

## Foreword

When I was approached to write this Foreword, my initial reaction was that I was not an appropriate choice. I do not know Bengali and though my indebtedness to the Hindu tradition is inestimable, it is not my primary tradition. On further reflection, however, I found myself warming to the invitation. My field is comparative philosophy and religion, and I have grown restive with what seems to be a growing trend in religious studies—using religion for political ends. *Kālī's Child*, I realized, would give me a tangible target on which to focus my thoughts on this topic.

The hijacking I am thinking of takes place both within and between religions. Within Christianity, “politically correct” has emerged to designate the political orthodoxy that reigns on campuses, which is the liberal stance on issues of race, gender and lifestyles. My concern here, however, is with the way this orthodoxy moves across religious boundaries, *Kālī's Child* being the case at hand. In devoting this Foreword to arguing that charge, I admit that I am crossing a field charged with landmines, but the matter is important so I persevere.

With his 1978 book titled *Orientalism*, Edward Said was the first visible non-Westerner to blow the whistle on this foul play—two hundred years in which scholars laid down in Western mind a view of the non-Western world that purports to be accurate but actually is sharply skewed by Western assumptions. However much that book was needed, it is not a responsible book, for Said was victimized by his academic discipline, comparative literature, which in his generation was dominated by Michel Foucault's contention that truth is simply a cover for power plays, so in *Orientalism* Said plays his cards to put down the West and triumph over it.

The responsible treatment of this subject had actually been in place for over a decade when Said wrote *Orientalism*, but having been written by a less publicly visible figure, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, it did not receive the attention it deserved. In Nasr's book, the 1964 Gifford Lectures *Knowledge and the Sacred*, he uses his invitation to deliver

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those lectures to turn the tables responsibly on the West. What he says in effect is: “For two hundred years we Orientals have been listening to what you Occidentals think of us. This is my opportunity to let you hear what we think of you.” And without raising his voice, he proceeds to tell us.

All he and I ask for, really, is what everyone wants, the author of *Kālī’s Child*, Jeffrey Kripal, included: fair play. The problem is how to achieve it, and in cross-cultural dealings the difficulties compound, for stepping beyond one’s own culture is a little like trying to step out of the shoes one is walking in. The requirement for those of us who work at this problem and who are at the top of the multicultural heap is how to steer clear of imperialism, for there is cultural as well as national imperialism. I may be unusually sensitive to this requirement for I grew up in the China that European imperialists had carved up among themselves, and Shanghai American High School was located in the French Concession where on walks off our residential campus I would pass parks marked “No dogs and Chinamen allowed.” Be that as it may, when I decided to make comparative philosophy and religion my academic home, I vowed to do everything I could to try to deal fairly with the cultures I crossed over into.

How was I to overcome the gravitational pull of ethnocentrism and do this? Early on I settled on three guidelines. First, target the profoundest texts in the tradition in question and do my homework by steeping myself in them. Second, to test my comprehension I would then seek out the greatest living exponents of the tradition, pilgrimage to them, and apprentice myself to them for as long as sabbaticals and vacations allowed. (In the case of Hinduism, the scholars were T. R. V. Murty and T. M. P. Mahadevan, while at home my local swami in St. Louis, Swami Satprakashananda of the Ramakrishna Order, stood in for them admirably.) My final step would be to run everything I wrote about the tradition past these mentors to check it for accuracy. Kripal—with whom I have had a brief exchange in *The Harvard Divinity Bulletin*—thinks this last step would preclude criticizing other traditions, but not at all. I am a staunch believer in interfaith dialogue as a way religions can learn from one

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another, but only when critics withhold their criticisms until they have made sure that the targets at which they are aimed are rightly positioned.

Right positioning here begins with accurate translations of the documents the critic cites, as well as the cultural sensitivity to present that study in a contextually authentic way. The book in hand is devoted to a scrupulous report on places where Kripal's conveniently adapted "dictionary Bengali" fails to meet these requirements.

Fair play requires that people who enter other cultures do so tactfully, and here the shortcoming of *Kālī's Child* becomes glaring. In arguing that Sri Ramakrishna's ecstatic mystical experiences were powered by his homoerotic libido, the book has offended Hindu sensibilities more even than did the tracts of early bigoted, poorly informed and polemical Christian missionaries.

It is hard to believe that this took Kripal by surprise. With his admirable empathy for the plight of homosexuals, Kripal must have known that it is a sensitive issue to address publicly even at home; if a candidate in an election campaign were to refer to his opponent's lifestyle, it could cost him the election for being seen by the electorate as a low blow, foul play. Or put it this way: would Kripal have chosen to write his doctoral dissertation on the way the lifestyle of a beloved mentor powered the virtues that Kripal so respects? How, then, could he have thought that such discretion doesn't apply when one ventures onto foreign soil, especially since the meaning of sex is highly culture specific and almost incomprehensible to outsiders. Kripal doesn't even mention this decisive point, which raises the question of whether he was even aware of it.

Much more could be said, but it is not the mission of forewords to argue the case of their books, which in this case its authors do admirably. To put the best face I can on Kripal's unfortunate book, perhaps it can serve as an object lesson on the way cross-cultural discussions should not proceed. I sincerely commend the authors of this book for their self-respect in standing up to *Kālī's Child* wisely and with dignity.

*Huston Smith*