

KNOWING SELF: THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF INTERFAITH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

The paper will explore the potential for those engaged in multi-faith dialogue to come to enriched understanding not only about other religious traditions but about their own tradition and, indeed, their own selves. Employing notions of knowing that stretch back to Aristotle and have been reinvigorated by moderns such as Habermas, the paper will explore the potential for Judaeo-Christians to come to this enriched understanding through dialogue with Hinduism and its associated derivative spiritualities. The author will employ some of his own empirical investigations in making the case that multi-faith enrichment implies far more than enhancing one's head knowledge.

Introduction

The thesis behind the paper is that multi-faith dialogue possesses an educational and formative potential quite beyond that which is normally conceived and explored through the goals and processes implicit in most religious studies and interfaith religious education programs. The more sophisticated knowledge and formation is seen theoretically in the epistemological work of key figures like Aristotle, Aquinas and Habermas, and in practical terms in the discipleship of figures like Bonhoeffer and Dom Bede Griffiths. The species of knowing and understanding that stands at the centre of these works promises not only that level of communicative competence that lies beyond cognitive enhancement but, moreover, a profoundly critical and self-reflective knowing that necessitates that any claim on the part of an individual to 'know' is accompanied by practical action [or what Habermas (1974) describes as '*praxis*']. The first part of the paper will briefly explore these theoretical perspectives, while the second part of the paper will make application of the theory to the practical goals that can ensue from the Judaeo-Christian engaging in intensely honest study of Hinduism and its derivative spiritual traditions.

Ways of Knowing, Knowing Other and Knowing Self,

Jurgen Habermas (1972; 1974), as well as anyone in our time, has challenged us to consider the different ways in which we claim to 'know'. I have used the Habermasian perspective to inform my own thinking about education and curriculum in general (cf. Lovat & Smith, 2003) and about social education and religious education in particular (cf. Lovat, 2002). Knowing facts and figures (the 'empirical-analytic') is important, as is the knowing of communication and meaning-making (the 'historical-hermeneutic'), but the knowing that most truly marks out human intellectual endeavour and has the capacity to transform self and community is critical or self-reflective knowing.

This is a profound knowing of self that issues in *praxis*, practical action for change. In a word, one

cannot know in this profound sense without being changed. It is through the process of coming to know self, invariably entailing an agonising struggle, that one gradually strips away the inherited knowledge, the familial and cultural baggage, and the ignorance that is so often the source of intercultural misunderstanding, bigotry, hatred and violence. Habermas offers a sharp challenge to social educators, including religious educators, to go about their business in a way that facilitates their learners beginning at least to tread the path towards this sort of knowing.

I have suggested elsewhere that I see connections between the Habermasian position and the epistemologies of Aristotle and Aquinas (cf. Lovat, 1995; 2001). First, there is Aristotle (1985), caught between the intellectualism of Plato (1987) and the pragmatism of Protagoras (Plato, 1989). Plato's intellectualism about virtue was seen in his postulation that to be virtuous was essentially about 'knowing' the Good, the Just and the Right. On the other hand, Protagoras held that there was no such thing as the Good, Just or Right, but only what one sensed to be pragmatically good, just or right in the given circumstances. In attempting to moderate between the two positions, Aristotle proposed not only a way of conjoining the two ways of knowing but an entirely new way of knowing altogether.

This was a way of knowing that arose partly from the human need to be guided by one's intellect (a la Plato), and partly from the human need to be guided by one's sense experience (a la Protagoras) but, above all, by one's need to be authentic in what one claimed to know. *Eudaemonia* was Aristotle's supreme good, but it was not a good that could be pursued merely by being known nor merely by being sensed. It was a good that must be lived. The kind of judgement essential to the pursuit of *eudaemonia* was what Aristotle finally described as a 'practical' judgement, a judgement (based on intellect and sense experience, no doubt) that led to practical action. This seems clearly to

me to be a precursor to the Habermasian notion of *praxis*.

Second, Aquinas (1936), who was also caught between the highly intellectual tradition of Augustine (1972) and the range of earlier traditions of Christianity and pre-Christianity that continued to fascinate him, especially after the work of the Islamic scholars came under his gaze. Rather reminiscent of Plato, Augustine's 'good conscience' was in having one's mind conformed perfectly to the mind of the church. In contrast were those earlier traditions, including the so-called heresy of Arianism, which emphasised the deeply personal relationship of the individual Christian with Christ as the basis of any morality. Like Aristotle before him, Aquinas not only conjoined these two stances but elicited a new form of moral knowing in the concept of *synderesis*, described in the *Summa* as an inborn faculty that urges us not only to seek truth but to put it into practice. For Aquinas, knowing truth was knowing on the inside what it meant for oneself and acting accordingly. If one did not act accordingly, one could not claim to know at all. Again, this was particularly reminiscent of the Habermasian thesis about authentic knowing issuing in *praxis*.

Clearly, these are challenging thoughts for educators of any kind, but for social educators in particular, whose objectives and intentions would seem to be about 'making a difference' through practical curriculum goals. In light of the above claims about knowing, one might wonder whether education of the past century or so, proceeding as it often has under the kind of narrow scientific and empirical regime that tends to dichotomise the cognitive from the active, has not in fact abandoned the quest to make a practical difference. In spite of those objectives statements that, in social education for instance, seem to speak about the difference that can be made in terms of the just, tolerant and harmonious society, it is possible that, under the values neutrality thesis of a poorly understood scientific method, even social education has often amounted to no more than platitudes among the platitudinous. Fairly clearly, social education can only make a social difference if it can firstly make a difference to the individuals who study it, to their attitudes and then to their actions and behaviours.

While we would always want strenuously to avoid crass forms of indoctrination and those blatant forms of enculturation that threaten the essential freedom that should always underpin effective education, it is also possible to become so obsessed with the danger of indoctrination that the exercise becomes so cognitive, bare of passion and devoid of intention towards personal commitment that the capacity to make any practical difference at all is rendered inactive.

Knowing, and Making the Difference

So, what is this 'making the difference'? What is the kind of knowing that underpins it? And what role is there for multifaith study and engagement in impelling it? In addressing these questions, I wish to bring forward two more key figures before moving to the implications for Judaeo-Christians engaging with Hinduism and its various spiritualities.

First, there is Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1998). In the Nazi prison for his actions against Hitler, Bonhoeffer struggled to answer the question 'Who is Christ for us today?' Who is Christ for a church that has surrendered its integrity in the face of such vile opposition? How can the church ever hold its head high again? What does it mean to be Christian anymore? Apart from the experiences of war and prison that clearly shook the foundations of his earlier thinking, Bonhoeffer also brought forward his interfaith engagement as being central to the struggle for these answers. First, there was Bonhoeffer's intensive dialogue with Judaism, brought on partly by the horrors of the 'final solution' as it was becoming evident to him, and partly by his growing understanding of the need for any Christian to know Judaism if one was to know Christianity. Second, were his engagements with Hinduism and Jainism, as understood largely through his active dialogue with Gandhi and his pacifist movement. Bethge (1970) offers testimony that his interest in India and its spiritualities was an abiding and tantalising passion for Bonhoeffer, and that he had a keen sense that Christianity had originally come from the East and that it was only through the East that it could ultimately be understood. Bethge quotes him as saying of Indian spiritualities: "Sometimes, it even seems to me that there's more Christianity in their 'paganism' than in the whole of the Reich church." (1970, p. :330). Third, and perhaps most dramatically, was his fraternity with the 'unfaithed', with those with whom he found himself sharing commitment and the conditions of prison but who, unlike him, were not at all motivated by a faith position. Their sole motivation was an earthy integrity and a profound commitment to their fellow human beings.

Bonhoeffer could not help but contrast these latter self-professed 'atheists' and 'agnostics' with so many of his erstwhile 'enfaithed' colleagues whom he saw cowering behind the protective walls of the church. In this context, his earlier inspirational thoughts, be they from Karl Barth's reliance on the revelation to be found in the bible or from Von Harnack's search for the historical Jesus, became starkly narrow and incapable of addressing adequately the bigger world Bonhoeffer had now discovered. He had been changed by his far wider experience of religion (and non-religion) and he could never go back to where he was. He had to

find a way of capturing intellectually this bigger world, and there was no time nor room for an intellectualism that was not indispensably about action, about making a difference. In the end, Bonhoeffer posited the notion of 'religionless Christianity' as the only form that could credibly survive these times, that could find meaningful dialogue between Christianity and that much bigger world he now recognised. The knowing that would underpin this 'religionless' form for individual Christians was what he described as 'the arcane discipline'. Again, this was a deeply personal knowing that would emanate from complete conformity between one's understanding, one's dispositions and one's actions. It was arcane in the sense that it would remain a secret between the Christian and God who, unlike those who saw only the face, sees also the heart. The sign of its authenticity would not be in the 'cheap grace' of enfaithment but in the costly grace of conforming one's life and actions to the essential charter of Christianity to 'make a difference'. The church would eventually find itself only by losing itself in the world. The church itself needed saving; its only future was in coming to the same kind of honest self-knowing that would eventually see it grasp its own destiny, leave behind its own blindness and bigotry, and become finally a force for 'making the difference'. In the end, Bonhoeffer was not sure the church would ever be capable of this, but this did not matter so long as individual Christians lived by their own 'arcane discipline'.

Second, Bede Griffiths, who became, at one and the same time, Benedictine monk and Hindu holy man. As a fully professed monk and Catholic priest, he went to India, initially as a missionary, only to be converted, in a sense, by the profoundly spiritual world of Hinduism. Over time, he put the two spiritualities together, not so much formally as in and through himself. Towards the end of his life, he claimed to have come to knowledge of himself for the first time and, of course, he was changed, he was renewed, he had become a living enshrinement of reinvigorated understanding across two vastly different religious traditions. He had made the difference. He had forged through his own being a vehicle for a new relationship that had potential to make the future different from the past. In the words of Fox (1996), he had become a 'post-denominational priest', at one and the same time a Hindu monk and a Christian sannyasi.

One might argue that knowledge goals of the sort specified here must lie beyond the day-to-day goals of multi-faith religious studies or interfaith religious education. I would argue, however, that they should not be ignored as providing at least a meter by which the directions for such educational enterprises should be set. Religious education must not sell itself short, nor set its targets too low. The

charter of religious education is to be a bold and robust way in which new knowing is ultimately achieved, a knowing that makes a difference to individuals and their world, a knowing that challenges learners towards the kind of self-knowing that puts away age-old divisiveness and impels a new order of religious understanding and interrelating (Lovat, 2002a). I postulate that this kind of knowing is possible for the Judaeo-Christian in pursuit of intense understanding of Hinduism and its spiritualities.

Christians and Hindu Spiritualities: Recapturing Earlier Research

The example provided of Griffiths is ample testimony to the riches which the Christian can discover in pursuit of Hinduism and its associated spiritualities. I have provided evidence before of the fairly common experience of Christians discovering the essence of their own religious heritage through exploration of, and in some cases conversion to, Hinduism and its derivatives (Lovat, 1997; Lovat & Morrison, 2000). My work with Hinduism began with an exploration of the diaspora community in Australia and its attitudes towards multi-faith curricula in schools (cf. Lovat, 1995a; 1997a). As time went on, I became more interested in the engagement of Judaeo-Christians with Hinduism and its various offshoot spiritualities. In this regard, the preponderance of evidence has centred on my work with the Brahma Kumaris, founded in the 1930s by the Hindu sannyasi, Brahma Baba. In the first instance, the work was centred on case studies of 34 Christians. It illustrated that, in many cases, the movement towards the other spirituality was more like a 'moving on', a 'building on earlier experiences, or a fulfillment of a long search. A few testimonies that capture the spirit of this are repeated below:

...to separate is to assume force .. for me, it was a natural stepping-stone and maturing into deeper spiritual experiences. (Lovat, 1997, p. 111)

I didn't separate – however I did continue on a spiritual path of growth and realization that grows bigger every day. (Lovat, 1997, p. 112)

I bear no grudge about Catholicism; indeed, I feel it is a superior form of Christianity and that it prepared me well for my spiritual journey. Separation was a stepping out, a maturation, an inevitable movement ... I could not run away from my spiritual journey (Lovat, 1997, p. 112).

It was not a real separation from the Catholic faith but I find my becoming BK coming back to an original spirituality

because all my experiences in the past seemed to direct me to this life (Lovat & Morrison, 2000, p. 301).

It is not a matter of separation. It's just like a continuation of the leaving process. Like if you finish the elementary grades, you graduate to the secondary level. So I liken myself to having been in the college level while a Catholic. Being exposed to the BK allowed me to go to graduate studies and a post-graduate course (Lovat & Morrison, 2000, p. 302).

I haven't separated from another religion, I have deepened my understanding of it and broadened my mind about all other religions (Lovat & Morrison, 2000, p. 302).

Part of this research also focussed on the more rare but, in some ways, even richer instances which saw those of Jewish heritage treading the path to Hindu spirituality. This latter research has two specific focusses, namely theoretical work about the ancient and contemporary connections between Judaism and Hinduism, and empirical work which attempts to track the experiences of those who have trodden the path between the two traditions. Both focusses uncover the potential for highly significant forms of self-discovery to ensue on the part of the one engaging in the interfaith probe. In the empirical work, especially, the self-knowing and change that impels making a difference becomes particularly evident.

Jews and Hindu Spiritualities: The Research

Research into the connections and similarities between Judaism and Hinduism is rare. The research that does exist, however, is characterised by its clarity and forthrightness. In other words, those who have made a study of the interface are convinced that it is a fertile field with quite clear indicators. Holdrege (1996), widely regarded as the leading scholar in this field, admits that "polytheistic, iconocentric Hinduism" and "monotheistic, iconoclastic Judaism" are generally considered to be mutually antithetical, a view exacerbated by the disparity between a cyclical and an historical view of existence. Her own research conclusion, however, is that:

such characterisations represent gross oversimplifications that fail to take into account the rich diversity of perspectives within the traditions themselves (p. 1).

She speaks of the presence of "certain fundamental affinities" between the two traditions, defined in the following way:

as elite 'textual communities' that have codified the norms of orthodoxy in the form of scriptural canons; as ethnocultural systems concerned with issues of family, ethnic and cultural integrity, blood lineages, and the intergenerational transmission of traditions; and as religions of orthopraxy characterized by hereditary priesthoods and sacrificial traditions, comprehensive legal systems ... elaborate regulations concerning purity and impurity, and dietary laws (p. ix).

Holdrege analyses, in particular, the role of scripture across the brahmanic and rabbinic traditions, arguing that the status and authority of scripture in each tradition is shaped by a similar conception that it is the scripture that captures and depicts the totality of this people's history and its cosmological significance. She argues that this phenomenon is to be found in equally strong fashion in these two traditions and in a way that surpasses the role of scripture to be found in any other tradition.

Goodman (1994) actually challenges the almost taken-for-granted view that there is a fundamental difference between the kind of God worshipped by both traditions, one being a 'saguna' God (i.e., the God of the Jews, endowed with attributes but unable to be symbolised), and the 'nirguna' absolute (i.e., the God of the Hindus who is without attributes but is manifested in a variety of symbolic forms). Goodman suggests:

There are questions here of epistemology, of the relation to sacred texts and their explication, of the social and cultural construction of the self, of ethical philosophy, and of basic cultural intuitions that remain distinct (p. xii).

Like Holdrege, Goodman contends that a careful and sympathetic exploration of the inner workings of both traditions reveals certain equivalences that are undeniable. Hubert and Mauss (1898) contended that Hindu and Jewish texts provided a better basis for comparison than the documents of Rome and Greece, so often used for comparative purposes in scholarship. They wrote:

... we have in the Bible and in the Hindu texts collections of doctrines that belong to a definite era. The document is direct, drawn up by the participants themselves in their own language, in the very spirit in which they enacted the rites, even if not always with a very clear consciousness of the origin and motive of their actions (p. 42).

Doniger (1994) has explored the increasing phenomenon that sees Jewish scholars looking to India for insights into their own tradition. Building on the phenomenon, she speaks of the mutuality with which her own study of Hinduism has allowed her to discover new personal meanings in Judaism and, conversely, how her Judaism has helped her to draw new meanings out of Hindu texts. Reminiscent of the work of Holdrege, she identifies 'striking' ways in which the two traditions are alike, including in the following:

...their depiction of the cunning malevolence of God (be it the God of Job or Shiva), (and) in their tendency toward orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy (the emphasis on correct praxis allowing for greater doctrinal freedom) (p. 16).

Beyond this, Doniger notes in Judaism an inbuilt tendency to openness to other religious experiences:

The tendency to make use of other people's myths has long been a habit of the Jews, wandering or dispersed as they are ... the ways in which Jews have been forced, for their very survival, to learn other people's religions and ... to learn from them as well (p. 16).

In an important reference to approach and method, and one that touches very much on the central thesis of this paper, Berger, in commenting specifically on the phenomenon of Jewish-Hindu dialogue, argues:

Contestation means an open-minded encounter with other religious possibilities on the level of their truth claims ... to enter into inter-religious contestation is to be prepared to change one's own view of reality (p. 167).

Of even more direct pertinence to the focus of this research, Katz and Goldberg (1990) provide conceptual research of the kind that identifies potential cognitive and spiritual pathways by which Jewish faith and practice might adapt easily to brahmanic Hinduism. They identify, in particular, the phenomena of an hereditary priesthood, the fastidious system of dietary laws, complex laws governing family purity, and the many ascetic tendencies to be found in custom and practice. Furthermore, Weil (1994) has built on the theme of cognitive and spiritual pathways between the two religious traditions with a series of case studies identifying the relative ease with which Indian Jewish communities have adapted their orthopraxy to fit better the Hindu cultural environment.

Chatterjee (1994) builds even further on the case studies theme by offering an indepth comparison of two of the twentieth century's outstanding mystics, Sri Aurobindo Ghose from the Hindu tradition, and Abraham Isaac Kook from the Jewish tradition. Chatterjee identifies *prima facie* commonalities in their mystical experiences, in the concepts they pursued, in the language they employed for their spiritual experiences, and in their impact on their respective traditions. On the basis of the comparison, Goodman (1994) suggests:

We are given a glimpse of what the future might look like if such great souls encountered each other at home in Jerusalem and Benares (p. 14).

Jews and Hindu Spiritualities: The Practice

I have had the opportunity to test the theory in practice through two case studies of women brought up as orthodox Jews, one in the US, the other in England, who have trodden the path identified above and become fully devoted BKs, both with a keen sense of the importance of a Jewish-Hindu synergy in their successful conversion. One of them now works in Tel Aviv, the other in London. The former, whom I will describe as Tel Aviv, began our conversation by saying that she could not believe she was meeting someone who was doing research in an area about which she had been having such strong feelings. Her work in Israel had convinced her of a deep synergy between Judaism and the Hindu-based spiritualities. She volunteered much that reflected directly on my reading, namely about the common family, home and ritual eating aspects of the two traditions, that behind the *prima facie* differences of monotheism versus polytheism, there was actually a common conception of a singular godhead.

Tel Aviv mentioned that BK had taken off with amazing speed in Israel, in spite of a fair amount of cultural resistance to religious movements that take people away from Judaism. Sometimes, this can apply even to movements within the broad 'family' of Judaic spirituality, seen as an instance when someone 'goes Orthodox', meaning when they become ultra-orthodox and separate from their home and family. Nonetheless, the attraction of BK had been remarkable throughout the entire country, with most expressing ease with which the transition of spiritualities could be made. Tel Aviv spoke of her own experiences of feeling at times in Israel that she was in fact in India, so familiar was the look and feel of the environment and the spirituality. She said she had at times felt the same while in India. She spoke of anthropological theories that she had uncovered which made close links between the two areas, even suggesting that

Israel may originally have been part of India.

The other participant, described as London, confirmed that, even from the perspective of her Orthodox Jewish background, she felt a natural progression from the God of her upbringing to the God held to be central by BK. London confirmed the sense of closeness between the two traditions, from her point of view, suggesting that she had even seen aspects of fairly explicit Hindu theology growing anew in Judaism. She provided the example of a renewed belief in Karma which she saw growing in Judaism, especially in relation to issues of violence and warfare and the reviewing of traditional beliefs related to God's will.

Both suggested strongly that the religious paths they had been placed on initially in Judaism had been confirmed and enhanced by their exposure and movement to a Hindu spirituality. They both, at times, made strong statements about coming to know themselves for the first time, about self-discovery and change of the sort reminiscent of the experiences of Griffiths in his cross-religious journey. London said it perhaps most explicitly when she made the comment that, in many ways, she had found in BK what she felt Judaism had been attempting to teach her all her life. Beyond that, she felt that she now understood the religion of her childhood better than ever because of her penetration of Hindu spirituality.

In both cases, this new self-knowing had made a difference. London now spent much time engaged in intercultural and interfaith dialogue at the international level, including with arms of UNESCO and other United Nations organs. Tel Aviv was playing a more targeted role, having moved from the relative safety of the USA to work towards renewed understanding and improved relations between the various parties that constitute the modern and very troubled state of Israel. Like Bonhoeffer and Griffiths before them, having come to understand themselves anew through engagement with a far bigger world than they had grown up with, neither of them could remain where they had previously been. As an integral component part of this new self-knowing, and in the very way anticipated by Aristotle and Aquinas, an attached action (*praxis*) became essential.

Conclusion

Assuming that one's faith, or indeed cultural alignment, is not something one feels one must cling to in overly defensive fashion, and so that one is interested to explore and understand ever more one's own faith and culture, then the study of Hinduism for the Judaeo-Christian offers much in the way of new knowledge and understanding, not only about the other tradition but about Judaeo-Christianity itself. It also offers much in the way of

new-found social literacy and inter-relational awareness between these religious cultures, awareness that certainly does not go astray in our world today. Above all, however, it offers one the chance to discover much about oneself, about one's own limited education, limited understanding, one's blindspots and bigotries, if one is open to knowing in this way. In short, it offers one the chance to change, to be different, to grow, and to help create a new order of understanding, communication and mutual self-reflectiveness between these traditions, traditions that share so much in common and yet have been too often strangers to each other.

So, let my very last word be once again for interfaith religious education. In our own time, religious education must come of age. Granted the issues that face us, we need a religious education that is robust and bold, that is dedicated to making a difference in the way people understand each other and function together in the human community. We need a religious education whose charter is unapologetically one of generating peace, goodwill and cooperation among peoples, because this is the only way that ultimately we can live and survive together on this planet. We need a religious education that promises self-knowing of the kind that is likely to impel change, new attitudes and behaviour, new practical action (*praxis*). In this quest, the role of interfaith studies is essential. The example provided of Hinduism is but one of the focus spiritualities that offers the opportunity for Judaeo-Christians to come to know their own tradition, and their very selves, in renewed fashion. In other places (Lovat, 2003; 2003a), I have spoken of the same phenomenon in relation to Islam, arguably an even more urgent and perhaps even richer source of self-discovery for the Judaeo-Christian.

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