

UNIVERSALITY AND IDENTITY

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THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY, given the thrust of this paper, is a problematic one inasmuch as we see it as unavoidable and necessary on the one hand, and limiting and exclusive on the other. It is a 'good' foundational given; yet it must be transcended; it is both a solution and a problem.

Some sort of tentative definition of the word may be useful. At an individual level, identity is the sense of self as an integral unit, marked by sameness and continuity and able to make sense of its milieu. But the social enters the process at the very earliest stages of development, for the infant can make sense of its milieu only in terms provided by the milieu or according to the way its particular milieu organizes experience. This is to say that the self acquires an identity within a given cultural matrix. Some of the determinants of this cultural space are religion, language, ethnicity and folklore. *These* symbols, *these* words, *this* skin colour, *this* story, compose the familiar, meaningful world, pass into the deepest layers of consciousness, and form the frame of reference which makes experience significant.

It is not possible for a self to emerge in a culture-less state; to have no orientation whatsoever would make for mental disturbance of a pathological kind. Anchoring the self, or the formation of identity is, as said earlier, both unavoidable and necessary – a dynamic process of acquiring meaning and of being able to place oneself meaningfully in a concrete historical situation.

There is no 'pure' or 'direct' communication among selves, or between the self and God. All communication is culturally mediated and culturally created. Eagleton remarks that human meanings are in a deep sense historical.¹ My dealings with God simply cannot operate independently outside a cultural context; culture alone provides me with the symbols through which I relate to God and the language with which I think about him. Culture provides my framework, constructs my symbolic universe of meaning, shapes my unconscious and colours my deepest psychic levels with pictures and words. I operate willy-nilly within a cultural matrix, and the religion given to me is an already constituted field of discourse. Religion and culture shape each other in a

productive and ceaseless shuttling to and fro, orchestrating myth, philosophy and theology in such a way as to perpetuate that particular formation or group identity.

However, a particular identity viewed from the outside appears very different from when seen from within. Attitudes and faith which confer meaning within the group may well appear grotesque to the outsider. The non-Hindu is likely to regard Hanuman, the monkey-god, with incredulous amazement. What can this possibly mean? The answer to that question requires a willing suspension of disbelief and a voluntary entry into an alien culture. Ignorance and unwillingness make the gazer scornful, and hence he perceives only a ridiculous object. Differences (distinctive cultural aspects such as rituals) reinforce scorn and superiority ('lower/higher', 'mine/yours'). Margaret Chatterjee points out that it is the 'non-essential' aspects of religious life (corporate worship, rituals, fasts) that foster the exclusive 'we' and divide the world into 'us' and 'them'.²

Here are the beginnings of power-relations. When the self is seen as identical with its culture, any threat to that culture becomes a threat to the self; the reaction is one of defence.

Identity formation is thus intimately linked with group processes and group behaviour, and thereby with power. The cultural milieu is itself the result of a group's activities (of individuals within the group); it is thus a fluid, continuously modified, but apparently steady horizon. The link between identity formation and group behaviour indicates that relations of power have entered the grid because relations within a group are marked by power, and relations among groups are determined by their (often) competing interests. My identity as a Hindu in India today is not independent of the power-manipulations of a political party any more than the identity of a Christian in Bosnia is independent of power-seeking groups in what was formerly Yugoslavia. The identity of an Aboriginal in Australia will be marked as surely by ethnicity as that of a Harijan in India is by caste, or the identity of a woman anywhere by patriarchy. Identity-formation clearly does not occur in a neutral medium uncontaminated by forces that drive power-seeking groups.

Among the strategies followed by such groups for power-affirmation is stressing those aspects of symbols that legitimize their power-positions while passing over other aspects in silence. Fundamentalist Hindu forces in India today stress Lord Rama's martial valour, to the extent that the tender side of his nature (his renunciation of his kingdom, his submission to his father's word) is submerged. Christian Europe similarly has offered the symbol of the Church Militant in direct opposition to Jesus'

teaching. The use of the cross for the Crusades is another case in point. The consequent effect on identity formation within the group needs no stressing.

This section has suggested that anchoring of the identity is both positive and necessary for the creation of meaning, but also that, since the anchoring takes place within groups marked by relations of domination, it is ambivalent; it can be liberating *or* oppressive.

We turn now from the subject of identity formation to the ineradicable longing in the human heart for a unity greater than itself. The movement from the many to the one is common to the world's cultures. Before we proceed in the final section to ponder the mystery of that dialectical movement, it seems useful to examine here the false forms that universalizing tendencies can take, and to denounce those that have their origins in the womb of power and manifest themselves in the will to dominate.

History, a record of cultural subjugations, shows a succession of particular identities which attempt, in the guise of universals, to obliterate or marginalize the subaltern. The term 'mainstream' indicates a spreading 'universalism' to which other particulars are only tributaries. The peripheral identities are either sent underground, or absorbed into the larger flow, and thus lost.

The most recent kind of universality, derived from the market, is produced for, and imposed upon, the planet by First-World capitalism. By this we mean the homogenizing patterns of consumption, culture and behaviour permeating global spaces with the help of the media. Knowledge and technology, pressed into the production of this homogeneity, become instruments for controlling subjects by creating consumer subjectivities all over the world.

There have been earlier kinds of willed universalities imposed from above. These lasted as continuous enterprises because an uncritical belief in their own superiority coincided with self-interest, making for a combination that went unexamined.

The Europeanization (and thereafter Americanization) of the world is one instance. Colonialism carried a western universal model composed of classical (Greek and Roman) elements and institutionalized Christianity. Power being imbricated in the interstices of the colonizer/colonized relationship, the cultural models of the dominated were deemed aberrant, primitive and inferior. The scars inflicted by such willed, sustained arrogance have not yet disappeared.

A third kind of universality emanated from Rome whence Catholicism proclaimed the unassailability of a unified western doctrine, dogma, faith.

M. Hegba, writing in *Concilium* (1984), speaks not only for Africans but for all Third-World countries when he raises the following anguished questions about hegemonic universalities:

What does Jesus Christ – not Christian civilisation – think of our ancestral religions and our social institutions?

How should we judge, in the light of revelation, a world-order which means for us a position of structural subjectivity, economic, political, cultural and religious?

... who will save us from philosophical, juridical and cultural Westernization, erected into the providential path towards salvation in Jesus Christ?³

The effects of these First-World universalizing tendencies, intricately woven into the fabric of the cultures to which they were carried,⁴ put to question the concept of the global village. Is this yet another of the 'white mythologies' to which Robert Young has devoted a whole book?⁵

We might add here that similar hegemonic universals obtain in more localized spaces as well: to wit, the Brahminical model upheld in the Indian subcontinent.

What happens to identity formation under the spreading shadow of these universalizing tendencies? Two consequences may be identified. First, in the dominating/subjugated dyad, the less powerful particular is homogenized in a process of assimilation and absorption that requires the subjugated to *change* their identity. Second, the model held up is one to which there is no entry save through birth. In the former case, identity is lost; in the latter, it is displaced to the margin and condemned to perpetual alienation. Humiliation accompanies both cases.

The issue of a true Christian response in these matters is underscored by the presence in Europe of immigrants from the Third World. Is England, or for that matter Europe, a *Christian* entity, and if so, how must it deal with the plurality that is in its midst? The questions apply equally to minority groups in largely Hindu India: what constitutes a true Hindu response?

We suggest that the true universal can never be imposed from without, but rises from within in an entirely different process. We suggest also that de-anchoring is essential for recovery of a free identity, and that both processes are part of the same paradigm.

The search for the true paradigm requires a simultaneous thinking of universal and particular. We suggest that in this new paradigm the true Universal reconstitutes itself by becoming totally *other* in the particular;

yet it does not cease being universal. Yahweh is known to be God when he is Jesus; the Formless Absolute of Hindu thought is known to be God when he is Krishna. In the same line of thought, the particular to be a true particular must become wholly *other* than itself. The paradigm comes from the mystery of God.

We take first the case of the true Universal *becoming* a particular. Hopkins speaks of the presence of Christ in a thousand places; the realization of the Universal made particular comes to him in a crashing moment of discovery:

In a flash, at a trumpet-crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am . . .

— lines which demonstrate the grasp of both at one and the same moment.

In discussing this paradigm of the Universal as particular we allude in this section to figures from our respective religious traditions, Jesus and Krishna. The word *incarnation* (Jesus is the incarnation of God) means the taking on of flesh. The word *avatar* (Krishna is an *avatar* of godhead) means a descent into human form. We do not imply that the terms have identical meanings; that is a widely discussed issue and is not our concern here. What is of interest for this paper is the symbolism inherent in both words. Divinity divesting itself of its divine nature to take on human identity is common to both. Self-denial is implicit in the act; that is, the Universal makes itself particular through self-denial; it does not impose itself through power. We might add that the multiplicity of *avatars* in Hindu tradition hints at the nature of the true Universal — how it de-mystifies itself and is 'lost' in a plurality of particular manifestations.

We turn now to the instances of the true particular. The figures of this new paradigm offer a liberative de-anchoring of self through an affirmation of the other, and through a denial of power. The issue cannot be explained altogether logically since logic is itself a tool of powerful, imposed arguments. Instead, it may be obliquely hinted at through allusions and images which transmit messages.

From Jesus we receive, through the gift of his self-bestowal, a sense of the beauty of *voluntary powerlessness*. From Krishna we get a sense of the beauty of *innocent play*.

Jesus' ministry, as he proceeds towards Jerusalem, may be seen as a progressive renunciation of power. Both his attitude towards his miracles, and his identification with the poorest and humblest, are indicative of a clear understanding of worldly power. The publican, the

weeping woman at his feet, the madman near Lake Gennesareth, the paralytic let down from the roof, the Samaritan woman at the well, are all poor outcasts. With each he establishes a direct and intense communication, entering their life-world and being with them wholly. Such a taking on of another's identity demands a melting of the hard core of self, a dissolution emphasized in the allusions to salt and leaven. Jesus' death on the cross speaks to us of the death of the powered self, and his identification with selves, groups, worlds other than his own. The Atonement is being-*at-one-with*. In some sense he becomes the other.

Turning to Krishna, we get from this mythical figuring of divinity a sense of innocent play. He is an enchanting child and an utterly enchanting lover. The child figure is a symbol of innocent powerlessness; the lover figure is a symbol of self-giving. Hindu art and poetry project both aspects in various ways. As a child he delights his foster-mother with his pranks and his charm. As a lover he stands under the *kadamb* tree, slightly bent at the waist in his *tribhanga* pose, his curved hands raising his flute to his lips. The *gopis* (milkmaids) wait and yearn for him on the banks of the Yamuna. He finally appears, and as they dance in a ring, Krishna's form is multiplied a hundred times so that each *gopi* believes him to be dancing only with her. It is worth asking what this says about an identity that multiplies itself in self-gift; and whether the plurality offers a loss of excluding, exclusive self which is also a joyful gain.

It may be noted here that there is an intimate symbolic connection between the innocence of the child, the abandonment of the lover, and the suffering servant of Yahweh: all three symbols express the denial of dominating power.

The figures discussed above have of course been institutionalized by power-affirming cultural groups. Over against these 'big traditions', however, there have always been 'little traditions' or counter-movements that relate afresh to the sovereign source after rejecting the cultural, power-stained tissue. St Francis of Assisi is an outstanding example. In India, the fifteenth-century Krishna devotee, Meera, rejects the rituals and religious practices of the palace where she is a princess, steps out of the cultural milieu in which her identity was formed, and goes in search of her own Krishna:

On a sudden,
 the sight.
 Your look of light
 stills all,
 stills all.

The curd-pot rolls
on the ground.

Parents and brothers
neighbours and friends
all call a halt.

Prise out, they say,
this thing from your heart.
You've lost your path.

Says Meera
Who but you
can see in the dark
of a heart?

(trans. Shama Futehally)⁶

It is worth noting that the subtext indicates that it is *Meera* who calls a halt to the forces that have governed her life hitherto, though the text ascribes the phrase to those very forces. She calls a halt to all this because of the sight she has seen (or which has seen her), a look of light.

The incompatibility here between prescribed, oppressive discourse (parents, brothers, neighbours and friends are all identity-determining factors) and the seeker, giving herself as gift to a self-giving lover-god who nurtures her particularity, pinpoints nicely the de-anchoring movement posited as desirable in this paper. *She loses her path*, the world of discourses, *to find herself*, that is, to find God.

We have used the term discourse for the cultural milieu rejected by Meera. By discourse we mean a practice of power delimiting a field of thought and activity and generating norms and concepts to sustain itself. The false universals mentioned in Section II of this paper are all different examples of discourses which establish 'big traditions'. The counter-movements or 'little traditions' mentioned earlier, usually emerge from the faith-experience of a seeker. Meera was one such seeker.

Authentic seekers imitate the pattern provided by the true Universal made true particular. For instance, St Francis of Assisi and Meera imitate the self-denial and self-giving implicit in the patterns offered by their figures. While acknowledging the intense purity of these individual 'imitations', we suggest that the messages of self-denial and self-gift transmitted by the incarnated Jesus and the Krishna avatar hold not only for the personal life but for the group as well. Group self-denial seems to be a contradiction in terms; it is certainly contradictory to institutional needs, for it requires divestment of a particular kind of

identity. A group is a group by virtue of being different from other groups; that is, its identity is based on fostered and maintained differences. The question of groupal transcendence of its identity is therefore a very difficult one.

This problem becomes acute as one attempts to define the essential elements of the Church. Does evangelization as conventionally understood stand in need of reinterpretation? Is dialogue the most Christian mode of encounter? Does institutionalized religion tend to become uncritical of itself, and does it find survival today in fundamentalist circles? Helmut Peukert notes in *Concilium* (1992) that the central cultural task after the dissolution of traditional structures should consist specifically in building up a communicative world at a new level of consciousness.⁷

We suggest that such a consciousness, if simultaneously critical of itself and receptive to the other, can transcend its cultural moorings. Jesus' transcendence of his particular rabbinical identity as he presents a God that challenges the rabbinical Yahweh is the model to be followed.

Following Jesus and Krishna in this issue of identity-transcendence calls for faith, a faith redefined in terms other than assent to a creed prescribed by authority, and in terms rather of loving encounter. Questions arise at this point. Can faith cease to be specific, personal, particular, historical? If it does, can it be faith? How does one enlarge one's understanding of truth without losing loyalty to one's own? Clodovis Boff says excellently:

Faith is not a landscape to be seen, but eyes for seeing. It is not a world, but a gaze upon the world. It is not a book to be read, but a grammar for reading – for reading all books.⁸

This grammar is one of love, an option for life which includes, as Boff says, a consistent ethical stand. Such a grammar for reading all books returns us to the Hindu monkey-god Hanuman and M. Hegba's questions about what Jesus would have thought of his ancestral customs. If, through love, one's specific identity can be transcended, and one makes an imaginative entry into another world, that milieu ceases to be grotesque. Hanuman may then be seen not as a magical, all-powerful 'God', but the epitome in myth and epic of selfless loving devotion to the good. Such an encounter may bring the realization that everything, including the profane and non-human, is made holy by love's power. Understanding that homage to Hanuman is not blind superstition (*pace* Bishop Heber)⁹ but rather, love of *love*, requires, however, not mere tolerance, but loving extension of oneself into an unfamiliar culture.

This in turn entails a divestment, a loss of power-retaining identity which is Christian in the highest degree. The answers implicit in M. Hegba's questions may find an echo here.

The way out of an anti-Christian power-position, it begins to appear from the examples above, is to *see* and *listen* to the subaltern, recognize its validity, value and right to be itself and to look at the world from that point of view. The example cited has been drawn from uncomprehending colonial Christian domination, but the point applies in all cases. The Hindu must see society from the Muslim point of view; the Brahmin must see Hindu Society from the Dalit point of view;¹⁰ Christians in the western world must look at England (or Europe) through the eyes of a poor immigrant. This seems to us to be the answer to the question we raised earlier as to what constitutes an authentic Christian and authentic Hindu response.

However, a simple reversal of categories once and for all (the subaltern turned dominant) is no solution either. A critical consciousness of one's own base (and bias) seems necessary. Contemporary philosophy's stress on an infinite, self-reflexive, distributive process exceeding every grasped 'truth' seems useful here. Robert Young notes that any differential theory of identity must think both totality and difference simultaneously.¹¹ Any other unity in the name of universality is idolatrous, a false universality formulated through special expertise by those who 'know'. It is also antithetical to an eschatological understanding which precludes final unity within the historical process. 'Thy kingdom come' refers always to a possible future, not to any direct present. Through a ceaseless adjustment of differences, issues of meaning, truth and value may be continuously arrived at, except there can be no final arriving, for finality would turn what is process into a particular.

The process described above is permeated by a respect for otherness which is kin to love. Love posits a unity always to be sought, refuses to accept divisions and breakdowns,¹² makes religion a matter not of culture but relatedness, and dissolves the rigidities of linguistic formulae.

Possible answers to the difficult problem mentioned earlier of groupal self-transcendence and self-denial may be found in such a process of continuous recovery of meaning from differences. When Habermas speaks of an ideal speech situation in which language enables intersubjective communication without domination, or when Levinas proposes language as communication acknowledging the inalienable otherness of the other, and as a means whereby the self opens itself to the other in a form of speech which leaves both intact, they offer the possibility of self-transcendence at the level of groups.

We have spoken in this final section of a true paradigm in which both universality and identity negate themselves at one level to affirm themselves at another. We have suggested that the path to that other level is illumined by the figures of Jesus and Krishna, and that the way to that path for both individuals and groups entails, first, giving up power; second, entering the world of the other; and third, looking at 'my' world from that standpoint. All three are interrelated, and seem to us to be Christian imperatives.

In conclusion, we return to the 'true' Universal and the 'true' particular in an attempt to understand what it is they share and how they are related.

Identity is a particular in need of freedom from itself. Universality is only a false universality unless it takes respectful account of all particular identities. For the one, a rising, freeing movement seems called for; for the other, a descending, embracing one. Neither seems to be truly itself unless it becomes the other. Any final resolution of that dialectical movement falsifies both, while self-denial and self-gift at the levels of both individuals and groups keep the dialectic in suspension. Critical awareness of the particularity of one's identity can restore one to the universal flow of life which is God, the true Universal.

Finally, the irresolvable paradox inscribed in our understanding of the Christlike task addresses the issue of universality and identity. The task calls, we believe, for an utter purity of intent and a miraculous Christlike sympathy which may require one to forget the supererogatory importance one attaches to particular names, even his particular name. 'Christ', says Simone Weil, 'likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.'

NOTES

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary theory* (Minneapolis, 1983), p 61.

² Margaret Chatterjee, *The religious spectrum* (New Delhi, 1984), p 131.

³ M. Hegba, 'From the generalisation of one triumphant particular to the search for true universality' in Claude Geffre, Gustavo Gutierrez, Virgil Elizondo (eds), *Concilium: Different theologies, common responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* (Edinburgh, 1984), p 48.

⁴ See Ashis Nandy, *The intimate enemy: loss and recovery of self under colonialism* (Delhi, 1983).

⁵ Robert Young, *White mythologies* (London, 1990).

⁶ The authors are grateful to the International Sacred Literature Trust and HarperCollins for permission to use this poem from their forthcoming publication: Shama Futehally, *In the dark of the heart: hymns of Meera*.

⁷ Helmut Peukert, 'The philosophical critique of modernity' in Claude Geffre and Jean-Pierre Jossua (eds), *Concilium: The debate on modernity* (London, 1992), p 25.

⁸ See Clodovis Boff, *Theology and praxis* (Maryknoll, 1987), p 37, where he says that faith is substantially a basic life-option, including a consistent ethical practice.

⁹ Reginald Heber, Bishop of Calcutta, author of the popular nineteenth-century hymn 'From Greenland's icy mountains' which contains the lines 'The heathen in his blindness/Bows down to wood and stone'.

¹⁰ Dalit is the term used to designate the scheduled castes and tribes. The literal meaning of the word is 'dust crushed under the feet'.

¹¹ Robert Young, *White mythologies*, *op.cit.*, p 62.

¹² See Nicholas Lash, 'Theologies at the service of a common tradition' in *Concilium* (1984), *op.cit.*, p 80.