Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy

Introduction

The previous two chapters offered an empirical case study followed by a theoretical investigation. I began with the fact that for the Kimbanguists, despite many European practices, the Christian scriptures are about Simon Kimbangu. This tradition of reasoning about scripture led to an excavation of their commitments, what Gadamer called ‘prejudices’, and to a broader account of the commitments that coordinate disputes among Christians about what counts as orthodoxy.

Gadamer’s account of the relationship between readers and texts began to clarify how debates about orthodoxy could be conceived in terms of the preservation or revision of a body of tradition-derived commitments. I posed revisions to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutic based on phenomena evident in the global reception of Christianity. I tried to indicate how traditions affect processes of perception and reasoning, and how they provide resources for arbitrating between good and bad interpretations. The integration of traditions entailed in the reception of Christianity produces a rationality that governs the interpretive process, and the diverse reception of Christianity has involved the formation of diverse reading habits.

The next two chapters will follow the same pattern, first presenting a case study and then embarking on a theoretical investigation. However, these will shift the emphasis from an excavation of the diverse traditions that shape a rationality, to the way that rationality shapes the encountered world. Both the receptive and the creative aspects of traditioned reason are important to grasp if we want to see what transpires in disputes over orthodoxy; I have tried to emphasise the accumulation of tradition in the first half of the enquiry, and now as we begin the second half, we turn to the more projective aspects of traditioned reason.

I will examine the theological formation of the Indian theologian Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy (1891–1975), particularly as his theological methodology developed between 1915 and 1932. During this period, Appasamy's theological programme developed into a mission to revise the inheritance of Tamil commitments in such a way that the traditioned reason of his community supported doctrines and practices that appeared Hindu but expressed Christian commitments. No more than in the study of the Kimbanguists does this chapter...
endorse the theological judgments made by Appasamy. Instead, our concern encompasses the historical development of Appasamy’s method for relating an Indian Hindu tradition to a European Christian tradition in order to produce Indian Christian theology.

Appasamy developed a theological strategy for merging traditions, a method that was cognizant of the theological consequences for the interpretation of scripture. The account of traditioned reason that I have offered thus far can describe what it is that Appasamy does in his theological methodology: he preserves superordinate commitments of Christian origin and appropriates subordinate Hindu judgments. As a consequence, other traditions sharing those same superordinate commitments have endorsed his theological judgments as orthodox or legitimately Christian.

2 A Brief Biography

Aiyadurai Jesudasen Appasamy was born on 3 September 1891 into a wealthy Pillai family in the dominant Vellalar caste of Tinnevelly (now Tirunelveli).\(^1\) Appasamy’s father, Dewān Bahadur A.S. Appasamy Pillai (1847–1926),\(^2\) was a successful lawyer and a ‘great believer in a hill holiday’, preferring to spend one or two months of the year vacationing to improve his health.\(^3\) The family owned land, which they rented out to farmers; they lived in prosperity on a large estate with numerous servants, and the walls of their home were adorned with the oil paintings of the famous Ravi Varma.\(^4\) The family was well connected with notable figures in local society as well as a number of foreign missionaries (such as the American Congregationalist, George Sherwood Eddy). A.J. Appasamy’s privileged background led to a distinguished career that would see him attend some of the best universities in the world, gain a position of authority and influence among Tamil Christians, help orchestrate the union of churches in South India, and eventually become a bishop in the newly formed

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1. The Vellalar caste presents a particularly complicated history—although the government listed them as Sat Śūdras in 1901, their rituals of purity and land control have supported their high social status.