

INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS SCRIPTURES FROM ASIAN CONTEXT

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1. Introduction

The thrust of this essay is to explore 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 may lead us to the distinction of a restrictive sense of the text related to the author, the cultural background, the life style and the self-training of the listeners, the exigencies of the time which urged the prophets to be very emphatic, and selective in their spiritual utterances and a significance which an interpreter identifies as having a universal appeal cutting across the barriers of place and epoch. If this assumption could be recognized as a functional hypothesis the new hermeneutics would become the meeting point of the world religions as well as the followers of these religions.

The hermeneutical task is, of course, both scientific and pneumatic at the same time. The pneumatic element makes it a search into one's faith. A committed believer in a deposit of faith undertakes the historical hermeneutical process with the attitude of Anselm, namely, "I believe so that I may understand." Here one can only speak from within the circle of his faith-content. But 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 hoped for.

Hermeneutics may be understood as formulating a set of canons of exegetical interpretation or as exegesis itself as the operation of decoding, along with its result or simply as theology. All religious faiths have developed their theologies and if we restrict our understanding of hermeneutics as theology, it is possible to have a number of particular hermeneutics in the context of Jewish, Hindu, Christian, Islam, and other

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major world religions. This essay proposes to limit its scope of reflection to Christian and Hindu theologies and to draw out a set of canons of exegetical interpretation, which could be applied in the interpretation of any religious scripture.

2. Perspectives on Hermeneutics

Aristotle's conception of hermeneutics in his *Peri Hermeneias* is very broad in the sense that it stands for any linguistic enunciation affirming or denying anything to anything. Here hermeneutics is the enunciation of the comprehension of a term or a text. In the tradition that is coming down to us from Friedrich Schleiermacher, we have the conceptualization that identifies theology with hermeneutics. In the philosophical circle, H. G. Gadamer, to be brief at the risk of oversimplification, conceives hermeneutics as a sort of ontology, that is, he permits a teeming anarchy of every sort of reading, exempting itself from all analytical criticism. Paul Ricoeur, assigning hermeneutics the task of deciphering the 'double meaning' of the text, develops a conceptualization that obviously goes beyond the notion of a theological hermeneutics. The biblical hermeneutics in the West limits itself to the theological hermeneutics and to the method of exegetical interpretation of the Christian Scriptures.¹

3. Hermeneutics from the 'Third World'

In his Introduction to *Voice from the Margin*, the editor R. S. Sugirtharajah makes a critical remark about the lack of recognition among the Western academic circles concerning the contribution of the scholars from the 'Third World'. He writes:

To date, biblical interpretation has been exclusively in the hands of male Euro-American scholars. Their academics and scholarly guilds have been the arena where hermeneutical theories, interpretative constructs and exegetical discourses were worked out, and from where they were exported to other cultures and contexts as having universal validity. Asians, Latin Americans, Africans, Afro-

¹Clodovis Boff, "Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency," in *Voices from the Margin*, R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., New York: Orbis Books, 1991, 10-12.

Americans and Native Americans were excluded both for their concerns and as producers of knowledge.²

The term 'Third World' referred to here is a theological neologism for God's own people. It is not merely a geographical connotation referring to the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but it is something that happens wherever and whenever socio-economic exploitation and dependence in terms of race, class, or sex generates political and cultural slavery, fermenting thereby a new peoplehood.³ This indicates that today hermeneutics has to address the wider context of religious pluralism and the 'third world' of the new people.

4. Biblical Interpretation

4.1. Message and Audience

Most of the languages of the Sacred Scriptures in which they were written are already dead, though the message they contain are still alive, a message that claims to speak to all generations of all times. It is unlikely that the hermeneutists from among those who have accepted the faith vision behind the Bible and those who are outside the circle of believers to see the purpose, method, and the findings they arrive at as identical or even similar. While the believers who hold a universalistic outlook concerning the ambience of biblical texts accept it, the non-believers are naturally tempted to challenge the wisdom of such an interpretation.

4.2. Insider and Outsider

Let us take, for example, the interpretation given to John 12:24: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." The Greeks who wanted to meet Jesus were gentiles outside of the Jewish circle of faith. Jesus' prophetic declaration of his death is interpreted in a hermeneutical context as his desire to transcend the limitations of his human condition of Jewishness. "He did not want his Jewishness to become a limiting factor for his elevated and transformed human nature to operate beyond the barriers of his own religion."⁴ Neither for a Jew nor for a non-Christian

²Boff, "Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency," 2.

³Boff, "Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency," 3.

⁴Joseph Pathrapankal, *Text and Context: Interpretation of the Word*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1993, 12.

what came out of this exegesis could be the true meaning of the saying attributed to Jesus. This may lead to the question whether it is possible to have different types of hermeneutics, one for the 'within' and the other for the 'outsider' of the fold. Even if such a question was not alive in the past, nor had anyone worked out anything along this line, it still remains a possibility to be worked out. As a rule, all religious scholars have done their share of exegesis of their sacred texts for the purpose of making their religion meaningful and relevant both for themselves and for the outsiders.

4.3. Faith and Historical Study

A glance through the history of the theoretical positions Christians have adopted in the scholarly world of scriptural studies would reveal the constraining parameters under which the Christian hermeneutists had laboured in the past. The primary concern was the way in which a Scripture functions as source of our knowledge about God and God's self-disclosure. The importance of the sacred texts is that they are taken as the primary resource for discerning the will of God for human life, the key that unlocks the mystery of God's ways. In the Catholic Christian tradition Scripture can only be understood in the light of the tradition presented by the Church, while for Reformers 'scripture alone' is enough, for it has its own illuminating power, a position similar to that of the Mīmāṃsists in interpreting the Vedas. Here the primary concern would be the rules to be observed in exegesis. This led to the rise of critical biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century. For Protestant hermeneutics

understanding Scripture required the study of (1) the structure and idioms of biblical language, (2) the type of literature represented, i.e., prose or poetry, history or allegory, literal or symbolic, or perhaps a particular genre found in the Bible, such as apocalyptic, (3) the historical background, (4) the geographical conditions, and (5) the life setting (*Sitz im Leben*). This hermeneutical tradition, with few but very important exceptions, continues in full sway into our own country.⁵

Faith and historical method are two basic assumptions in this hermeneutical attempt.

⁵Duncan S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987, 5.

4.4. Concerns and Presuppositions

What should be the method adopted for the interpretation of the Bible is an open question even today. While the fundamentalist approach finds the true meaning in the obvious literal sense, the scientific method, looks for true meaning of biblical text in its author-setting, that is in the meaning which was intended by its original author. But, of late, this critical method gives way to the awareness that it is not really adequate for interpreting a text, which is not scientific, but religious, a text meant for personal transformation of the reader through his response of faith. The same is true of the other methods of biblical interpretations current during these years, such as the New Hermeneutics, Bible Structuralism, and Rhetorical Criticism, etc. The texts were given birth with an emancipatory intent and the methods employed for interpretation seem to abandon the *raison d'être* of the birth of the very texts themselves.

Scholars themselves have started to criticize the present day biblical scholarship which has become a luxury, largely unrelated to the real struggles of the people of our times fighting for liberation and a dignified human living. As to the lopsided vision of the biblical scholarship a critic has the following to say:

The ever-increasing technical complexity of biblical studies, with its formidable apparatus of textual and historical criticism, comparative grammar and philology, reconstitution of the historical background through geography, archeology, papyrology, its recourse to source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism and redaction criticism, all tend to display a sense of complacency characteristic of a group of people who take it for granted, either that they do not have to think of a world outside of their own, or that their only task is to keep themselves busy with endlessly vivisectioning the living Word of God.⁶

It has been accepted that the dynamics of contextualization is the best method to recognize the openness of an ancient text to the present and to the future. "Contextualization here means the transcending of the original context by which the text is made to speak to the context of the reader and the interpreter."⁷ In this presupposition the text has not only a past history accessible to historical criticism, but also openness to the present and to the future, which far surpasses the past. As a matter of fact, the objectivism

⁶Pathrapankal, *Text and Context*, 4.

⁷Pathrapankal, *Text and Context*, 5.

of historical method prevents it from appreciating the role the reader and the interpreter have in constituting the total meaning of a text and so it remains blind to the authentically new meaning that a text may have to acquire as it is read in ever-new situations. In this respect the Indian approach to sacred texts independent of the scientific questions about its authorship, period of composition, and historicity may appear to be more congenial to the world of interpretation of the ancient texts. The interest in contextualization process, in fact, became the most vital expression of faith in the redeeming power of the ancient sacred texts even in the present Asian context.

5. Asian Biblical Hermeneutics

It is interesting to note that the first attempts for a comparative hermeneutics came from the colonial India. It could be traced from *Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness* by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833). One of the Christian as well as the Mīmāṃsā views this book challenged was the self-sufficiency of Scriptures. The textualized controversy between Roy and the missionaries had all the hallmarks of a colonial encounter between the invader and invadée.⁸ This controversy introduced Scriptures also as one more subject to be investigated. The new hermeneutical principle adopted was that the texts themselves as well as their interpretations had to be subjected to rational analysis. The interpretative key has to be reason. If the text comes in conflict with reason, the latter had to be followed. "Employing his own version of historical-literary method, he was able to demonstrate how doctrines propagated by the missionaries were products of evangelical Christianity and totally opposed to the gospel represented by Jesus." Roy posited the Vedas and the Bible "as part of a larger textuality, manifesting one revelation in two separate textual traditions."⁹

In the postcolonial period the emphasis of scholarly research was shifted from the comparative study of Scriptures to postcolonial perspectives on scriptural studies, a challenge raised by theories like postcolonialism, which gives mediation and representation to 'Third World' people. How scriptures could be interpreted in favour of the less

⁸R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*, Sheffield, Academic Press, 1998, 36.

⁹Sugirtharajah, *Asian Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism*, 38.

privileged or marginalized? Will it lead us to a dilemma of tradition and contemporary relevance of sacred scriptures? It is, in fact, by continuous interpretation that the tradition is to be kept alive. Moreover, the rich resources of the tradition are indispensable for the religious traditions to address relevantly the issues of humanity today. But the religious traditions seem to have isolated themselves from the issues and concerns of the society to move about in a self-enclosed world of beliefs and rituals.¹⁰ The need of the hour is, therefore, to bring out the deep humanistic potential contained in the religious heritages.

The three main issues the underprivileged face in 'Third World' countries, especially in India, are pollution (discrimination on the basis of the rank in birth – *jāti*), poverty, and powerlessness.¹¹ Today this section is designated in theological discussions as subaltern groups. In India a section of this people, the most discriminated group, is known as *dalits*. Any meaningful interpretation of the ancient religious texts should reflect the experiences and concerns of these people at the bottom of the society.

When dominant hermeneutics in the field swing to the pole of transcendence or eternal life, the other side of the polarity, that is a life that is human-centred, liberated, contextualized, and in temporality slip into shadowy existence. A hermeneutics that would emerge from out of the lowly, inferiorly, or marginally placed situation of any group in the society will certainly be welcomed by all genuinely religiously minded people in our country as well as in all other countries in the 'Third World'. This hermeneutical move in the interpretation of religious tradition is today known as subaltern hermeneutics.

The need to develop such a hermeneutics in the present scenario of religious interpretation is now recognized among the theologians from the 'Third World'. Felix Wilfred identifies a few factors that distinguish the subaltern hermeneutics from the traditional one.¹² Among these the question who interprets occupies the centre-stage. When the right and authority to interpret the religious texts are transferred from 'experts' invested with public recognition to the subalterns, a 'de-construction', as

¹⁰Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 248.

¹¹Arvid P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, NY, 1-22.

¹²Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, 260-267.

Jacques Derrida puts it, of the religious tradition would take place in favour of the disprivileged and discriminated. In this new hermeneutical approach there would be differences in the very perception of religious reality, differences deriving from the difference in social location. For the dalits and marginalized in the society, religion is a matter of experience of the moments of joy, expiation of sins, and a feeling of catharsis through ritualistic and cultic interventions in the events of life and not, as for the elites, an acceptance of a belief system, code of conduct, or a well knit world view.

Another important distinguishing factor of this approach is the emphasis it naturally puts on the earthly needs of the community. Felix Wilfred writes: "Their life and religiosity coalesce to form one single experience, which gets reflected in their hermeneutics... Their religiosity is made up of the very stuff fibre with which life is made." This religious urge is characteristically different from the natural concern to meet the needs of daily life squarely, and make earthly life comfortable. "People who have been denied bread, free movement, social equality, and human dignity will turn to any direction from where they possibly hope to get these."¹³ It is highly probable that their quest for a religious affiliation would be conditioned by its power to respond to their needs for rice, wheat, dignity, security, and other material necessities.

Another point for contrast could be the insistence of the traditional hermeneutics on written text in opposition to the insistence of the subaltern hermeneutics on the primacy of oral tradition. The oral carries with it the feelings, emotions, moods, etc., which derive from the power of sound and the spoken word. The textuality tends to refine and restrain these realities and expressions.¹⁴

6. Hindu Hermeneutics

6.1. General Outlook

(1). In the Hindu tradition the relation between the Sacred Text and its transmission and interpretation of its meaning was much stronger than it was in the Western tradition and in a sense the rules of interpretation were inseparable from the very understanding of the text. The philosophy or belief system behind the formulation of these rules was the very

¹³Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, 263.

¹⁴Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, 266.

conditioning factor in determining the meaning of the text. This has come about from the traditional belief that Vedas are divinely inspired and are eternal (*Sanātana*), impersonal (*apauruṣeya*), and infallible.

(2). The very term *Śruti*, meaning, 'that which is heard', or the eternal voice of divine knowledge heard by certain holy men called *Ṛṣis*, testifies to the belief that what is heard has to be orally transmitted. If committed to writing, they were written down exactly as heard, without any intervention of human authorship. Though the term *Ṛṣi* is fancifully connected with the root *driṣ* (*darśana*, to see), meaning that the truth is seen by the seer, the more authentic term to designate the text of the divine knowledge is *Śruti*, coined in connection with the theory of the eternity of sound and the belief that the ear was the proper channel for communication.

(3). The great bulk of hermeneutical literature in Indian religio-philosophical systems came out in connection with *Mīmāṃsā* (*Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*) and *Vedānta* (*Uttara Mīmāṃsā*). The classical interpretations of *Vedānta*, also called *Brahma-Sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa, by the great teachers like Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Mādhva, Nimbārka, and Vallabha reflect one or the other form of modern biblical criticisms. But the interpretational attempts of *Mīmāṃsā* seem to be something unique in the genre of literary criticism and so we shall take it up for a brief review.

(4). The text as absolute: *Mīmāṃsā* of Jaimini is a system of ritualism. It concerns itself with a correct interpretation of the rituals of the Veda and the solutions of doubts and discrepancies in regard to Vedic texts caused by the discordant explanations of opposite schools. It can be taken as an early form of hermeneutics, because of the special methodology it had adopted. This hermeneutics consisted in its mode of interpretation of the given text, namely the Vedas, the topics being arranged according to particular categories, such as authoritative, indirect precepts, etc., and treating the topic according to a kind of logical method, that is concerning the proposition to be discussed, the doubt arising about it, the first portion (*pūrva-pakṣa*), the *prima facie* and wrong view of the question and the refutation of the wrong view (*uttara-pakṣa*), and the conclusion. The nature of interpretation given here is an exposition of the obvious literal sense and not of any supposed occult meaning underlying the text as in the

case of the interpretations of the *Upaniṣads* and the *Vedānta*. The implied presupposition of the system is that no external authority, neither reason nor God, is needed other than the text itself for its interpretation: the Veda is itself authoritative. The objective of the system was, therefore, to create a desire to know duty, which is already being revealed.¹⁵

(5). The technique of Aphorism (*Sūtra*): *Sūtra*, the Sanskrit term for aphorism, derived from the root *Shiv*, to sew, means 'to properly string together'. A great variety of ancient Indian texts were written in aphoristic form, requiring strenuous effort for interpretation. The aim of adopting such methodology was to furnish the shortest possible suggestive memorial sentences as an aid to memory of both teacher and learners in an age where paper and printing were unknown, and books were scarce. Brahmanical *sūtras* were, as a rule, dogmas expressed as briefly as possible. In grammatical *sūtras* not even a simple letter is allowed which can by any contrivance be dispensed with. Very often in these *sūtras* letters and syllables are often used symbolically to indicate ideas through minimum letters and words. Philosophical *sūtras* were characterized by great brevity and the rigid economy of words. It is, therefore, evident that the ancient religio-philosophical tracts are practically unintelligible without a commentary or a key to their interpretation.¹⁶

6.2. Claims of *Purva Mīmāṃsā*

(1). Jamini's *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*, compiled most probably in the fifth century BCE, used *sūtra* style because that was then the accepted form of composition. It was used as a convenient method to formulate the manuals of practical systems of teachings whether in rituals, philosophy, law, or grammar. From the point of view of hermeneutics the *Vedāṅgas* developed for the proper understanding of *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* deserve our special attention.

(2). The ritual world of *Mīmāṃsā*: The proposed aim of *Mīmāṃsā* is to investigate the nature of *dharma* propounded in the former section of the Vedas, *Karma Kāṇḍa*. Jamini, the author of this investigation, enumerated his doctrines in aphorisms in twelve books. The commentators such as

¹⁵Monier Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001, 117.

¹⁶Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, 172.

Upavarṣa, Sabara, Kumārilabhata, his disciple Prabhākara, and others speak of six valid means of knowledge (*Pramāṇās*), including the verbal testimony (*śabda pramāṇā*). Bhaṭṭhari, one of the earliest commentators, had developed the philosophy of Brahman as eternal sound from the *pramāṇā* of verbal testimony. Later, Mīmāṃsakas have developed various forms of linguistic philosophies including *śoṭa* theory to explain the origin of the eternal connection between sound and meaning. All these later developments in search after meaning attained through sound and other means of knowledge had their seminal inspiration in the aphorisms of Jaimini.

(3). Perpetual connection between a word and its meaning

The fifth aphorism of Jaimini, as paraphrased by Monier Williams, reads as follows: "The connection of a word with its sense is contemporaneous with the origin of both. In consequence of this connection, the words of Vedas convey unerring instruction in the knowledge of duty."¹⁷ Some singular speculations occur in Jaimini's system. He asserts the absolute eternity of the Vedas and declares that only eternally pre-existing objects are referred to in it. This theory is supported by affirming that sound is eternal, or rather an eternal sound underlies all temporary sounds. Based on aphorism 18, commentators propose the following two arguments in favour of the eternal nature of sound: (1) sound must be eternal because its utterance (exhibition) is intended to convey a meaning to others. If it were not eternal it would not continue till the hearer had learned its senses and, thus, he would not learn the sense, because the cause had ceased to exist. (2) If on the other hand, it continues to exist for any period, however short, after ceasing to be perceived, it is impossible to assign any other instant at which there is any evidence of the discontinuance of its existence, whence its eternity is inferred.¹⁸

6.3. The Six Vedāngas¹⁹

We have six limbs (*angas*) for supporting the claims of Vedas, especially the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*. They are *Kalpa* (ceremonial directory), *Śikṣā* (the

¹⁷Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, 118.

¹⁸Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, 119.

¹⁹Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, 171-212.

science of pronunciation), *Chandas* (metre), *Nirukta* (exposition of different Vedic words), *Vyākaraṇa* (grammar), and *Jyōtiṣa* (astronomy).

(1). The *Kalpa* denotes a kind of ceremonial directory or rubrics called *Srauta Sūtras* to be observed in the conduct of sacrificial rites. There are *Srauta Sūtras* for each of the four *Samhitas*, thus, making it a voluminous literature.

(2). *Śikṣa* (Phonetic directory): It is the science of proper pronunciation, especially as teaching the laws of euphony peculiar to Vedas. This comprises the knowledge of letters, accents, quantity, the right use of organs of articulation, and phonetics generally. The manuals on this topic were of great value for the persons who had to repeat *mantras* (hymns) as an essential part of their religious exercises. The following translations of the fifth and sixth *sūtras* of *Śikṣa* manual will give an idea of some of the points that form the subject of this science: "Heaviness (i.e., prosodial length), lightness (i.e., prosodial shortness), equality, shortness, longness, and prolotion (of vowels), elision, augmentation, and change, original form, non-changing of *visarga* into a sibilant, regular order, the mixed tone, high tone, low tone, breath and sound, and both (combined), all this must be accurately understood by one who reads (or repeats) the words of Vedas."²⁰

(3). Sanskrit metres (*Chandas*): Knowledge of the metre of each hymn of the Veda was considered essential to right use and proper recitation of *mantras* (hymns). In the introduction of Sāyana to the first hymn of the Ṛg-Veda we have the following instruction to show the importance of knowing the metre of a hymn: "He who shall cause anyone to repeat or shall himself repeat (any hymn of the Veda) without having acquainted himself with the name of the *Ṛṣi* to whom it was revealed, the metre in which it was written, the deity to whom it was addressed, and its right application is the worst of sinners."²¹

(4). Exposition (*Nirukta*): The subject of this Vedāṅga is etymological explanation or interpretation of different Vedic words. The work

²⁰Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, 176.

²¹Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, 178.

composed by Yakṣa is the only typical representative of the whole class of this literature. The first part of this work is a list of words and the second is an explanation of words in the list. When words are explained, Vedic passages are quoted in illustration and the author often enters into curious etymological investigations, which are, however, difficult to understand from the extreme brevity and obscurity of their style.

(5). Grammar (*Vyākaraṇa*): Usually, the grammar of Pāṇini is taken to represent this Vedāṅga. It contains 3996 *sūtras* or aphorisms. It is fabled that Pāṇini has seen rather than composed his grammar and the aphorisms have been supernaturally revealed to him. For brevity and economy of words nothing can be more successful than the system in which this entire immense and intricate subject is explained. Though in the modern culture people look on a grammar of any kind as a necessary evil to be tolerated or to be accepted as a mere passage to its literature, the ancient Indian tradition, however, regarded it as something to be studied and elaborated for its own sake. Since the grammar had been developed as a limb (*anga*) of Vedas, Pāṇini allowed manifold forms and irregularities both to defend his rule and the overarching freedom of Vedas to be different due to its divine origin.

(6). *Jyōtiṣa Vedāṅga*: The object of *Jyōtiṣa Vedāṅga* is to fix most auspicious days and seasons for commencing sacrifices. One of the important, ancient astronomical ideas is the belief in the importance of choosing auspicious days and lucky moments for the performance of rites and ceremonies. The influence of the sun upon atmosphere and soil made itself so manifest that it was only natural to infer that similar influences belonged to moon, planets, and stars. The supposed power inherent in their rays intensified the superstitious belief of dependence up on their favourable aspects for the success, not only of religious acts, but also of all the affairs of life.

6.4. Brevity and Eternity

Over and above the direct purport of the given text, the text may acquire additional nuances when reactivated in the contemporary context, for there were other accompanying factors such as the literary preoccupations for being in *Sūtra* form and other dogmatic assumptions, namely the text

reveals eternal truth, which, in fact, either enhance or obstruct the genuine understanding of the text. In the case of Hindu religious texts originated in the *Śruti* period with rigid economy of words and brevity in expressions, even devising symbols for that purpose, there is justification for wider excursions through the jungle of the world of meaning.

In the case of the interpretation of sacred texts of Hinduism there is no question of the intended meaning of the compiler, because the author is only a seer who has faithfully transmitted what he has heard. When the content of what is revealed is deemed to be eternal the tools of communication would only be rendering a service for the approximation of truth and it is the duty and the right of the current seer to go beyond the limitations of the given text to the eternal truth. This way of looking at the text would give the present interpreter a fresh lease of unlimited freedom to discover the eternal truth anew.

7. Conclusion

As Hans-Georg Gadamer in his book *Truth and Method* argues, the hermeneutical task should go beyond the scientific investigation of a given text in an attempt to gain 'truth'. Moreover, hermeneutics should be an attempt to experience the dimensions of truth that transcends the sphere of the control of the scientific method. In short, the hermeneutical responsibility is more than the interpretation of an ancient text. It has to be understood as a scientific method allowing the text to reveal and enlighten the mysteries of ultimate reality through language.²²

The pre-understanding, that is, the body of assumptions and attitudes, which a person brings to perception and interpretation of reality, or any aspect of it, makes a significant difference in the understanding of a Scripture by a believer and a non-believer. The role faith and history plays in the understanding of a text can be identified as essential factors in the reality of pre-understanding. This means every interpretation incorporates a particular prior understanding. A general principle we could formulate is that "pre-understanding may be open-ended or closed. True of its structure it may allow itself to be corrected and altered by evidence, or conversely, it may reject *a priori* anything which does not nicely fit into some preconceived mould." The reality of pre-understanding and its limiting influence on our perception are long recognized factors among

²²Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 6.

philosophers. This will lead one to a modest claim on the finality of one's own position as regard his truth claim.²³

The pre-understanding appropriate for the knowledge of God is faith. Though faith is taken as a starting point, great care must be exercised to avoid its distorting influence. Though Ricoeur, through his concept of 'distanciation', stands out as an exception, it is generally agreed that some clearly articulated hermeneutical approach – a self-consciously chosen pre-understanding – is essential for the meaningful interpretation of a given text. The recognition of the presence of a pre-understanding in our interpretation of Sacred Scriptures and its limiting influence constitute the first step to accept parallel sacred texts and their hermeneutical struggles. It is true that the interpreter of faith must begin the task with a single limited perspective. But to be able to welcome a plurality of perspectives in search of knowledge of God through the interpretation of ancient texts, one has to acknowledge the truth that the 'internalist' position of a believer would be in many ways opposed to the 'externalist' view, which would endeavour to maintain impartiality and objectivity in the interpretation.

Bible is seen as the locus of revelation. Christian hermeneutics proceeds with the assumption that faith and history constitute the minimum requirements for a hermeneutic that makes possible a 'full understanding of the Christian faith'. There are, however, so many voices, so many competing traditions. How could one piece together a meaningful faith orientation that meets my spiritual needs and has integrity? Do the claims that there is God's presence in universal history render the special action of God in the history of Israel, and for that matter, in any other religion, meaningless? It need not be so. After all, the coordinating theme of the Bible, as well as of the all religious scriptures is the acknowledgment of the kingly presence of God in his creation and it could form the coordinating faith for a universal hermeneutics beyond specific religions and their individuating claims.

Two important issues the hermeneutics of today has to face are the reality of spiritually rich world religions and the urgent need of liberation of the marginalized. Do the Scriptures of the world religions give us the knowledge of God's rule where the oppressed are freed? The major religions, however, seem to remain very much outside the history of the

²³Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 6-22 offers a detailed discussion on the issue of pre-understanding and its conditioning influence on our interpretations.

oppressed (*dalit*) and their culture, struggles and sufferings, their movements, and their leaders.

Jesus' education, rooted in the Old Testament, could not help but create in his sensitive spirit and keen mind uneasiness about empty religion and social injustice. Hence, his mission has to be seen as a universal mission for the liberation of all those who are captives in any way, a mission proclaimed by all world religions, and the type of hermeneutics we are called to develop must be capable of meeting this challenge.

The presupposition and the belief in a set of unchanging dogmas precondition the possibility of free and further hermeneutical explorations of any given text in question. It is difficult to evolve a neutral exegesis, both in the Indian and the Western traditions, freed from the metaphysical assumptions of a particular religious tradition. New articles of truth such as the importance of passing earthly goods for the marginalized may have to enter among the eternal truths that the contemporary hermeneutics may become relevant and find new scope and direction.

The overwhelming concern of the article was a search for guidelines within which a constructive, dynamic and people-oriented hermeneutics could be framed for our contemporary situation. This essay, it is believed, has raised some issues from the point of view of inter-religious dialogue and poverty rampant in the Asiatic countries, though the attempt at answering them remains yet incomplete.