REVIEWS


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I cannot say that I myself could ever pretend to grasp the whole of the Western cultural impetus intellectually, and to state what it is "all about". Perhaps only a "non-Westerner" could do this. One gains the impression from Dr. Balagangadhara that he has (at least) been able to show why religion is central to Western culture, and how this explains why Westerners look at the world in the way they do. That is an extraordinary claim. I am caught between admiring the effort and snorting over its pretentiousness; and between the Scylla of being a European-originated scholar patronizing a brilliant Indian mind and the Charybdis of my own aggressive self-assertion—to retort that I should "know it better". Whatever the upshots of my assessments, I will have to admit, on the one hand, that the author of this book has had gumption to attempt an "apparent impossibility", and I can only hope that my reactiveness, on the other, will be more out of defensiveness on behalf of sound judgement than from some horror at my own culture being "found out" by yet another insightful post-colonial critic.

This is not a book to be skimmed. It has many interlocked arguments, yet, however exhaustively, sometimes gleefully, they are pursued, the book is far too long. Most of its propositions could have been reduced to half the length, and saved the trees. Before submission as a doctoral thesis, in fact, the supervisor should have nipped it in the bud with a call for scissors. In nuce, Balagangadhara rightly suspects that Western scholars see entities called "religions" in all the world's cultures because their own discourse, their own traditional myth-history about post-diluvian social beginnings, indeed the very fact that religio is intrinsic to their own culture complex, leads them to this inevitable conclusion. Those scholars who have been affected by the Enlightenment, or are avowedly post-Christian, have not, per-
haps cannot, escape this propensity. Surrogate terminology for religion, such as “world-view”, still seems to lead toward the same traps.

The title of the book is a subtle tilt at unthinking missionary-influenced attitudes. Westerners have misguidedly treated non-Christian (or non-European) ways as heathenish: they have claimed to confront the uncivilized, depraved customs which were really not debased when properly understood; or alleged that idolatry was present whenever the effigies of deities appeared, only to miss the point that, in India at any rate, no one ever literally identified a carving with a spirit-being. It is the Westerners who have really been blind, and Balagangadhara joins a chorus of Indian voices lamenting European arrogance and misunderstanding, and Western scholars should be able to take all this “on the chin” in our acclaimedly post-colonial context. After all, Balagangadhara makes good use of those “European-originated” researchers—Philip Almond noticeably among them—who have argued that such so-called “religions” of India as Hinduism and Buddhism were inventions of Western minds, to categorize what ought to be in the East when it was apparently not.

How does one respond to these interesting challenges? Let me first say that I had occasion to read Balagangadhara’s strictures in tandem with a clever article about what went wrong with the West by Marshall Sahlins, for *Current Anthropology* (37 [1996]), and I came away preferring Balagangadhara’s attempt. Curiously, Sahlins’ “Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology” reads virtually every major shift of consciousness from intellectual texts; Balagangadhara has a better feel for popular mentalités and thus a greater sense of continuity in Western outlooks. He certainly has more space to avoid Sahlins’ slickness, and of course it is easier to tolerate the critique of a foreigner learned about Western culture (even if he is frustrated by it) that to put up with a Westerner who almost inevitably self-gratifies—by elevating his own brilliantly conceived standpoint as a “final-looking arbitration of meaning” within a history of ideas too complex to bear his univocal solutions. But I have already worried over Balagangadhara’s possible presumptuousness; all I do here is to concede that in the Indian’s efforts I find a certain welcome earnest patience about sorting out each relevant problem as it comes, as against a “smart-bombing by the intellect” that I find so sickeningly prevalent among my (typically ethno-biased) academic peers.

Still, there are some curious blind-spots in the Balagangadhara