The Issue of Not *Being Different* Enough: Some Reflections on Rajiv Malhotra's *Being Different*

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Let me begin by reiterating what I said in my pre-publication comments about the book, namely, that Rajiv Malhotra's *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* (2011) is important for two reasons. First, the book is one of the first attempts by an Indian intellectual "to challenge seriously the assumptions and presuppositions of the field of India and/or South Asian studies," not only European and American scholarship on India and South Asia, "but as well the neo-colonialist, postmodernist, and subaltern *ressentiment* so typical of contemporary Indian intellectuals." Second, the book attempts to examine Indic culture "from within the indigenous presuppositions of India's own intellectual traditions." I concluded by saying: "The book will be controversial on many different levels and will undoubtedly elicit rigorous critical response."

Regarding my own critical response, I shall limit my comments to Malhotra's characterization of the Indic material, since throughout my career I have been especially interested in South Asian thought and can claim a certain expertise in India studies and South Asian religious studies generally. While his characterization of what he calls "the West," meaning for the most part his shorthand reference to European and American traditions, also calls for critical comment, I shall leave that task to those colleagues who specialize in European and American thought.

(*1*) Turning then to my critical assessment of Malhotra's characterization of the Indic material, I want to suggest, first, that in my view Malhotra allows himself to get caught up in what might be called the self-referential

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problem (sometimes also called the "self-referential paradox"), in the sense that the arguments which are used to show that other traditions cannot simply be reduced or "digested" for one's own purposes, also apply equally, alas, to one's own position. In other words, Malhotra's own account of Indic traditions is subject to the same limitations that he himself directs at "the West."

Let me explain what I mean. Commendably, Malhotra sets out to argue that it is important to take seriously that Indic thought is really "different" from that of "the West" and that Indic thought should have a place of "mutual respect" in any discussion of comparative religion, comparative philosophy, or any of the other discourses that compare and contrast cultural traditions. It is not sufficient simply to "tolerate" Indic religion and thought. It is, rather, the more important claim that Indic thought has every right to equal status and "mutual respect." So far so good, and I quite agree that it is long overdue for Indian intellectuals to argue for both the intellectual substance and validity of their own religious and philosophical traditions without always doing so using the categories and presuppositions of modern Western thought. There continues to be, unfortunately, a colonialist mindset among many intellectuals in India that deeply resents "the West," but then uses the methods and presuppositions of European and American thought to analyze Indic religion and thought.

Malhotra deeply and aggressively wants to change this pattern, arguing throughout his book that "being different" is to be embraced and that he will attempt to demonstrate how profoundly "different" Indic thought truly is. Here, however, in my judgment, he falls into the self-referential trap. Instead of setting forth the manner in which Indic traditions are really "different," not only in terms of their appropriate or inappropriate interpretations by outsiders but in terms of differences within their own traditions of self-interpretation, he presents what is largely a Neo-Vedānta and/or Neo-Hindu reading of the so-called "Dharma traditions" (Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina and Sikh traditions) that substantially reduces them to a vague "integral unity" (chapter 3), that focuses on an a-historical theory of meditation (chapter 2), based on ignoring determinate "order" in favor of a willingness to live with "chaos" (chapter 4), and all of this expressed in the medium of India's classical language, Sanskrit, which unfortunately, according to Malhotra, is in many respects un-translatable with respect to

its most important mystical meanings (chapter 5). In other words, and in contradiction to his own expressed intentions, he eliminates all of the important "differences" that make Indic thought truly distinctive, interesting, and worthy of "mutual respect" as a distinctive set of divergent intellectual views that could well have significance in contemporary intellectual life.

Although admittedly (and to his credit) he refers again and again to the many differences within the Indic traditions, he glosses over the differences in almost every instance, or to use his own idiom, he "digests" the differences and reduces all of them to a grand "integral unity" that is little more than a Neo-Vedānta or Neo-Hindu reading of the *Bhagavad Gītā* documented with numerous citations from Aurobindo. He fails to see that he is undermining his own argument for "being different" by obliterating the vast differences between and among the various religious and philosophical traditions of India.

Put another way, what Malhotra presents is what Wendy Doniger (2009: 29, *passim*) has provocatively called the "Brahmin imaginary," that is, the standard Brāhmaṇical view of Indic religion and philosophy in its Neo-Hindu garb.[1] When one recalls that Brahmins comprise only 3.5 percent of the population of India and that the Sanskrit language is an elitist medium of expression that is known to very few, it begins to become clear that the "Brahmin imaginary" is just that, an imagined "integral unity" that was probably little more than an "imagined" view of the religious life that pertained only to a cultural elite and that empirically speaking had very little reality "on the ground," as it were, throughout the centuries of cultural development in the South Asian region.

Equally reductive as the "Brahmin imaginary" in Malhotra's work is the expression "Dharma traditions" or "dharmic systems," referring to all the Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina and Sikh traditions. Malhotra would have the reader believe that there is an "integral unity" underlying the various Dharma traditions, but, in fact, the very term "*dharma*" signals fascinating differences. For Hindu traditions, "*dharma*" usually means "*varṇa-āśrama-dharma*" or "*sanātana-dharma*," the former referring to the Brāhmaṇical ritual duties of caste and station or stage of life, the latter referring to the "unchanging" or "eternal law" of the Hindu way of life.

The term "*dharma*" never has this meaning in Buddhist traditions (whether Theravāda, Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna). It signals precisely the

opposite. Not only is Buddhist "*dharma*" contrary to caste and stage of life, it also calls into question the very idea of permanent substance or "integral unity." The term "*dharma*" for Buddhist traditions sometimes means "truth," "law," "righteousness," and so forth, but not at all in the sense of Brahman or Ātman or transcendence of any kind, all of which notions are rigorously denied in all the varieties of Buddhist thought. For early Buddhist traditions "*dharma*" means, rather, a pluralist system of radical transience, largely a temporal metaphor, of continuing change and lack of substance (*niḥ-svabhāva*); and in later Mahāyāna and Tantra Buddhist traditions the very notion of "*dharma*" is shown to be "*nairātmya*," lacking in any metaphysical significance whatsoever. The great Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, in his famous analysis of the tetralemma, negates each lemma (identity, difference, identity and difference and neither identity nor difference), not for the sake of "integral unity," but rather, for the sake of a radical "emptiness" which refuses to make any propositional assertions whatsoever!

The term "*dharma*" for the Jainas is yet again interestingly different and irreducible to either Hindu or Buddhist "*dharma*." For the Jainas, the term "*dharma*" is a material thing (*dravya*) and refers to "motion" in contrast to "*a-dharma*" which refers to "rest." It has a specific technical sense closely related to its thoroughgoing dualist system of "*jīva*" and "*ajīva*." It is a radically materialist notion, which has nothing whatsoever to do with "consciousness" (Jaini 1979: 99–101).

Finally the Sikh notion of "*dharma*" has components of Hindu and even Sufi/Muslim associations and appears to be related to the formation of the Khālsā and its code of conduct for "baptized" or initiated members, arising in the late seventeenth century. In any case, the Sikh tradition arises many centuries after the distinct "*dharma*s" of the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Jainas.[2]

In all of this, what is fascinating about the so-called "Dharma" traditions is their remarkable differences. They cannot plausibly be reduced to the "integral unity" that Malhotra asserts, apart, of course, from the Brāhmaṇical Neo-Hindu reading. This is not to deny that there is a respectable and well-known "integral unity" notion of "*dharma*." It is only to say that the "integral unity" version is only one among many divergent notions of "*dharma*," a hybrid product of the "Brahmin imaginary" and modern Neo-Hindu discourse.

An even more striking example of Malhotra's reductive reading of Indic religion and thought pertains to his comments about Yoga.[3] There are, of course, many traditions of Yoga in India, and one must always specify to which tradition one is referring. Malhotra usually claims to be speaking about the classical Yoga of Patañjali, or what is usually called in the Sanskrit texts, Pātañjala Yoga. The classical Yoga of Patañjali is, of course, a form of Sāṃkhya and specifically said to be a *samāna-tantra* or "common tradition" along with Yoga. Thus, one often reads in Sanskrit texts about a composite tradition called simply "Sāṃkhya-yoga." More than that, each colophon of the four *pāda*s of the *Yogasūtra* together with the Bhāṣya attributed to Vyāsa in the extant manuscripts is said to be a "*sāṃkhya-pravacana*" or an "explanation of Sāṃkhya." The Sāṃkhya philosophy is one of the oldest traditions of classical Indian philosophizing, roughly contemporary with the rise of Buddhist and Jaina thought and much earlier than any of the philosophical schools of Vedānta. As is usually noted in most books on Indian thought, Sāṃkhya-yoga's influence on Indian culture is immense, extending to medicine, aesthetic theory, law, the Sanskrit epics (including the *Bhagavad Gītā*), the Purāṇas and many other areas of Indic cultural production (including, by the way, the later Vedāntas).

Many years ago, when I met the great *paṇḍit* Gopinath Kaviraj in Varanasi and informed him that I was working on one of the systems of Indian philosophy, namely, the Sāṃkhya, he waved his hand to stop me and commented, "Sāṃkhya is not just one of the systems of Indian philosophy. Sāṃkhya *is* the philosophy of India!" What is interesting about the Sāṃkhya or Sāṃkhya-yoga philosophy is that it is a rigorous dualism that eschews the notion of "integral unity" and, to the contrary, argues that the experience of "integral unity" is the basic reason for ignorance (*avidyā*) and bondage. In ordinary experience we experience what appears to be an integral unity of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, but the task of *adhyātma-vidyā* is to undo this false appearance of the unity, or, in other words, to separate or detach (*vi-yoga*) *puruṣa* as contentless consciousness from the realm of ordinary awareness (*prakṛti* or *cittasattva* as *traiguṇya*).

Two fundamental insights arise from the Sāṃkhya-yoga analysis, namely, first, that one must make a distinction between consciousness (*puruṣa*), on the one hand, and awareness (*buddhi, citta*), on the other; and second, that there is a basic reversal of the notion of the One and the

Many that is dramatically different, not only from Western thought but from most of the other traditions of Indian philosophizing. For Sāṃkhya-yoga, the One is the rational and fully intelligible realm of *prakṛti* (*trai-guṇya*) while the Many is the realm of multiple *purusa*s or consciousnesses (*puruṣa-bahutva*). There is no metaphysical cosmic One other than the materialist (and painful) realm of unified *prakṛti* or *citta-sattva*, and the task of philosophy along with Yoga meditation is to undo (*vi-yoga*) the mistaken experience that consciousness and awareness are one. Certainly, one can disagree with the Sāṃkhya system, as many of the other systems of Indian philosophy do, but it is clearly the case that the Sāṃkhya-yoga dualism cannot seriously be reduced to any sort of "integral unity." Moreover, as I suggested above, the Jaina dualism of *jīva-ajīva*, the Buddhist pluralist system of radical transience and/or emptiness, and one might also include the pluralist systems of Nyāya and Navya-Nyāya are all likewise irreducible to the "integral unity" of Neo-Hindu thought.

(*2*) But perhaps I have said enough about the issue of "being different" in Malhotra's interpretation of Indic religion and thought, namely, his reluctance to admit that there are aspects of Indic religion and thought that go quite beyond the "integral unity" of a certain variety of Neo-Hindu apologetics. What I would like to suggest instead in some final remarks is that attending to the remarkable "differences" in Indic thought may provide a much more productive route for allowing Indic thought to play a more vital role in contemporary intellectual life, precisely because of its "being different."

I have in mind here some stark remarks offered by Peter Watson toward the end of his fascinating book, *The Modern Mind: An Intellectual History of the 20th Century* (2002).[4] He refers to:

> an interesting absence that readers may have noticed. I refer to the relative dearth of non-Western thinkers. When this book was conceived, it was my intention (and the publishers') to make the text as international and multicultural as possible. The book would include not just European and North American—Western—ideas, but would delve into the major non-Western cultures to identify their important ideas and their important thinkers, be they philosophers, writers, scientists, or composers. I began to work my way through scholars who specialised in the major non-Western cultures: India, China, Japan, southern and central Africa,

> the Arab world. I was shocked (and that is not too strong a word) to find that they all (I am not exaggerating, there were no exceptions) came up with the same answer, that in the twentieth century, the non-Western cultures have produced no body of work that can compare with the ideas of the West….I should make it clear that a good proportion of these scholars were themselves members of those very non-Western cultures (Watson 2002: 761).

Watson continues:

> Of course, there are important Chinese writers and painters in the twentieth century, and we can all think of important Japanese film directors, Indian novelists, and African dramatists.…We have examined the thriving school of revisionist Indian historiography. Distinguished scholars from a non-Western background are very nearly household names—one thinks of Edward Said, Amartya Sen, Anita Desai or Chandra Wickramasinghe. But, it was repeatedly put to me that there is no twentieth-century Chinese equivalent of, say, surrealism or psychoanalysis, no Indian contribution to match logical positivism.…Whatever list you care to make of twentieth century innovations, be it plastics, antibiotics, and the atom or stream-of-consciousness novels…or abstract expressionism, it is almost entirely Western (2002: 761–62).

Watson also refers to V.S. Naipaul's views about India, especially his earlier books from the 1960s and 1970s, for example, *An Area of Darkness* (1967) and *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1977); views that are deeply negative about India's religion. " 'Hinduism…has exposed [Indians] to a thousand years of defeat and stagnation….Its philosophy of withdrawal has diminished men intellectually and not equipped them to respond to challenge; it has stifled growth' " (Naipaul 1977, cited in Watson 2002: 762). Naipaul's view of India changes to a more positive tone in his more recent book, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). The tragic conflicts confronting India in the 1980s, including presumably the Sikh crisis in the Punjab, the crisis in Kashmir, the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and then Rajiv Gandhi, the Babri Masjid controversy, and so forth, all in Naipaul's view led to a cultural wake-up call. Naipaul concludes his book with the following comment: "People everywhere

have ideas now of who they are and what they owe themselves….The liberation of spirit that has come to India could not come as release alone….It had to come as rage and revolt" (1990, cited in Watson 2002: 763).

Watson also cites Octavio Paz, a thinker usually more upbeat about India's culture than Naipaul, but still highly critical of India's religious traditions.

> Hindu thought came to a halt, the victim of a kind of paralysis, toward the end of the thirteenth century, the period when the last of the great temples were erected. This historical paralysis coincides with two other important phenomena: the extinction of Buddhism and the victory of Islam in Delhi and other places….The great lethargy of Hindu civilization began, a lethargy that persists today…(Paz 1997, cited in Watson 2002: 763).

These are harsh judgments, to be sure, especially those of Naipaul, whose comments must, of course, always be taken *cum grano salis*. There is, however, one theme that runs through these various comments that should give pause to all serious interpreters of India's cultural heritage; namely, the observation that traditional Indic religion and thought have not been taken seriously in modern intellectual life for a very long time. As Watson puts it, "Whatever list you care to make of twentieth century innovations, be it plastics, antibiotics, and the atom or stream-of-consciousness novels …or abstract expressionism, it is almost entirely Western."

Many reasons have been given for what Watson calls this "relative dearth of non-Western thinkers," some of which have been highlighted in Malhotra's *Being Different*, but a full and persuasive explanation has yet to be provided. My own view is along the lines of Niels Bohr's comment when asked to evaluate David Bohm's highly sophisticated and abstract theory of a possible "implicate order" in quantum theorizing. Bohr is reported to have said that Bohm's work is a check that cannot be cashed, meaning that it was an abstract theory for which no experiment could be formulated or imagined that would show its value one way or another (see Larson 2003: 188, 2004b: 396). It simply could not play a role, therefore, in the current conversations in scientific theorizing in a manner that could be utilized.

Much the same is true, in my view, *mutatis mutandis*, for most of Neo-Hindu or Neo-Vedānta philosophizing. The various traditions of Vedānta and Neo-Vedānta philosophizing are magnificent visions of the spiritual life that have provided succour and deep intellectual insight for believers for many centuries, from the time of the great Śaṅkara (*c.* 700 CE) up to and including the brilliant work of Svāmī Vivekānanda (Narendranath Datta, 1862–1902). With the coming of the twentieth century, however, and even more so now in our own twenty-first century, the insights of Absolutist philosophizing (whether Hindu, Christian, Islamic or whatever) no longer play a part in the innovative conversations occurring in the sciences, the arts, and the humanistic social sciences. To be sure, the institutional embodiments of the Absolutist philosophical traditions continue to be important politically, but in terms of intellectual content Absolutist philosophies are checks that can no longer be cashed. They come from a different era and have not made original contributions to the great issues of our time for well over a century, as Watson was so "shocked" to discover in his intellectual history of the twentieth century.

How might this situation be changed? Here I recall the interesting work of Percival Spear in his book, *India, Pakistan and the West* (1958: 177–91). Spear develops a typology of behavioral responses that appeared among the people of India with the coming of the British. This typology is to some degree still relevant for formulating how Indic religion and philosophy may begin to play an innovative role in the intellectual discourses of our time. Spear identifies five types of distinctive responses: (*1*) a "military" or openly hostile response—taking up arms against the intruders; (*2*) a "reactionary" response—the attempt to reconstitute the older political order, for example, the North Indian Rebellion (formerly called the "mutiny") in 1857–58; (*3*) a "westernizing" response—assimilating to the new values; (*4*) an "orthodox" response—maintenance of the older religion with appropriate reform; and (*5*) the "solution of synthesis"—the effort to adapt to the newcomers, in the process of which innovation and assimilation gradually occur, alongside an ongoing agenda to preserve the unique values of the many traditions of Hinduism (and other religious traditions as well). Spear goes on to argue that the first four responses all ultimately failed. In skirmish after skirmish the "military" or hostile and aggressive responses were defeated. Likewise the "reactionary" attempt to reconstitute the old political order proved to

be a disaster. The "westernizing" response led to confusion and disorientation for generations of Indian intellectuals. Only the "solution of synthesis" was able to prevail in the work of such figures as Rammohun Roy, Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Rabindranath Tagore, Svāmī Vivekānanda, M.K. Gandhi, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Muhammad Iqbal, V.D. Savarkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and many others. All pursued the "solution of synthesis" in their own unique ways, sometimes generating intense conflict with others, sometimes accomplishing incredibly important goals for the future (see Larson, forthcoming). Spear concludes that such willingness to achieve a synthesis that is neither fearful of the new nor dismissive of the old is "the ideological secret of modern India" (1958: 187).

It should be noted that all of the names listed by Spear, with the possible exceptions of Svāmī Vivekānanda and Rabindranath Tagore, were primarily political figures involved in the great struggle for independence. Vivekānanda and Tagore were also philosophical and religious thinkers. What is true of all of them, however, is the recognition that the intellectual future of India cannot "overlook time's arrow" (to use Charles Hartshorne's metaphor), namely, the "asymmetry of temporal relations" (1988: 104).

In my view, the task for the future of Indic religion and thought is not to retreat into the "Brahmin imaginary" of some sort of vague "integral unity," but rather, to move in the other direction: toward a future in which "being different" truly reflects the complex and irreconcilable but fascinating "differences" in Indic religion and thought in a manner that challenges but also learns from the ongoing interactions with "the West." Then and only then will "the West" do more than "tolerate" Indic religion and thought.

Notes

1. For a lengthy discussion of the notion of "Neo-Hindu" (or "Neo-Vedānta"), see Larson (1995: 129–40).

2. In many ways, two of the best seminal essays on the development of the Sikh Pant, the establishment of the "*dharma*" of the Khālsā and the meaning of the term "Sant" are still the articles by McLeod "The Development of the Sikh Pant" (1987a) and "The Meaning of 'Sant' in Sikh Usage" (1987b).

3. For a useful discussion of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, see Larson (2012).

4. I first had occasion to read Watson's work just before my retirement from the Tagore Chair at Indiana University, Bloomington, and used some of the provocative quotes that I use here in the first portion of my remarks in my "exaugural lecture" (to borrow a neologism of my former colleague, Ninian Smart) (Spring 2003), entitled " 'A Beautiful Sunset… Mistaken for a Dawn': Some Reflections on Religious Studies, India Studies, and the Modern University," subsequently published under the same title in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2004a).

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