

Editorial

ASIAN HERMENEUTICS: NEW HORIZONS

Human beings are hermeneutic beings. Inasmuch as they are rational, they entail the capacity to understand and respond to whatever happens and whatever they encounter within the ever-expanding horizons of their lives. Understood literally as the capacity to interpret, being hermeneutic is a basic function of being human: basically, every human being involves in interpreting anything and everything that happens in and around him or her. In fact, it is the *human* way of understanding, appraisal, and appropriation.

Although the historical length and breadth of hermeneutics as a scientific discipline may be disputable, the capacity of humanity – individually and collectively – to be hermeneutic remains unquestionable: the hermeneutic endeavour is co-extensive with human existence.

As a scientific discipline, hermeneutics¹ concerns every human enquiry: it is a science of and for human beings. Though it came to prominence as an independent science only in the 20th century, especially according to the western standards, its origins could be traced to the earliest human communications, oral traditions, and extant written texts. Constitution of human communities, over and above isolated individuals, had given definite patterns in doing hermeneutics. This had resulted from a plurality of perspectives cultivated by different communities, having their existential needs as the motivating force. While the individual perspectives did have a bearing on any interpretation by way of penetrating analyses and intuitive syntheses, communitarian emphases had a decisive impact on how these interpretations have been put forth, regulated, accommodated, and given for posterity. In many an instance, therefore, hermeneutical inquiries initiated by individual insights have been reined in by the larger spectrum of community commitment.

¹Etymologically, hermeneutics has a relation to Hermes, the messenger god of the Greeks. The task of Hermes was to act as a messenger between gods and human beings. In order to carry out this task, he had to be conversant in the idioms of both groups. In fact, he had to understand and interpret the messages of one in view of the world of the other, i.e., the recipient group. The very literal meaning indicates how complex could be the task lying behind the hermeneutic enterprise.

Just as a plurality of individuals and communities is involved in the hermeneutic enterprise, a multiplicity of perspectives is natural, which, in turn, vouches for the dynamism and beauty of any meaningful human endeavour. Hermeneutics involves an art which cannot be rigorously formulated into a set of determinate rules or definitive patterns and procedures. Sensitivity in this regard would mean that we can never hope to eliminate the intrinsic openness, plurality, and ambiguity which are involved in every instance of understanding and interpretation. Therefore, in any community of inquiry, pluralism shall not merely be tolerated but must be encouraged, though, without sacrificing truth and the ensuing commitments upheld by the community; pluralism shall not be an excuse to admit and perpetuate chaos and anarchy in any form, as such would destabilise the foundations of the community itself.² One of the many advantages we shall reap from the admission of plurality in the hermeneutic enterprise is the complementary nature of various attempts and viewpoints, which can lead us towards “mutually critical correlations”³ among them.

The necessity of a plurality of human behaviour patterns, viewpoints, perspectives, philosophies, etc., facilitates a plurality of hermeneutics that cannot be restricted to any single tradition or school of thought, but must be open and applicable to various traditions, cultures, and peoples, each having the ability to address the existential needs and futuristic horizons within which they have emerged. Though the dynamics of these may be different in some aspects, there will be methodologies and areas of interest shared in common among them. Moreover, specific nuances and emphases that form the worldview of the cultures and traditions in Asia did have some common denominators that have evolved over a period of time. Identification of the common factors in the Asian way of doing hermeneutics, however, does not rule out admitting a plurality of hermeneutic traditions within the Asian context itself. This, in fact, is the justification for addressing “Asian Hermeneutics: New Horizons” in this issue of the *Journal of Dharma*.

²Hans-Georg Gadamer opines: “Every age has to understand a transmitted text *in its own way*, for the text is part of the tradition in which the age takes an objective interest and in which it seeks to understand itself.” *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1975, 263.

³David Tracy, “Hermeneutics and Tradition,” *The Hermeneutics Reader*, Kurt Mueller-Vollmer ed., New York: Continuum, 1989, 52.

Asia is known for originating and promoting religions that are capable of responding to the needs of people and civilizations. In fact, many of the oldest extant major religions of the world have had their origin in the Asian bosom. As many of these religions have existed side-by-side, people have been trained to look upon members of other religions with an openness and mutual acceptance, as positively enhancing characteristic marks of a pluralistic society. So, pluralism was not introduced in Asia as a theoretical necessity after endless discussions among philosophers and theologians, but cultivated and imbibed as a spontaneous response and accepted as a natural habitat. In this context, it would be an oversight if we do not take into account the recent spurts of fundamentalist forces. Fundamentalist tendencies among the religionists have almost turned out to be a global menace in the recent past, destabilizing even the most considered and engineered plan to re-establish global peace, the ultimate aim of every religion. Perpetrators of fundamentalism and those agencies that manipulate the religious sensibilities of any vulnerable group tend to forget the fact that peace cannot be bought through hatred, violence, malice, religious intolerance, or political might. Although the equations continue to change for both these parties, depending on their political agenda and pragmatic ends, the ultimate casualties are the people and their genuine religious sentiments.

A cursory perusal of the sacred scriptures of these religions, however, indicates that they are so rich – philosophically, theologically, and existentially – in articulating their basic religious tenets. Over the centuries, subsequent religious enquiries have also given rise to a variety of interpretations, making their foundational experiences ever-living and vibrant, enabling the followers to assimilate their meaning without losing sight of both the original spirit with which they were codified and the needs of the times. Hence, their hermeneutic task was one of enlivening the sacred texts in the living milieu of the people who have inherited the religious and cultural ethos from the bygone ages.

The recent phenomena of ‘new age masters’ (among Hindus), charismatic movements (among Christians), etc., that continue to command a large following, including devotees from educated and economically well-to-do classes, must be looked with interest and concern. This scene is particularly striking in the Indian Subcontinent. An important distinction that could be noticed in their attempts not only to offer apparently novel (but mostly literal) interpretations of the orthodox texts accepted by the community, but also to *interpret themselves* as the

embodiments of the divine. These are clear instances of reason being misrepresented as a power to manipulate texts, situations, and persons for the ulterior purposes or hidden agendas that go against the positive sense of any interpretation in terms of authentic understanding that is capable of enhancing and promoting human life at large in every sphere. While some such cases have been found to be enhancing the stream of life of their votaries, many an instance in this regard has turned out to be farce. The scrupulous and uncritical religious psyches of some people who go after these masters/movements, however, do not differentiate between the 'divine' claims made by them (it seems fashionable among them to assume the garb of *avatāra* or incarnation, though their being and doing ultimately do not qualify many a time for any enhancement of the life situations of their followers) and some known but unbecoming aspects of their own lives, in spite of bearing counter witnesses. Moreover, it is alarming to note that some of them tend to manipulate the religious innocence of their followers even by destabilising the morale of the people and the fundamental unity of the nation, all for the realization of their own materialistic designs and selfish motives. Their new hermeneutics is prompted by what they can establish as their private domains with pseudo spirituality, political clout, and economic power.

In contrast to the subtle religious nuances involved in being the birthplace of so many religions and the ever-vibrant religious fervour visible among millions of people continuing to practise religion of their choices, Asia is also known for situations that are unbecoming for any religion worth its name: social, religious, and political oppression both from within and without, unending suffering of the masses created by a mismanagement of human and material resources, marginalization of people from the lower strata of the society, etc. Added to these, the colonial rule of many of the nations of Asia by the West in the past and the new imperialism perpetuated and practised by almost the same powers during the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have created a cultural, social, and economic victimization of many a people in Asia.

Any text worth the name is multi-functional. It depends on (i) who tries to understand and appropriate, (ii) how and when this is done, and (iii) with what motive it is being carried out that would finally determine the meaning and nuances of a text that is being interpreted. Texts may, for example, serve self-interests and interests of dominating power structures, if they are appropriated by those who are at the helm of the affairs of the society.

Texts can be used for social manipulation or control, or to authorise, or to appear to authorise, values which serve the interests of some individual or corporate entity... For if there can be no critique from outside of a community, hermeneutics serves only to affirm its corporate self, its structures, and its corporate values. It can use texts only by the same ploy as that which oppressors and oppressive power-structures use, namely in the service of its own interests.⁴

Danger lurks there, and if such trends continue to exist, notions of freedom from bondage, liberation from oppressive social structures, etc., will be alien to our life world. It is true that official interpretations have a natural tendency to idealize, defend, and safeguard the *status quo*; indeed, traditional paradigms are categorically asserted to be *the* right and true, while any implied novel perspective would be looked down with suspicion and antipathy. This is true of the Asian situation as well. The challenging messages of Asian religions seem to be already controlled, domesticated, and transposed by the vested interests by aligning either with the traditional hierarchies (wherever they are available), or with the new movements or the 'new age masters', ultimately nullifying any trans-contextual function of these religions. The best example could be identified in the corrupt and corrupting politicians of the Indian polity, who move from one popular pilgrim centre to another, from one *guru* to another, shielding themselves with pseudo religious fervour, bailing themselves out of any political threat from the followers of those religious identities, and ultimately buying out the religious sentiments of the masses for their own political mileage. Thus, they not only domesticate a religious text as it used to be, but many a religion as a whole! Further, instead of being instrumental in expanding horizons of life vision, they restrict the pre-existing social horizons as much as possible, and shun all attempts for transformation by blocking the emergence of any new horizon that would challenge their comfort zones. They too are doing hermeneutics, though on the wrong side of the spectrum.

Given the above stated conditions and possibilities, everyone has to be constantly vigilant against squeezing in one's own private agendas, wishes, and images in the garb of the only proper and valid interpretation. In the context of any system or theory that is relatively narrow, ill-informed, and self-centred, we need a trans-contextual critique emerging

⁴Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, 6-7.

from the existential needs of the life-world. It will enlarge the horizons of the society by way of enhancing meaningfulness, freedom, joy, openness, etc. Thus, hermeneutics must essentially involve self-criticism to check any attempt on the part of the interpreter from slipping into self-deception and deceit. Even if one begins to offer interpretations centred on the individual's benefits or the preservation of the *status quo*, it would become meaningful and life-giving to the life-world of a community only when its horizons of interpretation are enabled to expand, decentring the individual and corporate self.

Hermeneutics is not only concerned with the old texts and their literal interpretations, oriented towards a retrieval or recovery of the original meaning and preservation of the past; it is rather a genuine attempt to understand the texts by a person or people placed in a different historical milieu, without losing sight of the 'meaning' communicated through them. Grasping the 'meaning' will take place neither in a neutral field nor in a vacuum, but only in an existential situation that calls for a competent and comprehensive dialogue with the contemporary experiences and worldviews of individuals and communities. Such an approach will revitalize the content of the texts by trying to live their insights, responding to them in a creative manner, and hoping to enhance human and cosmic existence at large. Thus, we should involve in a continuous dialoguing with past and present texts and their authors, with an earnest desire to discover their hidden riches, leading to a better appropriation of truth, and of extending and expanding the horizons of our personal and communitarian perspectives. Despite the complexities and difficulties involved in this process, the possibility of realizing truth – even if it were very much limited – should keep everyone on the go, keeping him or her alert, inquiring, and questioning the text without any chance for complacency.

If attaining and appropriating truth were the goal of hermeneutics, one must begin it by understanding oneself and the fellow human beings in their life-world. In fact, this process necessarily includes recognition of the limitations of each other, especially of oneself, making each one vulnerable to the other. Awareness of the limits would pave the way for patience, openness, mutual respect, readiness to learn from each other, etc. Indeed, this calls for an understanding of a text, event, or person by way of a communitarian hermeneutic endeavour. Even in this, however, criticism has to operate continuously so that both the 'limits' and the 'possibilities'

could be unveiled and explored, enabling us to be freed from enslaving illusions and undue commitment to idols and ideologies.

An exclusive thrust on understanding and interpreting the mind of the author, without any reference to the contemporary living context of the community, will only continue to perpetuate the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the author and his or her community, which may turn out to be irrelevant to the present. Moreover, it may also continue to recreate and perpetuate the same old world, without the needed openness to the present and future-oriented horizons. Undue stress on the original mind and the world view can be as enslaving and oppressive as any other system had done in the past. Some even tend to create an aura of mystification around the text, whereby the masses will be barred from any direct access to the truth communicated (as it was the case with the people of the */dra* caste among Hindus). Mystification is an effective tool adopted by vested interests (wherever power-structures are absolutized) to inculcate relatively useful values or pseudo-objective truths as real or objective truths. Texts and their meanings which can accommodate fluidity and plurality without any limit should not be allowed to be domesticated by those in authority: their natural tendency is to suppress change and any call for transformation. Any structure or system, if absolutized, will imprison and destroy the creative spirit of a hermeneutic being and community, reaffirming pre-existing prejudices, traditions, and attitudes, blocking any novel perspective on approaching and understanding truth.

Hermeneutics is not primarily an attempt to make logical abstractions, as many other sciences may tend to do. While other sciences formulate their principles by moving away from the concrete and real, hermeneutics can do justice to itself only by a reversal process: it has to come closer and closer to the hard and naked facts of life, even if they were embarrassing and painful. In a dynamic understanding of the task of hermeneutics as a science, openness to unseen and unexplored dimensions of life is inevitable. For, in such a hermeneutic enterprise “[human] understanding remains a single, complex, interactive process in which the interpreter’s own developing understanding undergoes constant revision, modification, and correction.”⁵ An illustration drawn from the daily experience among lovers will illuminate this principle of ongoing transformation and expanding horizons of relevance and meaningfulness

⁵Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 559.

happening in the life-world of each other.⁶ A young man may share with an ‘in-group’ interests in rock music and driving. He falls in love with a girl whose peers, from a different ‘in-group’, reflect typifications and relevance drawn from an enthusiasm for Indian classical music and Hindu temples. If the two persons are really ‘in love’, they will discover that their own criteria of relevance *rapidly expand and become transformed* as they get involved with each other. Further, their prior typifications of each other’s relevance will be shattered and disengaged from mere stereotypes, taking them to newer heights in their understanding and interpretation of everything happening in their life of togetherness.

“An openness to be willing to listen, to see the other person’s point of view, and to be changed, characterizes any hermeneutically sensitive reading of texts, no less than in encounters between persons in everyday life.”⁷ So, hermeneutic understanding that is characterized by a dynamic openness to the text as well as to the life-world of the present indicates that an interpersonal and interdependent mechanism in doing hermeneutics is promising in the Asian context. It becomes integral and emancipatory over against the experiences of division, alienation, and depersonalization. The goal of such a hermeneutic enterprise is interpersonal commitment and social cooperation that would enable individuals and societies as a whole to practically involve in a holistic uplift of human life, having its roots not only in the flimsy distant past but in the firm foundations of the enlivening present.

In the light of what has already been stated hermeneutics is understood as a science of making sense of the past in the present with a futuristic orientation. In this science, past, present, and future get transformed and liberated from their own stereotyped frameworks; in fact, they become something more than what they were, are, or will be through the hermeneutic being and activity of human beings who can engage with texts, events, and persons creatively and proactively.

Against the present-day experience of perplexity and confusion on the role of classical Indian culture as a whole and particularly about its values in contemporary India, the first article, “*Nyāya Theory of Implication and Interpretation*,” by John Vattanky establishes the fact that in *Nyāya* theory, where discussions on the philosophy of language and

⁶This narrative and the following reflection are inspired by Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 609.

⁷Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 33

theories of interpretation are carried out, India has pioneered a distinguished history of theories of interpretation. The interpretative strategy of the *Nyāya* is centred around the profound discussions on *śabda* (word). A masterly analysis of Significatory Function (*vācī*), Denotative Function (*lakṣaṇā*), and Implication (*lakṣaṇā*) establishes, according to Vattanky, a sound basis for developing a *Nyāya* theory of interpretation with which the meaning of a text as intended by its author could always be established. It is affirmed that the consistent application of these theories which have been drawn from the *Nyāya* philosophy of language, in general, and of implication, in particular, can go a long way in enlightening our minds with regard to the problems of Indian philosophy as well as of Indian culture.

“Interpretation of Religious Scriptures from Asian Context” by Thomas Kadankavil is an exploration into the possibilities of evolving a new universal hermeneutics for the Sacred Scriptures of world religions, giving importance to the distinctive factors of the living context of the nations in which these religious texts have been accepted as sacred. This research is carried out with the earnest hope that in doing hermeneutics as a scientific method, if evolved through a comparative study of different religious hermeneutics, a larger area of common agreement on principles of interpretation in understanding the scriptures of world religions could be reached. In order to actually verify his hypothesis, Kadankavil makes an analysis of biblical interpretation against the backdrop of the ‘Third World’ and asserts that today hermeneutics has to address the wider context of religious pluralism and the ‘third world’ of the new people. He concludes saying that the hermeneutical responsibility to the text has to reveal and enlighten the mysteries of ultimate reality through language.

Paul Kalluveetil explores Indian milieu of biblical hermeneutics in his article “God’s Word for the Indian Folk.” He establishes through a very interesting analysis of the biblical as well as Indian sources that the existential reality of ‘land’ in India – which is misused and underused both in the villages and cities – shall provide a context-sensitive understanding of ‘land’ as biblical ‘text’. According to him, Jesus’ own incarnation points at a paradoxical, but liberating, situation: “The very purpose of Jesus’ words and actions was to make the so-called ‘land-ed’ people ‘landless’, and the ‘landless’ ones of God the ‘land-ed’ beings.” So, his hermeneutical reading of the Indian situation of landlessness invites the Christian community in India to be instrumental in delivering justice to the people of India: “*Like their Master they should live a life of ‘landlessness’*”

in order to make humans 'land-ed' people," as this 'land' ultimately becomes the Word that would deliver the Kingdom of God for a majority of Indians. The article ends with a practical hermeneutical programme of reading the Bible from the perspective of Indian reality of 'landlessness' and the need for 'land-edness'.

Raphael Neelamkavil, in his article "Reconstructing the Foundations of Vedāntic Metaphysics: A Pluriversal Model for Philosophizing," makes a hermeneutic reading of Vedāntic texts to reconstruct and integrate its ontology from a new angle of Einaic philosophy. Imbibing inspiration from the western methodology of doing ontology and hermeneutic readings, and taking to heart some of the unresolved problems in Vedāntic Metaphysics, Neelamkavil undertakes a corrective in some of the fundamental ontological issues by trying to bridge the lacunae identified. The $\exists tm \langle n$ -into- $Br \langle hman$ movement through realization of Wisdom as encapsulated in the principle "*Tattvamasi*" and other *mahāvākyas*, for example, poses a lacuna. For, according to him, in this world, the individual ($\exists tm \langle n$) experiences change and decay, but in $Br \langle hman$, the $\exists tm \langle n$ experiences no change. This absolute general ontological difference and lack of mutual approachability between $\exists tm \langle n$ and $Br \langle hman$ have not been questioned sufficiently well, and so, the ontological consequences of this on the nature of $Br \langle hman$ and the epistemological consequences of it on religious practice are not sufficiently mended. As a result, he argues, mystical epistemology is not properly exploited for the purpose of answering the question as to how to contemplatively and ethically overcome the seemingly absolute difference between the many and the One, so that socio-mystical practice is, in principle, made possible. Adopting the Transcendental, the Specific Transcendentals, the Transcendent, the Transcendent Divine and the Specific Transcendents as the keys for reconstruction and interpretation he attempts to provide his 'Einaic' solution to some of the issues identified.

Every human person is real and is yet to be realized. The process of realization does not happen in a vacuum, but in the concrete context of diversity, freedom, and interpersonal relationships that would enhance our capacity for understanding and creative response. Doing hermeneutics involves, therefore, disciplining of the intellect which would also include making provisions for integral education (the barest minimum should include both religious and secular spheres) to all, so that each one will be

in a position to understand and interpret not only texts of any nature, but also human situations and human lives in an authentic manner. This necessitates, especially within the Asian horizons, the need to engage Asian texts, contexts, and life itself in any training that is imparted; for, engagement with these will naturally expand our horizons and give rise to new configurations that we naturally inherit from living traditions or we acquire by ourselves through creative interactions in the course of time. In the context of a plurality of human beings, human communities, religious affiliations, etc., which we find in abundance in Asia, it is an existential need that the definition of authenticity also gives due place to mutual understanding among scholars as well as commoners spread across the territories of different religions. Indeed, within the Asian horizons of hermeneutic enterprise, we should adopt a proactive approach in our unceasing hermeneutical quest so that the 'dead' and the 'deadening' will be avoided and eliminated and, instead, the 'living' and 'life-giving' will be continuously incorporated.

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