-Western” eyes. This volume is aimed at advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and professional scholars in philosophy, religion, and related fields. Readers will benefit from its broad coverage of regions, traditions and problems, and the balance of philosophical critique and reconstruction.

Certainly, there is a significant dimension of postmodernity/postmodernism in the North American mind-sets. While some critiques of postmodernity have offered an alternative term of “late-modernity” (e.g., R.C. Neville), one might ask whether post-colonial discourse might also carry the alternative: “late-coloniality.” Indeed, this volume’s connection with the work of Neville—as well as Kūng, Cobb, and Knitter—links the topic of the book just as readily to a philosophical theology. Throughout this anthology, “Postcolonial experience” is seen as fundamental, and multiple testimonies in the book seek out its philosophical implications (p. 5).

In A subaltern/postcolonial critique of the comparative philosophy of religion, Bilimoria develops a perspective on the philosophy of religion in light of the historic tension between *reason* and *faith*. Are truth claims linguistic and conceptual or the product of first order intuitions that ratify scripture and tradition? The philosophical question becomes one of *religions*, as a totality of worldviews, over a wide range of doctrines, ideologies, myths and symbolic patterns, sacred practices, and ultimate beliefs (that which deeply inform human life rather than simply providing a basis for propositional assertions). Drawing upon the work of Smart, Halbfass, Kessler, and Cabezon, this makes for a comparative philosophy of religion with a natural theology in line with the plural reality (p. 10). Anti-Orientalist critique, for example, becomes just one form of critical reflection amidst a mass of wide-ranged reading. Much the same can also be said of distilled truth claims across a broad spectrum of inquiry. This leads to the question: “can religions in reality be compared?” On this issue, Bilimoria is skeptical because “religions are organic wholes” that cannot be dismembered for the sake of making remote comparisons between the parts (p. 19). Whether one positions oneself as philosophizing with the other or on behalf of the other is of chief importance.

In Richard King’s *Philosophy of religion as border control: Globalization and the decolonization of the “Love of Wisdom,”* a contrast is highlighted between Western philosophy—rooted in a combination of liberal Protestant and secular Enlightenment agendas which is de-centered if not brought to an end by postcoloniality—and the larger part of the world’s philosophies (“wisdom traditions”) excluded by the former’s “parochialism” (p. 39). King warns against postcolonial criticism becoming a “derivative discourse,” pointing out that even the category of religion is

Western-centric, conspicuously part of its universal history (42). A warning arises for postcolonial theory, here termed “subalternization of knowledges” (citing Walter D. Mignolo), that the attempt to preserve indigenous ideas nevertheless perpetuates such Eurocentric binaries as faith and reason, enlightenment and superstition (p. 47).

Markarand Paranjape explores epistemology in *The third eye and two ways of (un)knowing: Gnosis, alternative modernities, and postcolonial futures*, focusing particularly on the work of Sri Aurobindo. This is an important test case, particularly as Aurobindo has “important implications for the discipline of consciousness studies” with its “naturalization of a higher conscious than the mental” (p. 55). As knowledges have become a critical key to postcolonial discourse, the essay here follows the *gnosis* or gnoseological characterizations of theorists such as Mignolo and Mudimbe as strategies of decolonization in view of a growing diversity of “planetary cultures” of “alternative knowledge structures” (p. 57). Interestingly Paranjape actually equates postcolonial with planetary future: a world where the once oppressed nations have come into their own self-determined future forming a global reality where none colonize the other in a new kind of universalism. From the Indian perspective and contribution, this means a new or recovered dominance of “creative intelligence” over “critical intelligence” (p. 59). This is where the contribution of Aurobindo becomes determinative for this cultural evolution to take place now by reaching all individuals, not merely a select few.

Section II: India, continues the predominant contribution of this volume in terms of a particular cultural situation. In Chapter 5, *Mispredicated identity and postcolonial discourse*, Bibhuti S. Yadav focuses on the geocultural sense of identity and difference. With an incisive contra-Orientalist critique, Yadav’s exposé of Western utilitarian knowledge and call of self-determination for “Mother India” is dramatic and poignant (p.72). The creation of an identity for the world in Enlightenment religious terms has been foreclosed by the postcolonial consciousness. Yadav describes an alliance between “the colonizing liberal elite of the West . . . and the self-colonizing Neo-Vedantic elite on the other.” In the postcolonial order, the latter assume leadership aiming for “a return to the old Brahmanic social order by making India a Hindu nation” (p. 75). Not surprisingly, the masses feel more attached, argues Yadav, to Enlightenment modernity. Using critical categories derived from Sanskrit thought, Yadav exposes how Vedantic thought self-colonizes India for purposes of hegemonically creating new identities for its people.

In chapter 6, *On the death of the pilgrim: The postcolonial hermeneutics of Jarava Lal Mehta*, Thomas B. Ellis focuses upon the hermeneutics of this Indian philosopher who, as a student of Heidegger, sought to understand the self through the image of the pilgrim as dialogical subject. Although Mehta interacts with Gadamer at the point of embracing the alien in order to better comprehend the self, one has to wade through Ellis’ reflections upon the latter before coming to a discussion of Mehta. The heroic pilgrim symbolizes all of India for Mehta, where in the midst of dissolution, careful appropriation of elements from the external, colonizing culture takes place – change in “one’s inmost being” (p. 114).

In Chapter 7, *Western idealism through Indian eyes: A Cittamitra reading of Berkeley, Kant and Schopenhauer*, Jay L. Garfield contributes an experimental, comparative philosophy utilizing

Buddhist conceptuality for a “meta-meta-metaphysics” (p. 121). Acknowledging that comparative philosophy is often condemned as subservient to Western influences, Garfield calls for a new model of scholarship without privileged texts or perspectives. The Buddhist idealist tradition of mind-only (Yogacara) is applied in an analysis of Western representation from Berkeley, to Kant and finally Schopenhauer. A number of key examples demonstrate this tradition “as idealist as one can imagine” (p. 127). While I agree that some approaches to comparative study are helpful, it seems odd that such simple equations are asserted just because the vocabulary of the two traditions seems to bear them. But has “intercultural dialogue” (p. 136) actually taken place or has the author simply performed this synthesis for his own sake?

In Chapter 8, An approximate difference: Proximity and oppression in the West’s encounter with Sikhism, Navdeep Mandair reacts against the kind of pluralist philosophy of religion done by John Hick as “a comparative idiom” that “inscribes cultural chauvinism” as much as other forms of Western discourse (p.141). Although comparative philosophy of religion seems to suggest the acceptance of cultural difference in actuality, the irreducible particularities of the religions are reduced to a collection of Western/Christian categories thus stereotyped as if a single context is able to posit universal affinities. All of this takes place in what is described as a “fideiographic context,” by which is meant, a solicitous cultural interventionism that is radically unaware of itself. Sikhism is the test in this chapter, especially its scriptures treating situations of violent combat and its “ontology of violence” which cannot be internalized along Western reformist interpretation and legislation (p.152).

In Chapter 9, Max Müller and textual management: A postcolonial perspective, Sharada Sugirtharajah investigates Müller’s hermeneutics of translation and interpretation of the Vedas, showing an infusion of Western paternalism. Due to having produced such a text as the Rig Veda, India’s culture received the label of a “progressive savage” (p.162). As such, in Müller’s taxonomy of world scriptures, the Vedas occupied the second lowest position, followed by the Zoroastrian Avesta (p.164) all beneath the ultimate, the New Testament. Significantly, it is Müller whose interpretation of the Vedas bore distinctively Protestant features that continue through many contemporary, intra-Indian hermeneutics.

In Chapter 10, Auto-immunity in the study of religion(s): Ontotheology, historicism and the theorization of Indic phenomena, Arvind Mandair considers how cultural theories of non-Western religions, particularly, Indic traditions (e.g., Hegel’s description of India as “religion obsessed”) fall under meta-historical theories of history (historicism) that have fostered—and continue to foster—colonial mindsets (p.173). Mandair claims that Hegel was determined to establish a clear line of demarcation between the origins of Western culture and that of Eastern culture in India by concentrating upon the latter’s “confused” and “erroneous” thoughts on divinity; whereas, the former had clarified itself far beyond a rudimentary state of knowledge (p.182). Finally, because of the ideology of religious developmental retardation, India and the Orient are seen to conceptually remain outside of history since history can only be made through the evolution of culture (p.187).

Part III, America, brings together a collection of essays, reflective of contemporary attitudes in the West and the cultural North. In Chapter 11, The meaning and function of religion in an imperial world, Nelson Maldonado-Torres follows the critical edge of the book by focusing upon

the secularism and imperialism of the West in relation to its global others, utilizing the work of Frantz Fanon and Ludwig Feuerbach. Maldonado-Torres argues there are “processes of recognition” which fund “a fundamental condition of lordship and bondage,” echoing a Hegelian polarity, (p.194). To be colonized and subjugated, excluded on the basis of race, is to experience a “house of non-being” since there is, and will continue to be, no access to civilization; even as one of its full-fledged members is entitled to reciprocal relations grounded in equality (p.196). Religion can of course be seen as validating this state of affairs where masters are to imitate the God, the cosmic Master (p.199). The dehumanizing conditions of master/slave have to be overturned and require continuous review of how ungodly those conditions were and are.

In Chapter 12, Cultural participation and postcoloniality: A U.S. case study, Andrew B. Irvine investigates the different conditions held within cultural authority. Using contemporary sources, the author embraces the idea of culture as “an authoritative tradition” that functions without force and persuasion thus, an ethical notion (p.214). The question becomes whether or not ethical authority is an adequate explanation of culture. Looking at *mestizo* cultures in the US, Irvine pursues issues of belonging that result from the mixtures of culture and race. Three aspects come under specific review: freedom, community and justice from a liberationist perspective.

In Chapter 13, Imperial somatics and genealogies of religion: How we ever became secular, Eduardo Mendieta, one of the leaders in post-colonial philosophy in the Western hemisphere, looks at the “autotheodicy” of modernity and its colonialist devastations, including genocide and ecocide (p. 235). Mendieta argues that the Christian subject was Protestantized and then secularized into a “Cartesian anxiety and Lutheran psychosis,” guided by personal reason and later by natural science (p.236). Religion demonstrated unbounded capacities for reinvention and dominance including privileged access to the past. The Western psychological dimension developed a somatology of disgust for that which was aberrant and abnormal according to the demands of the “imperial self” (p.240). With this generative capacity, Mendieta argues, religion found ways of installing itself as a “political technology” within the secularity of modernity, grounding its racism as a *habitus*, a regimen of cultural development: a biopolitics (p.243). Mendieta demonstrates how the late medieval/early modern Inquisition became an institution to create these structures of racial and cultural purity whose logic was later used in justifying the paternalism of modern slavery and genocide.

In Chapter 14, De-colonial Jewish thought and the Americas, the outstanding, young Jewish liberationist Santiago H. Slabodsky, provides a stunning essay on the impact of the Holocaust in terms of other forms of racial suffering and conscious exclusion of Judaism from the Western canon. After describing an encounter between a young Argentinian student (Enrique Dussel) and future leading liberationist theologian (Emmanuel Levinas), Slabodsky highlights Dussel’s critique of Levinas’ claim for too much exclusivity for Jewish suffering in a world of uncountable sufferers. The other suffering masses represent, for Levinas, a third party for whom he could not give an account, and thereby has not broken with the colonialist Euro-centrism of his situation. This is the “problem of Jewish exclusivism” in the face of otherwise colonialist anti-semitism (p.254). Levinas is looking for a postmodern Judaism that does not think of the Holocaust as “a formative event” but rather a “multicultural Judaism” that opens up possibilities of “de-colonial inclusion” (p.259).

In Chapter 15, *The enduring enchantment: Secularism and the epistemic privilege of modernity*, Walter D. Mignolo points toward a secularism which maintained an enchanted world while seeking a dis-enchantment through textualization, historicization, and printing. However, in discussing the “racial war” of England and France against Spain in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) a concern arises from how post-colonial thinkers potentially minimize Spanish/Portuguese colonialism and the oppression of indigenous populations in light of the twentieth century problems of North/South relations by claiming a “civilizing mission” over-and-against the former’s “plantation economy” (p.280). The question of post-colonial modernization comes in as something desired only by the once colonized and not the colonizers, radically altering every contemporary understanding of tradition.

Part IV, *Uneasy intersection*, is derived from Chapter 16: *Uneasy intersections: Postcolonialism, feminism, and the study of religions*, by Grace M. Jantzen. Here, feminism’s connection to the postcolonial and religious is explored from the perspective of a de-centered Europe and a re-constructed view of self in terms of gender. A delicate balance is played out between the disenfranchised of the formerly colonized world and the silencing of the feminine gender, universally.

In Chapter 17, *Postcolonial discontent with postmodern philosophy of religion*, Purushottama Bilimoria adds a lengthy discussion of the problems between these two major trends in contemporary thought. Acknowledging the post-foundationalist qualities of postmodernism, caution appears over tendencies toward relativism in philosophy, which undercut critical and constructive values. In many respects postmodernism becomes unserviceable for the subaltern and marginalized of the world. Bilimoria’s recommendation is that “postmodernism ought to step aside, and let indigenous-framed criticism of the excesses of traditionalism emerge” (p.317). This is just as much the case with postcolonialists who have called for a neo-modernism on their own terms; however, little has come of these developments (e.g., “internally modernizing Islam”) although, currently, we are seeing significant developments (p.318). Indeed, many of the postcolonial study programs in the West tend to “re-Orientalize” their subjects (p.320). There is the need for a “third space,” away from modernism and postmodernism, toward a self-critical postcoloniality that truly gives a voice to the indigenous and subaltern.

In the *Afterword: Religion and philosophy between the modern and postmodern*, Kenneth Surin concludes by focusing on the need for an adequate theory of culture to be derived from “reflection on the natures” and “functions . . . of expressivities” for any given situation, cultural or religious (p.331). Surin uses this rubric to detect how the essays of the anthology have demonstrated such an approach. Another aspect of his reading is his observation that the essays do begin to offer a vision beyond the former barriers between cultures toward a more bearable sense of limits. Finally, the question of a “decolonization of thought” is quickly introduced as a sign of appreciating deep difference; particularly, at the religious level (p.333).

One has to look far-and-wide for such a vast treatment of postcolonial vis-a-vis philosophy. There is still much to work out and yet, the crucial, critical substance is present in this volume; particularly, within the matured perspective of self-critical requirements. The book is weighted toward the Indian context by its focus on how India’s vast culture and religion have been read by Western colonizers and philosophers. As a result, *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion* is helpful

as both a case study and an active fleshing out of postcolonial theory; especially, due to Indian contributions being a major influence to postcolonial development. Most ambivalent, however, is the philosophy of religion. Is postcolonial philosophy of religion something that indigenous and subaltern voices need to contribute to? Are representatives of the major religions in the once colonized world finding other ways to listen to these religious voices that are “other” while being completely non-Western? In respect to modernity and modern religious sensibilities, have the most sophisticated postcolonialist voices contributed to further colonization of their own cultures? Looming in the background of the entire volume is the question of human rights as conceived by the United Nations Charter and its ability to be compatible with traditional perspectives globally. Who is participating in this discourse from nation to nation, culture to culture, people to people, and citizen to citizen? While there is still work to be done within postcolonial progress, *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion* contributes a great deal toward that end.

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