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Victor A. van Bijlert, who until his retirement worked as a lecturer and associate professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the Netherlands, builds on his earlier work on Indian modernity in his 2021 publication on *Vedantic Hinduism in Colonial Bengal* (van Bijlert, 2003; 2007). In this work, he analyses the idea of a specific variation of modernity as it appears in the writings of various Bengali reformers. More specifically, he traces the chronological development of Vedantic reformist thought in colonial Bengal from the early days of the Brahmo Samaj under Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) and his successors all the way to the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Through this approach, he situates the thoughts and writings of these Bengali reformers in the context of the "original" Reformation, particularly the writings of the priest John Calvin, as well as those of revolutionaries, such as Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin. As a result, van Bijlert uncovers shared themes and concerns that connect the Protestant Reformation with the Vedantic reformation of colonial Bengal, namely an emphasis on individual conscience, as well as inner renunciation, which is compatible with active participation in the world, in order to glorify the divine and improve social conditions. Additionally, the author sees similarities in the methods used in both reformations, such as defining and disseminating a fixed canon of scripture and founding formal organizations for the propagation of the reformist message.

The first two chapters are devoted to defining "modernity", particularly "Western modernity", which the author defines as a state of mind conducive to self-realization and autonomy (pp. 1–2). The author then convincingly traces this notion of modernity back to the Protestant reformation, via the theories of Max Weber and the writings of Calvin and Paine, where he first identifies the idea of privacy of conscience as a key factor leading to the revolutionary potential of Protestantism. In the third chapter on Rammohun Roy, van Bijlert delineates what he considers to be the second key factor, namely a particular kind of world-renunciation, for which he relies heavily on Louis Dumont's theories concerning the opposition between the householder and the ascetic in Brahminical Hinduism. Additionally, in the writings and activities of Rammohun Roy, the author identifies the origin of the methodology of the Vedantic reformation, namely the definition of a canon and the foundation of several organizations, of which the Brahmo Samaj would become the most influential. The following chapter on Debendranath

Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen introduces new commonalities between the two reformations, such as the writing of autobiographies and the primacy of subjective spiritual experience and continues to trace the development of reformist themes introduced by Rammohun Roy. In this context, the author sees two fundamentally different archetypes in the two men under discussion. While Debendranath Tagore continues to refine the canon outlined by Rammohun Roy, as well as solidifying the organizational structures of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chandra Sen, despite founding numerous organizations, was primarily a charismatic leader, "something of a guru" (p. 98).

This charismatic leadership, which for the first time "combined the individualism of Vedanta with collectivist Hindu devotionalism" (p. 98), is further examined in the fifth chapter through the writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee. The main object of interest is his novel *Anandamath*. It introduces into the Hindu reformist discourse an element of violence, as well as the vision of the nation as a goddess. Additionally, Bankimchandra Chatterjee introduces the concept of *anushilan* (i.e. cultivation of both self and society as the basis of *dharma*), a term that would later be adopted by violent nationalist actors such as Aurobindo Ghosh. The penultimate chapter is devoted precisely to this further development of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's new revolutionary ethos, as found in the lives and works of Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghosh. Van Bijlert ends with the seventh chapter on Rabindranath Tagore, whom he dubs a "reluctant Hindu nationalist" (p. 174) as well as "the most able and universal voice of modern enlightenment Hinduism" (p. 222). This characterization is based on the fact that Rabindranath's early writings echo the individualistic spirituality of his father Debendranath's teachings, yet in his later years, he vehemently defended the Indian nationalism of Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghosh against the "Western-style[1]" nationalism of the rising Hindutva movement.

Although Victor A. van Bijlert is not the first to make the connection between Bengali Hindu reform movements and the Protestant Reformation, his skillful analysis of certain key themes, such as privacy of conscience, inner renunciation and the emphasis on work for the glorification of the divine, adds depth and nuance to the discussion. Nevertheless, his selection of authors, based on their influence, innovation, institutional contributions and lasting literary legacy (pp. 18–19), obviously limits the scope and thus the applicability of his findings beyond these historical figures. Moreover, his focus on Vedanta over *bhakti*, even though he acknowledges the role of texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā* not only in shaping the theory of inner renunciation, but also in several of the later authors' personal piety, has led to the exclusion of several influential reformers. The most remarkable is Bhaktivinoda Thakur, who was a close associate of several of the figures included in van Bijlert's study. He was influential, innovative and a prolific writer, whose works are still studied today by millions of people belonging to the various

[1] Van Bijlert (pp. 208–211) defines Western-style nationalism as violent, based on the nation state and exclusionary. Tagore considered the violent nationalism of people like Aurobindo to be based on Western history and instead advocates for an "ethical" nationalism, which allows individuals, nations and the whole world to reach their full potential.

successor organizations of the Gaudiya Math[2], founded by his son Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati in 1920. This devotional stream within the Bengali reformation and its influence on the thought of several of the authors discussed by van Bijlert has been skillfully analyzed by Ankur Barua in his work *The Brahmo Samaj and its Vaiṣṇava milieus* (2021). Therefore I recommend it as a complementary reading to anyone who is interested in colonial Hindu reform in Bengal.

Additionally, van Bijlert's work suffers from several methodological and theoretical weaknesses, one of which, the charge of eurocentrism and the validity of embarking on such a comparative study to begin with, he addresses at some length (pp. 5–12). Nevertheless, despite the Bengali reformers' own familiarity with Protestant Christianity, due to their education and interactions with missionaries, the applicability of Protestant, more specifically Calvinist terminology to a temporarily and spatially completely disparate religious context remains questionable at best. Furthermore, the choice of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (which examines a very specific local, historical and economic development) as a theoretical foundation for his concept of Vedantic reformation, disregards the very different economic and developmental trajectory of India, including Bengal. This disregard risks neglecting the influence of the local material and economic conditions on the development of philosophical and political thought, as such an influence between culture and economics is rarely unilateral. Similarly, by relying on the theories of Louis Dumont regarding Indian social structures and the role of the world-renouncer as antithetical to those structures, van Bijlert consciously chooses to ignore decades of research criticizing Dumont's theories (Appadurai, 1986; Olivelle, 2024),[3] due to their over-reliance on textual sources, including critiques collected by Ravindra S. Khare (2006) to which he refers in a footnote (pp. 20–21). Thus, while Dumont's theories allow van Bijlert to effortlessly construe the renouncer as someone who has revolutionary potential, due to his rejection of conventional social roles, this prototype is rarely found on the ground (Burghart, 1983). Renouncers, due to their mutual interdependence, often maintain close ties to householder societies. Moreover, "mixed" states between householder and renouncer (as found among the Nath yogis) are and have always been present (Gold, 1999).

Nevertheless, van Bijlert's book presents a thorough yet concise analysis of the thoughts of several key figures of the Bengal renaissance through the lens of Protestant, particularly Calvinist terminology. Through this, he sheds light, if not on

[2] The Gaudiya Math, as well as its successor organizations such as the Gaudiya Mission and ISKCON, represent a reformed Gaudiya Vaishnavism as envisioned by Bhaktivinoda Thakur, which rejects both heterodox practices found among Vaishnava groups such as Bauls and Sahajiyas, and the supremacy of Brahmin priests and gurus. These social reforms, as well as his desire to spread Gaudiya Vaishnavism across the world, particularly to the West and bringing it in line with "rational" religion and modern science place Bhaktivinoda Thakur firmly into the realm of Bengali Hindu reform. However, as Gaudiya Vaishnavism, being centered on public devotion to Krishna, rather than private contemplation of a formless absolute, does not match van Bijlert's notion of Vedanta, he chose to exclude reformers adhering to that school of Vedanta, known as *acintyabhedābheda* (inconceivable oneness and difference).

[3] While Olivelle's article is more recent than van Bijlert's book, it builds on earlier indological critiques of Dumont's theories, including his own earlier work on life stages in Hinduism, which is why I chose to cite it as the most up-to -date indological, i.e. text-centered critique.

actual interconnections and mutualities, then at least on the way in which humans more generally experience the divine, make sense of changing socio-historical circumstances and organize themselves in order to effect societal change. Additionally, he expertly traces the shift from individualistic spirituality to collective activism, thereby providing key insights into the development of (Hindu) nationalism in the Indian subcontinent, insights which, given the current political climate, are sure to remain topical for decades to come.

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