

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 6, No. 2, June 2012

Pages: 378-384

NEW SCHOLARS

**DOING THEOLOGY HEURISTICALLY
Methodological Stepping Stones Towards An
Intimate Dialogue With The Hindu Religious Other**

Martin Sebastian Kallungal♦

University: Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium

Faculty: Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies

Director: Prof. Dr. Lieven Boeve

Year: 2012

Up until the recent past, an empiricist scientific approach had the upper hand in analysing and explaining religious data, and underlying such an approach was an assumption that reality was completely transparent to positivistic rationality. But with developments in hermeneutical studies as well as regional and cultural studies, this confidence in the total sufficiency of positivistic rationality began to waver. In the place of one or another kind of reductionist thinking style, a richer notion of rationality, a rationality that could turn on its own assumptions and procedures, began to emerge, and in the place of closed, discipline-bound scientific practices, many interdisciplinary enterprises emerged that continued to remain rooted in their respective home disciplines while, still sharing the rational resources of one or more other disciplines. As far

♦Martin Sebastian Kallungal

as fundamental theology is concerned, the issues surrounding intersectionality boil down to one basic question: how to maintain the relationship between faith and context, which has been irrevocably established through the unique event of the incarnation? Since context is partially constitutive of faith, as Lieven Boeve rightly suggests, "contextual language, images, and thinking patterns" can function theologically.¹ From a meta-methodological point of view, modern correlation theologies, for instance that of David Tracy, can be considered as some recent examples of the dialogue between Christian tradition and contextual consciousness. Yet the limitations of modern correlation theologies as well as the new developments in diverse contexts of Christian faith entail that correlation method itself is in need of fresh contextualization. This dissertation is an experiment in what Boeve calls a *consistent recontextualization of the correlation method*. We have attempted to do mainly three things in this dissertation. First we examine Tracy's hermeneutics of religion and bring out the three essential aspects in interpretative engagements. Second, we assess the three essential aspects of Hindu-Christian hermeneutics. Third, we explore if theological interpretation in general and the Christian hermeneutic of Hinduism in particular can be practised heuristically. All throughout the dissertation heuristics is the method employed and the point argued for.

Hermeneutics conceived as the theory of interpretation explores how humans understand, what they understand, and which factors condition their understanding. Theological hermeneutics is a wider project that bases itself on a hermeneutical method of inquiry. It claims that all texts have certain implicit and/or explicit theological dimensions, and develops a method to explore such dimensions of the text or the event under consideration. What distinguishes hermeneutical theology from other fundamental theological exercises is its claim that every act of theologizing is an interpretative process. The other key technical term in this work, "heuristic," comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to find out or to discover. Any method that employs a seek-and-find dynamics can be called a heuristic method. Heuristics conceived as the theoretical counterpart of such concrete modes of search provides certain guidelines for moving forward successfully, and certain criteria for assessing the

¹ Lieven Boeve, "Mutual Interruption: Toward a Productive Tension between Theology and Religious Studies," *Louvain Studies* 34 (2009-2010), 6.

success of varied moves in the whole of the search. As is evident from various learning practices and different ways of discovering what we want to find out in everyday life, thinking is heuristic in nature. One of the main guiding assumptions in this work is that interpretation, which is the proper subject matter of hermeneutics, can be practised heuristically. All different investigations and discussions in this dissertation are meant to establish this assumption and to bring out its implications for theological thinking practices. In this dissertation, we make minimal as well as optimal use of heuristics. If successful heuristic structures in different fields of inquiry are used for analytical purposes only, then we may call it a minimal use of heuristics. On the other hand, the optimal use of heuristics is an engaged search where all heuristic capabilities of human rationality are integrated towards understanding what one is seeking to understand.

The dissertation is divided into three parts. In the first part, our special focus of attention is on Tracy's views on hermeneutics of religion in *Plurality and Ambiguity*.² The part is sub-divided into three chapters. The attainments in the first chapter are mainly two: first, we found that discussions in *Plurality and Ambiguity* can be understood as developing heuristically, that is, issues are explored in an abstract, internal reflective site called *problem space*; and the whole inquiry is one main-goal-directed search that allows many interruptive subgoalings to happen, and yet progresses. Second, over against the commonplace tendency to fixate Tracy as a plain correlationist, we could re-introduce him as a heuristic theologian. In the second chapter we brought out the hermeneutical heuristic operative in *Plurality and Ambiguity*. It was found that interpretation, for Tracy, is a conversational game that has certain essential openness to interruptions. But despite the interruptions, conversation does continue. All our findings were recast in this part as various interrelated aspects of one heuristic procedure which by nature admits interruptions. In the third chapter, we engaged in another short expository work devoted to bringing out three essential aspects of all theological enterprises, namely, the subject matter of theology, the self-identity of a theologian, and method in theology. Tracy's achievement in understanding afresh these basic aspects is that he

² David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

could show how badly affected all of these are by plurality and ambiguity. Towards the close of the third chapter we made a theological assessment of Tracy's conversational model. The identity of the postmodern interpreter seems to be an unresolved question in Tracy's thought. Tracy's nonfoundationalist stance does require revision. Truth in *Plurality and Ambiguity* is an elusive concept for the determination of which Tracy gives no definite criteria. This apparent flaw calls for an epistemological revision of Tracy's theory of religious classic. If the analogical imagination was the distinct heuristic strategy proposed by Tracy in his earlier works, interruption is the precise theological epistemological category he pushes forward in *Plurality and Ambiguity*. And the critical question we would pose against this innovative move is only in regard to the exhaustiveness of the list of interruptions.

In the second part we narrow down our focus of attention to the field of Hindu-Christian hermeneutics and further examine the specificity of each of the basic realities in the interpretive act. After introducing the Hindu religious other in the fourth chapter, and the field of Hindu-Christian hermeneutics in the fifth chapter, we engage in three extensive investigations in the sixth chapter. First, we examine the plight of theological truth in Hindu-Christian hermeneutical engagements; second, we bring out the possible self-identity transformations in the post-conversational cognitive as well as religious life of Hindu-Christian hermeneutists; and finally, we make a critical exposé of the methodological practices in Hindu-Christian interreligious learning projects. Hinduism has never been a static reality, and consequently, its study belongs to a field that is still evolving. Axel Michaels does make a point while arguing that the defining feature of Hinduism is an *identificatory habitus*,³ but we proposed to counterbalance his claim with subaltern theorists' arguments for what we called a *differentiatory habitus* in the Hindu world. Our ultimate point is that Hinduism has certain religious specificity, and that a Christian understanding of the Hindu religious other has to proceed heuristically because there is a perceived logical and theological gap between the Christian self and the Hindu other. An analysis of the state-of-the-art of Hindu-Christian engagements led us to see that Hindu-Christian hermeneutical activities are both

³ Axel Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

involuntary and voluntary and therefore generate transcendental as well as concrete understandings concerning the undoable facts of proximity with the other, the bounty and boundaries of one's resources, and the promises and risks associated with cross-border knowledge and experience. Truth in Hindu-Christian hermeneutics arises in two ways: as a topic of inquiry and as the condition of possibility in such inquiries. In either case, given the hybrid character of the discipline, certain epistemological crossings were found to be a logical necessity. Our overall argument concerning the truth question is that Hindu-Christian hermeneutics seems to be entrenched within an epistemological framework which is not sufficiently interreligious. We wonder if it is caught up in a largely (Vedic) Hindu frame of thinking. It must be admitted that our analysis of Hindu thinking practices is not exhaustive. We have isolated the idealist thinking styles, which in our reading, cannot provide us with a frame of thinking for understanding the kind of self-particularization that happens in the Christian theological truth of incarnation. Unlike in the case of the views on truth, there is much resonance between the Hindu and Christian views on the structural possibilities of our being. In light of a fresh cross-reading of some texts from Aurobindo and the *Arnhem Mystical Sermons* in respect to self-understanding,⁴ we argue that the human person is not simply an empirical self or a body-mind complex at the most, but a constitutionally open being whose self-realization consists in finding oneself as founded in God in whom all else also is founded. This view further resonates with William Desmond's insight into the porosity of being and Michael Polanyi's views on the heuristic openness of the human quest for meaning.⁵ The final section of this chapter is devoted to a critical analysis of the learning practices of those theologians who engage Hinduism in their effort to offer an interpretation of the Christian texts. Notwithstanding his *ad hoc* as well as ambivalent engagements with the Hindu religious reality, and quite relaxed understanding of

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, I, SABCL, vol. 18 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970), 630-631; *Letters on Yoga*, I, 114-115; etc. The *Arnhem Mystical Sermons*, written in Middle Dutch on 372 paper folio by an anonymous author, is a collection of sermons prepared for the Cycle of Seasons and the Cycle of Saints. The collection is currently preserved in the Royal Library of The Hague, the Netherlands, with the signature 133 H 13.

⁵ William Desmond, *Being and the Between*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, (London: Melbourn and Henley, 1958).

the *locus hermeneuticus* of Christian theology, George M. Soares-Prabhu's greatest achievement lies in his bold and persuasive argument for an Indian way of thinking which is intrinsically related to Hindu religious imaginations and practices. After making a critical exposition of the different phases of the Hindu-Christian comparative reading that Francis X. Clooney proposes, we examined if comparison can be considered as a theological epistemological norm. Clooney is employing an intra-religious commentarial method - *upasamhāra* (combination) - for interreligious theological engagements, which we find objectionable. In addition, among the three ways of doing comparative theology suggested by Tracy (similarity, analogy, disjunction), Clooney is exploring only the first. As a matter of fact, it is analogy that holds both similarity and difference in a tensive relation, and that has been Tracy's proposal.

In the third part we propose an optimal use of heuristics in theology. Having seen that Tracy's hermeneutical project has an open heuristic structure and that it is applicable in interreligious hermeneutical engagement as well, the objective of this part, which is also divided into three chapters, is to propose and experiment with further refinements. For this latter task, we turn to the works of Polanyi and Desmond. Both Polanyi and Desmond have not only made fundamental research into the questions of being and knowing but also addressed the questions of the disciplinary identity and interdisciplinarity between science and religion from a post-critical philosophical perspective. We have chosen three pairs of themes from their texts: reverence-indwelling, passion of being-passion in knowing, and aspects of being-ways of knowing. Although in these sections we do not engage in explicit theological discussions, the way we have juxtaposed the themes and the manner in which we have inter-connected their views are all with a fundamental theological question in mind: in what way does their re-envisioning of human knowing and being suggest consequences for theological thinking practices? We propose that these thinkers can help us to develop interpretive skills that can bridge our gap with our religious others. The final chapter of this part is devoted to proposing and examining the criteria and conditions of heuristic thinking in theology. Basing ourselves on the simple experiential/epistemological fact that one is committed to the truth one is trying to discover, we propose that heuristic circularity is the structural condition for acts of knowing. The point is further clarified with a brief analysis of Polanyi's concept

of heuristic anticipation and Desmond's interpretation of the so-called Meno paradox. The functional specificity of a heuristic theological project lies in that it is engaged in *finding* the ways God *finds* all that is His. A heuristic theologian qua *Christian* relies on the mystery of the Christ-event which is unique in history and yet has a universal reach. Humans as they are, heuristic theologians cannot determine the boundaries of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Next, we transpose the general operational conditions of heuristic thinking into a theological level and summarize them into two minimum requirements: a mutual indwelling that happens when a theologian dwells in Christ in whom God meets everyone, and a profound epistemic generosity that is expressed in true openness to understand-through-interpretation all claims and views pertaining to the questions one considers in one's intellectual pursuit. In order to analyze the complex nexus of theological-epistemological issues in this connection, we then engage in two illustrative discussions: one concerning the theological skill in balancing ironic and creative thinking styles, and the other concerning the interdisciplinary alliance theologians need to develop in the course of their investigations. We propose to see Christian faith as a heuristic impulse and Christian life as an unfolding of a heuristic vision in the midst of inherent doubts and intimate loves. In the final part of this chapter returning to our special focus on Hindu-Christian relations, we retake the theological hermeneutical questions of truth, self and method along the heuristic lines intimated by our Polanyi-Desmond engagement, and argue that Hindu religious others are our *intimate others*. Theologians who are passionately loyal to the truth they are committed to, and yet seeking to find it more explicitly, are responding to a sense of calling "to consistently recontextualize" the ways God finds His people in contemporary times. In this, they are empowered to practice a heuristics of love between the claims of faith and reason.