

‘Religion’, Religious Identity and the Frustrations of Modernity

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ABSTRACT: This review discusses Arvind-Pal S. Mandair’s *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (hereafter *RSW*), published in 2009 by Columbia University Press.

Arvind Mandair’s book is, as he himself points out in his Introduction (*RSW*: 2) one which attempts to bring together a range of discourses which have converged on the issues of religion, language, the production of colonial knowledge and that of colonial and postcolonial modernity—discourses which have been amply discussed in both religious and postcolonial studies but not brought together in this cogent fashion nor necessarily seen in relation to each other. In other words, this is a work of breadth and audacity and addresses both the large themes as well as the more specific ones of the fashioning of a modern Sikh theology. For these reasons it deserves careful and considered scrutiny and even where one is not engaged in a study of the particular religious tradition concerned (Sikhism) and the regional developments (the construction of religion in colonial North India) nor with the genealogy of ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’, their mutual constitutiveness and the institutionalization of them as ‘habits of thought’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 4) in both the academy and political modernity. Furthermore, even where one is not directly engaged with these issues in one’s own work the very scope of Mandair’s book and arguments demands a considered response from all of us

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engaged in the study of Indian religions before, during and after the onset of colonialism.

The first part of the book is concerned with establishing the theoretical grounds for what might be called very simply the invention of 'religion' and the terms associated with it (such as 'transcendence', dealt with in Part II) as well as the dominance of the Hegelian narrative on 'religion' through the impact of German indology on the study of religions. Related to this issue is the crucial one of language and translation. Part I demonstrates the author's incisive analytical grasp of the postmodern debates whirling around on these issues. Even while it clearly and in most respects lays the groundwork for Part II, I felt that the logic of the book, and we readers, would have been better served if the chapters in this section had been integrated into Part II, or, to put it into other words, that we did not have a Part I and II reflecting the more general and the specific, respectively, but the illumination of the latter by the former at each stage. This is particularly true, for instance, both of the Hegelian narrative itself (once we are exposed to Macauliffe's account of the Sikh religion in pages 201ff.) as well as the argument about language and translation (concretely connected to the tasks of the commentators of the Singh Sabhā). To engage and give a considered response to Part I of the book—which culminates in a critique of Hegel and the historicist basis of all social sciences and, therefore, the study of religions, requires, at the very least, not only an engagement with the critique of Hegel and historicism in post-structuralist, deconstructionist, and post-colonial theorization, starting with Foucault, but equally an engagement with Hegel's own writing on religion and the reception of Hegel in Heidegger's critique of 'Onto-theology', mirroring Mandair's own mastery of these sources. This is not a task I propose to undertake for this review. Nevertheless, there are a couple of questions which it seems to me legitimate to ask about the Hegelian critique and these relate to what might be a conflation, in the book, between the influence of Hegelian historicism and Hegel's perspective on Hinduism and Buddhism and Indian religions in general. I would not dispute that the historicist perspective on Indian religions, that permits their getting charted into a periodization and time-scale linking them to the origin or even the pre-history of Western religions, might have become dominant if not hegemonic in the construction of 'world religions'. But I would also suggest that this does not mean quite the same thing as an equally ubiquitous acceptance of Hegel's views on Hinduism and Buddhism within the framework of German indology. Indeed, both Halbfass (1988: 84, 135) and Sengupta (2005: 2–3) have suggested that Hegel's views on Indian thought were considered speculative at best and met with little acceptance or interest on the part of indologists. Indeed, the very institutional structures in German academia from the inception of indology—the establishment of the first chair occupied by Wilhelm Schlegel in 1818 in Bonn, its self-defining areas of interest, as reflected in the schol-

arship of the eminent names up to the 1860s, being philology (and, therefore the close relations established between *Indologie* and *Sprachwissenschaft*), lexicography and a persistent interest in *kāvya* (one needs to only think of the extraordinary work of Friedrich Rückert in this context) and its rigid self-separation from *Religionswissenschaft* (the first position of which was established only much later in 1912)—all this has led, even till today, to a marked, one might say, anachronistic distrust of a non-immanent theorization within the discipline, as practised in Germany. I would, therefore, suggest that the influence which Hegel's views on Indian religions exerted might well have to be more relativized and contextualized within the development of the study of religion as a discipline and also in areas other than Germany. At the same time, as Part II of the book shows, there can be little doubt that the ordering of Indian religions, particularly a 'Hinduism', on a historical time-map did gain momentum after the 1860s, as both Dalmia (1997) and Mandair have decisively shown, and the effects this had in the self-definitions of the other religious traditions of India were both profound and irreversible. In this context, I would like to begin by addressing some of the arguments in Chapter 3 of the book and, in particular, the analysis of the commentary of Bhaī Vīr Singh on the *mūl mantar* which forms the opening lines of the *Ādi Granth*, since it seems to me crucial in also leading one to address the larger issue of the production of colonial knowledge.

The section on the interpretation of the *mūl mantar* is particularly fascinating and very helpful for understanding what is at stake, because Arvind Mandair actually gives us the original text as well as his translation, enabling one to closely follow the line of argument. This, if I understand it correctly, seems to be as follows: the Sikhs, in their anxiety and determination to be seen both as separate from 'Hinduism' and 'Hindus' and as having a tradition which constituted Hinduism's transcendence, embark on a reformist, exegetical, commentarial project in the vernacular in the 1930s, which delineates a new concept of God, proper to this new religion. Further, that this new concept of God implies a new kind of transcendence, 'one which immobilizes time, thus making it accord with the absolute immobilization of God' (RSW: 227). It is further suggested that this immobilization of time and, therefore, this particular kind of transcendence ('the overcoming of time, of sensuousness and, therefore of alterity', RSW: 207) which is God, was not present to Indic traditions prior to its 'ontotheologization' through the internalization of Hegel. Thus, Sikhism enters modernity through this reorientation of God. I think there can be little to quibble about in this general argument. Where the matter becomes somewhat more complicated for me, or anyone who works on pre-modern theological commentaries on the nature of God in the Indic or, more specifically, the Vedantic traditions, is when one begins to consider the actual arguments which Bhaī Vīr Singh uses to define God as *oamkār* in his commentary on the *mūl mantar*. The basic tension is between affirming the non-duality of God and establishing that this non-duality or oneness is

not the same as non-existence but rather a state of being that is a constant essence transcending time. The dilemma is instantly identifiable as one which constitutes the central ontological problem of classical Vedānta—its non-dual (*Advaita*) as well as its modified non-dual (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) and dual (*Dvaita*) forms. Indeed, it also seems clear that the discursive field from within which Vīr Singh is speaking, as well as his terminology of *sat(i)* and *śūn*, comes from a Sikh absorption of Vedāntic discourse, in however idiosyncratic a form. The answer which Śāṅkara's Advaita provided to this dilemma, which also seems to be the one which any absolutely non-dualistic tradition does in some way, is to relegate the God who is implicated in time, and therefore, change and duality and multiplicity, to a lower level of reality (which is still, nevertheless, real), within the sphere of cause and effect (see Śāṅkara's commentary on *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 2.1.16). The Ultimate Reality, Brahman, in contrast, is outside the limiting adjunct (*upādhi*) of any the three times (*trikāla*) or the modifications brought about by time (*vikāra*), though what this might mean, definitionally, is not as strongly theorized as the 'being in time'. I would not argue with Mandair's contention, at this point, that the 'being outside time' might well be defined and modified in modern Sikh theology through the inflection of Western metaphysics in Bhaī Vīr Singh. But it seems self-evident to me that his commentarial discourse cannot be understood without recognizing its obvious rootedness in a pre-modern conceptual terminology as well as discourse—a very old one at that in the Indic tradition which also includes Buddhist and Jaina thought—of the nature of the Ultimate Reality and/or God and its vexed relationship to time. It is in this regard that I would be interested to know what the pre-1930s commentarial tradition on the *Ādī Granth* looked like, how they related to non-dualistic Vedānta, and how exactly the Singh Sabhā commentaries deviate from this, to create modern Sikh theology. But let me now turn to the larger issue of what this tells us about the nature of colonial knowledge.

The issue of the production of colonial knowledge has been extensively dealt with, particularly in the debates centred around the 'invention' of religion and/or specific religions. This issue has persistent implications for the political (as shown so convincingly in this book) and, therefore, is persistently, even chronically relevant. Unfortunately, though, its scholarly parameters can be considered as having reached a stalemate. For those embedded in French post-structural and deconstructionist readings of seminal European philosophers (Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Benjamin to name those most frequently cited) and European intellectual history, concerned with tracing the genealogy of 'religion' and with the focus and expertise almost exclusively on the colonial and the post-colonial, it seems beyond dispute and self-evident that the production of colonial knowledge is a 'non-dialogic' activity, due to the incommensurability of the project of translation, reflected in the incommensurability of the power-equation between the colonizer and the colonized. For

those who work on 'pre-modern' South Asian textual sources, in particular though, or at the last stages of the pre-colonial, the pre-colonial textual sources appear to complicate this largely accurate picture considerably. And this is not, I would suggest, due to a lack of understanding or differentiation between 'theory' and 'data', or the generally acceptable position that no one word existed for 'religion', thereby signifying the absence, not just of the word, but of the concept in pre-colonial South Asian languages and thought. Rather, it rests on the suspicion that 'theory' itself is not an abstract, essential given but undergoes historicization and creolization at the very moment when it is instantiated in a particular already existent South Asian intellectual world and 'contaminated' by other theory/data. In other words, even while Bhaī Vīr Singh is undoubtedly responding within the parameters of the power relation, also the parameters of the given dominance of the colonizer's language he can only do so at all because he has access to a conceptual world which precedes this colonial moment and which shapes the theory he encounters (see further also Hal-lisey 1995, Pinch 2003 and Wagoner 2003 for similar arguments)—a conceptual world which itself might well have been dominant if not hegemonic in premodernity. Indeed, this is exactly the sort of argument—with regard to the pre-colonial intellectual history of Sanskrit in South and Southeast Asia and its 'provincialization' through the vernaculars—which Pollock (2006) makes for the emergence of the second, 'Vernacular Millennium'. How useful, then, can post-colonial theorization be in helping one to make a distinction between the conceptual dominance of Sanskrit in pre-modernity and the conceptual dominance of English in modernity and post-modernity—particularly if its deployment rests on a reluctance or refusal to see that the 'provincialization of theory' might well be, from the inception, an intrinsic performative dimension of theory itself, proportionate to its cosmopolitan reach?

In the penultimate section of this review let me take up, firstly, the links established between 'the Vedic economy', and the concept of sacred sound which is seen as central to it, in Part III of the book. Regardless of what might be considered the basic suppositions underlying the practice of ethno-sociology (as outlined initially by McKim Marriott) and its influence on the history of religions in the American academy (an influence which I suspect has long ago peaked at least where the cultural anthropology of India is concerned), it is very difficult, if not misguided, to speak of Indian culture as devaluing the written word (RSW: 271) or to speak of a traditional Indian bias against writing (RSW: 474 n. 57). There are at least two reasons why this is problematic: the privileging of orality is linked almost exclusively to the impersonality (*apauruṣeyatva*) of the Vedas, and the status of the Vedas itself has been continuously contested and critiqued for over two millennia in the Indian post-Vedic and āgamic traditions (Renou 1965). In other words, the privileging of orality must be seen within a specific context of the reinforcement or the

mimicry of Vedic orthodoxy and historicized within such a context. Secondly, as early as the final centuries BCE and certainly from the first millennium CE, with the emergence of the script (Falk 1993) and particularly with the emergence of a manuscript culture, much prior to the emergence of print culture in India (Pollock 2006: 315–16), there had emerged a very explicit privileging of the written, *precisely as a continuation and consequence of the privileging of orality*. Indeed the veneration of the written manuscript, and the worship of the book as a deity, has a long history in South Asia, as the history of the veneration of the *Mahāyāna sūtra* texts and the entombment of written scrolls within Buddhist *stūpas* from as early as the early centuries of the Common Era shows. Interestingly enough, the reappropriation of the Vedic tradition by neo-Hindu thinkers, and here I am particularly thinking of Aurobindo Ghose and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, has not been sufficiently explored to see if it really does reaffirm the original conceptions of Vedic orality. I would suggest that it does not, particularly if, as I consider it to be the case, they did away with the impersonality of the Vedas by assimilating them to the Romanticist paradigm as the insightful reflections or poetic outpourings of the Vedic *ṛsis*.

I would like to conclude this review article with my musings on those aspects of the book which have both enlightened and delighted me as, in some crucial senses, a lay academic reader: those aspects which engage with the history of ‘Sikhism’ and the history of the Sikhs on the Indian national and international stage—and in the world of the Academy and the study of religions in North America. It is to be admired for both its taking on of established shibboleths and its attempts to create new paradigms. Arvind Mandair’s work provides one with a remarkably lucid account of the complex interaction of the political, the scholarly and the personal and encourages the sort of critical self-reflexivity which must be a desideratum for anyone writing on the ramifications and the life of contemporary South Asian religious traditions.

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