

Conceptions of Hinduism— Swami Agehananda Bharati *versus* the Hindu Reformers

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Koncepcie hinduizmu—Swámí Agehánanda Bháratí verzus hinduistický reformisti

Resumé Štúdiá definuje základné charakteristiky koncepcie hinduizmu v diele Agehánanda Bháratího a dáva ich do protikladu s názormi hinduistických reformátorov. Hinduistickí reformátori kládli dôraz na asketické prvky a stali sa z nich významní predstavitelia hnutia za nezávislosť Indie aj kvôli tomu, že svoje názory na úlohu vášní interpretovali v súlade s protestantskými názormi (a teda názormi svojich kolonizátorov).

Abstract This paper will attempt to isolate key characteristics of Agehananda Bharati's conception of Hinduism and contrast those with the views of the Hindu Reformers. The latter were crucial in emphasizing ascetic elements, and became prominent representatives of the Indian independence movement, namely by adjusting their views to Protestant (and thus the colonizers') views of the role of passions.

Keywords Hinduism, Hindu Reformers, Hindu Renaissance · Tantra, asceticism, *moksha*, mysticism, amoralism, eroticism, self-criticism, puritanism

Huston Smith (b1919), he of venerable memory and frustrating analogies, introducing the chapter on Hinduism in his *The World's Religions* (orig. *The Religions of Man*, 1958) gives the fundamental question of Hinduism thusly: »If we were to take Hinduism as a whole—its vast literature, its complicated rituals, its sprawling folkways, its opulent art—and compress it into a single affirmation, we would find it saying: You can have what you want.«¹ Smith's assertion raises a

1 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 13.

number of troubling questions for the researcher: Just how comprehensive was Smith's knowledge of Hinduism's »vast literature«? Was he a Sanskritist? What are »sprawling folkways«, exactly? Nevertheless, it is this writer's assertion that, according to Swami Agehananda Bharati, Smith was exactly right, though perhaps for the wrong reasons. You can »have what you want« in Hinduism, even if what you want is *moksha*, but, *contra* Smith and by extension the Hindu Reformers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, there are multiple ways to get what you want, according to your taste and abilities.

Smith continues his exposition of Hinduism with the typical Hindu Renaissance spiel, derived from Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), of the »Four Yogas« and Manu's four *ashramas*, approaching the point that Hinduism's basic teaching is that you can have what you want, until your *karma* has been worked out, at which point you will realize that what you *really* want is *moksha*, liberation, which can only be attained through one of the aforementioned »Four Yogas«, i.e. »The Way to God through Knowledge«, »The Way to God through Love«, »The Way to God through Work«, and »The Way to God through Psychophysical Exercises«. ² This »Four Yogas« construction takes as its basic principle the concept of self-denial and asceticism. In other words, you can have what you want until those wants exhaust themselves and you realize what you *really* want is to abstain from sex and animal flesh, and perhaps take up very specific breathing and mental exercises, until you attain *moksha*. It is a simple, sweet, God-centered distillation of the 'essentials' of Hinduism, perfectly in line with the sentiments of the typical Westerner, as Smith himself avers. ³

Against this one may juxtapose the account Swami Agehananda Bharati (i.e. Leopold Fischer, 1923–1991) was called to give of himself by the *shankaracharya* ('head of the monastery') of Govardhanapitha at the Allahabad *kumbhamela* ('festival of the pot', i.e. a ceremonial meeting) of 1954. It was in part occasioned by a teaching Bharati had given earlier in the day:

In another public lecture on the day after the procession I tried to show—in mild and popular terms—that the Hindu tradition did not envisage asceticism as the only way to achieve liberation; that many great seers and many schools of religious

² Smith, *The World's Religions*, 29–41.

³ »The Anglo-American temperament is not voluptuous.« (Smith, *The World's Religions*, 15).

discipline had taught that killing the senses was but one of the ways, and that harnessing them, using all their strength toward the supreme goal was another alternative. [...] As soon as I had finished, a bearded Vaisnava monk, clad in the yellow garment of his order, jumped to his feet [...] and cried: »Swami Agehananda teaches that there is no need of sense-control, that one must indulge in sensual pleasure to achieve *mukti*, that the ascetic life is misconceived« and so on.⁴

The »Vaisnava monk« in this story may represent the dominant, ascetic view of Hinduism put forth by Vivekananda and the other proponents of the Hindu Renaissance, a movement which began in the late 19th century with organizations like the Arya Samaj ('Noble Society', est 1875, movement based on the infallibility of the *Vedas*, trad 17–11th c. BCE) and continued well into the 20th century with the opinions of people like Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), even up until the present day with the Hindutva movement. This view of Hinduism states that *moksha* is the *summum bonum* of the Hindu experience and that this goal can only be achieved through strict asceticism. It is this writer's opinion that this is exactly what was meant by Huston Smith's »You can have what you want.« In Hinduism, you can have what you want, but what you want is generally the product of *naïveté*. What you *should* want is the ascetic path toward the realization of Brahman (»the creative principle that lies realized in the whole world«, Paul Deussen [1845–1919]).

The problem with this, however, is that, as Heinrich von Stietencron says, [a] characteristic feature of the great Hindu religions is that they never start out by assuming an irreconcilable opposition between two postulated truths. Any claim to absoluteness is alien to them. They see it as narrowing the range of potential human consciousness. Wherever they find avoidable contradictions, they view them as lodged within the framework of complementary oppositions, and they try to integrate them into some comprehensive connection.⁵

4 Swami Agehananda Bharati, *The Ochre Robe* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1962), 232.

5 Heinrich von Stietencron, »Hindu Perspectives«, in *Christianity and the World Religions* [*Christentum und Weltreligionen*, 1984], ed. by Hans Küng, tr. by Peter Steinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 146.

In other words, as von Stietencron has taken great pains to demonstrate throughout his career, Hinduism is a ‘world religion’ that defies definition. »Even the doctrine of reincarnation, which we think of as being so closely linked with Hinduism, is *not* a universally accepted part of Hindu teaching and faith.«⁶ It is my contention that Swami Agehananda Bharati (1923–1991), a Dashanami *sannyasin* (Hindu ascetic who belongs to one of the ‘ten orders’) and Sanskritist of the highest order, would unequivocally agree with Smith’s assertion, »You can have what you want«, but not in the sense Smith intended. Hinduism, in Bharati’s view, and in line with von Stietencron’s, is a religion so comprehensive, so all-encompassing, that it can contain completely opposite paths to *moksha*. The idea of opposite methods to the same goal is something many other religions only flirt with, but in the Hinduism of the Vedic and Sanskrit texts, this view is orthodox.

Bharati’s main concern in his scholarly life was Tantrism, and he sums up the Tantric view of Hinduism thusly:

All tantrics flout traditional, exoteric orthodoxy, all put experiment above conventional morality denying ultimate importance to moralistic considerations which is not contradicted by the fact that most tantric texts pay initial homage to conventional conceptions of morality; and all agree that their specific method is dangerous, and radical, and all claim that it is a shortcut to liberation.⁷

By contrast, the asceticism of Hindu Reformers like Vivekananda was one that essentially propped up the puritanical morality that permeated India in the 19th century (and, some would argue, even today), which saw sex as inherently harmful except perhaps when fulfilling the householder’s duty of procreation, and even then only to be tolerated as a necessary act.⁸

Huston Smith deals with Tantra rather flippantly in his *magnum opus*, devoting around eight pages to it (in his chapter on Buddhism), and confining his

6 Stietencron, »Hindu Perspectives«, 139.

7 Agehananda Bharati, *Tantric Traditions* (Delhi: Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1993), 21.

8 As a representative sample, I invite the reader to refer to a webpage of quotes on sex given on a website devoted to collecting quotes from Swami Vivekananda: <swamivivekanandaquotes.org/2013/12/swami-vivekanandas-quotes-on-sex.html> (last accessed 4 Apr 2016). References to sources are given on the webpage.

discussion almost exclusively to Tibetan *Vajrayāna* ('diamond vehicle', denoting the Tantric corpus of Buddhism).⁹ »Tantra's sexual side« (Smith's term) he deals with mostly on the second of those pages, introducing analogies, as was his wont, with Hesiod (*fl* 8th c. BCE), Plato (*ca* 427–*ca* 347 BCE), and, of course, Christianity. The point of his analogies seems to be to argue that Tantra 'spiritualizes' sex. In particular, he says, Tantric sexual rituals must be conducted »in the controlled context of a non-dualist outlook«. Smith actually hits the nail on the head here, but he must then either admit that his analogies with Platonism and Christianity are inept at best, harmful at worst, or else he is getting it right for the wrong reasons. Everyone knows that, of all the things Christianity and Greek metaphysical thought may claim to be, *non-dualist* is certainly not one of them.

Hindu Tantra does not come to a realization of the non-dualist absolute by denying one side of existence, but »it is to be grasped through a process of conceptual and intuitive polarization«. ¹⁰ In other words, no part of existence may be discounted as being any less beneficial than another, and thus no one method toward liberation may be elevated above another. Morality too, according to Bharati, is peripheral to the attainment of *moksha*: one may just as easily attain liberation by flouting morality as by embracing it. A typical view of the mystic, Bharati, paraphrasing Sisirkumar Ghose, tells us, is this: »the mystic is the true helper in need, he is the ideal man in human society, he supersedes the norms and rules of his tribe, he sets new norms or reinterprets the old ones so as to change the total ethical behavior and the moral perception of his people.« ¹¹ On the contrary, Bharati contends that, »this should be clear through an honest and randomized reading of mystical texts: that by far the greatest portion of the mystics' report is of an asocial, even anti-social, autocentric, self-indulgent kind, marginally or artificially related to moral and social considerations.« ¹² Not only is morality peripheral to the mystical experience—and let me

9 Smith, *The World's Religions*, 140–149.

10 Bharati, *Tantric Traditions*, 18.

11 Swami Agehananda Bharati, *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism* (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1982), 87.

12 *Ibid.*

remind the reader that Hinduism is one of the religions in the world where mysticism is an important part of established orthodoxy—but indeed moral considerations are *atypical* in methods of mysticism.

Thus far we can say that one characteristic of Bharati's conception of Hinduism, which runs contrary to that of the Hindu Reformers, is that, among all its paths to *moksha*, Hinduism also encompasses an *amoral, asocial* path. Furthermore, this path may be argued to be much more typical than most Hindus are willing to admit. Most scandalously of all to the Hindu Reformer, a key element of Tantra, the best-known of the immoral paths, is *eroticism*. Vimalananda's (Robert E. Svoboda's, 1872–1908) Aghori guru ('teacher of the fearless' or 'dirty'), has this to say of sex:

»A good husband does all he can to satisfy his wife's desires, beginning with sex. He must not fail to satiate her with sex. Our ancient scriptures even mention this.« In one of them, Parvati, Shiva's wife, says, »Among all the pleasures of women the greatest pleasure is to unite with a good man in private, and the misery which arises from its interruption is not equaled by any other.«¹³

Compare this to the following Vivekananda quote from the webpage referred to in the note above: »The highest love is the love that is sexless, for it is perfect unity that is expressed in the highest love, and sex differentiates bodies.« Essentially, Vivekananda teaches that sex leads to delusion, while Vimalananda, going outside the ritualistic context completely into the realm of the householder, insists that a man who does not give his wife as much sex as she can handle is committing a grave moral offense.

Bharati also frequently praised the overt eroticism of ancient and medieval India, which he found evident in temple sculptures. I am quoting at length from *The Ochre Robe*.

Now one of the greatest visual delights of India's visible past is the pageant of its temples and shrines. Both foreign tourists without Christian prejudice and Indian lovers of art and of tradition are enchanted, in growing measure, by the abundant erotic sculpture and bas-relief which penetrates temple-India from one end to the other. The Renaissance Hindu, however, loathes these images. Swami Vivekananda

13 Robert E. Svoboda, *Aghora: At the Left Hand of God* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1993), 240–241.

was the first who, fighting the Christian missionary, adopted the latter's denigration of Eros, and began to unsex the Hindu pantheon—a process which is now almost complete in the temples built after 1910. The Birla Temple in New Delhi has a rather philistine looking Siva instead of the prescribed *lingam*. [...] The Hindu Renaissance feels apologetic for Siva—it humanizes Him, it removes the numinous from Him, it makes Him a good citizen. There could hardly be a greater blasphemy from an esoteric standpoint.¹⁴

This is typical of Bharati's view that not only is the Hindu Reformer puritanical, he is *disingenuous*. He knows very well of his country's erotic heritage, and yet continues to ignore it, downplay it, and even attempt to destroy it, in large part because he is afraid it makes it inherently inferior in the eyes of Christians. Perhaps he is not wrong, for, as we have seen, even so benign an observer as Huston Smith, the son of Christian missionaries in China, feels the need to spiritualize »Tantra's sexual side«, analogizing it with the Biblical *Song of Songs* (tr 10th–2nd BCE), of all things. Bharati and Vimalananda set the record straight, however. There is nothing spiritual to Tantric sex: it is not an allegorical sexual union between the human and the divine as in, for example, some medieval Christian mystical visions or the most common allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. Tantric sex is sex between two humans; often between two *unmarried* humans. These humans represent the passive and active polarities of existence. There is no 'spiritual' reality beyond that, and there is no God involved except as a ritualistic implement himself.

Bharati did not see this Hindu eroticism as merely an intentionally forgotten facet of the tradition that needed to be recalled: he saw it as an *integral* part of a tradition that was *incomplete* without it, and with its exclusion left an India puritanical and increasingly prone to moralistic fascism. He gave this alarming appraisal of the situation in the mid-1970s:

The left-handed, eroticized, well-suppressed tantric tradition is a resuscitable alternative to the ascetic, self-mortifying forms of yoga. The tantric theological matrix stresses the polarity of divinity as male and female, human sexual congress as a replica of the eternal divine copulation. This tradition, of course, explains very largely the abundance of erotic sculptures on shrines all over India and beyond. In

14 Bharati, *The Ochre Robe*, 244–245.

recent centuries active tantric practice has become extremely rare and disguised. At this time, there are no more than three centers extant where ritualistic copulation is practiced in the tantric tradition. One of the centers was raided and broken up by the police about fifteen years ago, and any such assembly would be annihilated by the governments of the Indian States or by the Union, once it became known. So absolute is India's official and unofficial puritanism that non-marital sex is viewed on a line with theft, bribery, embezzlement, except that these things are often forgiven, whereas sex is not.¹⁵

Thus far we have characterized Bharati's conception of Hinduism against the Hindu Reformers as being *all-encompassing* in its methods to *moksha*, even including *amoral* and *asocial* methods. I think we have now shown sufficient evidence to add a second characteristic: Hinduism is the inheritor of a religious tradition that is both *erotic* and *hedonistic*, and though this tradition now survives only in clandestine pockets, it was once prevalent enough to have large temple spaces devoted to it.

The foregoing characteristics have been the products of Bharati the social scientist and Bharati the Tantric practitioner, respectively. The final characteristic I wish to examine comes via Bharati the committed Hindu. Throughout his works, Bharati proclaims himself the enemy of the syncretism and oversimplification inherent in the Western view of Hinduism. He puts the blame for these faults squarely on the shoulders of those whom he derisively refers to as the »swamis«, notwithstanding the fact that he himself carried that title. By »swamis« of course he means the Hindu Reformers and their progeny: Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), Dayananda Saraswati (1930 to 2015), Gandhi himself, and, later, Satya Sai Baba (1926–2011), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008), and Bhaktivedanta (1896–1977):

The young [in the West] who are bound to remain the majority and to set the relevant standards are likely to espouse Yoga and Tantra: more seriously and with more regard to primary traditions than they do now. For such grotesque oversimplifications as Hare Krishna and 'Transcendental Meditation' will have to be abandoned or reformed by a serious study of primary sources. So long as the roaming swamis succeed in dissuading their wide-eyed followers from studying

15 Bharati, *The Light at the Center*, 230.

Sanskrit and Tibetan, and from listening to specialists who do not know English, there is little chance for such fruition.¹⁶

The last characteristic of Bharati's conception of Hinduism against the Hindu Reformers, and the one that perhaps encompasses the others, is that Hinduism is *self-critical*. Bharati does not see self-criticism as something that should be exclusive to Hinduism, but believes it is necessary to all religions. In a remarkable article published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1973, Bharati went completely on the attack, targeting Vivekananda, Gandhi, the Maharishi, »Lama T.[uesday] Lobsang Rampa« (Cyril Henry Hoskin; 1910–1981), and ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness; est 1966), among others, as well as a mysterious Indian gentleman who had sent him a very angry letter indeed. Bharati rails, »It is BECAUSE I am a committed Hindu that I criticise what I think is phony in modern, urban English-speaking *swamiji* [refers to disciples of Swami Vivekananda]—and modern saint-oriented Hinduism.«¹⁷ He then goes on to give a dramatic example of how the »swamis'« oversimplification of the Hindu religious path can lead to fanaticism:

I was sitting in my office one morning when two ISKCON lads, both New York Jewish, I would think, stepped in and greeted me with a loud, mispronounced »*Hare Krishna*«, to which I replied *Shiva Shiva*. They paused for a moment, turned visibly pale, turned around and left the room. This they had not expected—they could cope, on the basis of their briefing, with Christians and Jews and other irremediable meat-eaters, but, without teaching them anything about non-Bhaktivedanta Vaishnavism, Bhaktivedanta has certainly succeeded in making these little jokers into intra-Hindu fanatics.¹⁸

It seems to me, after careful reading of much of his available *œuvre*, that, theoretically anyway, Bharati had no problem with ISKCON or similar neo-Hindu organizations. Though he definitely had a mischievous side that made it hard for him to resist poking fun at these Western kids playing *sannyasins*, he conceded in multiple places that ISKCON was a valid, if eccentric, extension of

16 *Ibid.*, 234.

17 Swami Agehananda Bharati, »Hindus Ignorant Of Hinduism—Phoney Swamis Abroad«, *The Illustrated Weekly of India* 18 March 1973, 24.

18 *Ibid.*, 25.

Sri Chaitanya's (1486–1533) Bengali Krishna *bhakti* ('devotion', 'commitment' [to God] in Hinduism; *devanāgarī* in Sanskrit) movement. His objection was to the swamis' deliberate *withholding* from their disciples those tools that would give them access to original source materials, e.g., an education in Sanskrit. Bharati insists that what they would *find* in those sources is Hinduism's rich *eclecticism*, an eclecticism comprising as many religious paths and goals as there are human temperaments. He quotes Prod S. Chennakeshavan: »"A good Hindu can be anything from a pantheist to an atheist. He may be a devil worshipper as well as a monk for whom the worship of a personal God is a matter of relinquishable choice."«¹⁹

»Choice« is the word I would like to emphasize as we conclude. It is my opinion, and I believe it was Bharati's as well, that one of the characteristics that make Hinduism so unique among religions is the almost boundless range of choices available in the realm of belief and practice. I am not speaking of the social realm, which can be quite another matter, but the most serious Hindu practitioner, the *sannyasin*, is not bound by social conventions anyway. Reading *The Ochre Robe*, one finds that Bharati was repulsed by the rigorous orthodoxy inherent in his native Catholicism, and found freedom of theological and philosophical expression in the heart of India, where we began this paper, at the 1954 Allahabad *Kumbhamela*, when, sitting before the *Shankaracharya* of Govardhanapitha, he was asked why he felt it appropriate to teach that the existence of a Supreme Being was not important to Hinduism. His answer was met with approval, albeit with some reservations.²⁰ It seems to me that Bharati fought the Hindu Reformers so adamantly because he saw in their teachings similar disingenuousness and rigid dogmatism what he had left Catholicism for. He summed it up well enough in the *shankaracharya* tent:

19 Swami Agehananda Bharati, »Hinduism and Unbelief«, in *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, 2 vols., ed. by Gordon Stein (New York: Prometheus Books, 1985; 2nd ed. 1987), 1: 315.

20 Bharati, *The Ochre Robe*, 235–237.

I am unwilling to share with anyone my feelings and thoughts about the existence of non-existence of God, because I am deeply convinced that teaching a way to conceive the 'existence of God' is fraught with disaster—it creates prophets, it creates fanatics. Prophets are fanatics; seers and mystics remain silent.²¹

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²¹ *Ibid.*, 237.