

Counter Matilal's Bias: The Philosophically Respectable in Indian Spiritual Thought

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Tirelessly and lucidly, with keen intelligence, did Bimal Krishna Matilal show to the world of English-speaking philosophers the rigors and insights – epistemological, ontological, linguistic and more – of much classical Indian thought. Thirty years ago, to do comparative philosophy, one needed, in addition to Sanskrit (or classical Chinese, etc.), only some intellectual history. But now, Matilal's command of contemporary philosophy of language and logic, as well as his extensive reading in Sanskrit texts, has established a new standard for specialists in classical Indian systems, namely, mastery of tools of philosophical analysis, now as important as language training. Although Matilal has not been alone in the cause, his work, I think, more than that of anyone else, except possibly the great classical philosophers themselves, has secured the study of Indian systems as a legitimate subfield within philosophy as a global discipline. And thanks to Professor Mañilal, and maybe to two or three others of his stature, a philosopher who still views Indian thought as thoroughly and irredeemably religious and mystical is easily or often corrected, and now by *non*-specialists. The time has not yet come when Śrīharṣa or Gaṅgeśa is as well known among philosophers as Leibniz or Hume, but it is not far distant. Matilal's books have made classical arguments and positions come alive in a modern idiom and informed by contemporary concerns. My point in this paper is to worry publicly that Matilal's success on the front of legitimation may have come at the cost of distorting some of the history of Indian philosophies, and of distorting what we and future generations may from them learn. He and others following his lead have dissociated the religious dimensions from the putatively truly philosophic dimensions of classical reflection, when there was in fact no need for there to be such separation.

The discussion that follows falls roughly into two parts. First, I shall identify Matilal's bias through citations and other references to his works, and show, by also discussing several great classical

philosophers, that Matilal's bias does indeed distort some important classical concerns. This demonstration unfortunately can be no more than a sketch, because of the extensiveness of classical traditions and the brevity required in this piece. Nevertheless, I believe a convincing, even an overwhelming, case for the point can in a short space be made. Second, I shall argue that each of three prominent classical approaches to and defences of religious or spiritual practices and beliefs – (a) mystic empiricism, (b) rational theology and (c) self-certifyingly trustworthy, or unchallengeable, scriptural authority – are in themselves philosophically respectable. None of the three is very easily dismissed, and the first, the mystic empiricism, which resonates with strains of recent Western popular interest in Indian traditions, and which Matilal particularly disliked, may well survive the severest of onslaughts, and prove to be of lasting value.

Outside of a policy statement in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, which I shall turn to at the end of this section, Matilal's bias is subtle, and rarely in stark evidence. In what is probably his most influential book, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*,¹ there are, nevertheless, clear indications of it. There Matilal's principal interest is laying out and defending the Nyāya philosophy of perception, but, briefly, he also presents a reading of the history of classical thought as philosophy liberating itself from soteriology.

These concerns [intellectual concerns sparked by religious and soteriological teachings] are very general, but they obviously lead to issues which are very specific, complicated, involved, and intellectually demanding. For these are what we call today philosophical issues and puzzles. And when presented with puzzles and knots it is the nature of the human intellect to keep trying to unwind them. This then becomes part of the philosophical enterprise. After some time, slowly but surely the theological or salvational concerns are replaced almost unconsciously by philosophical ones. This is what has happened in the intellectual history of the medieval (classical) period in India.²

Later in the book there is a section entitled, "Philosophy versus Soteriology",³ and Matilal states that scriptures are said to "impart non-empirical or trans-empirical knowledge".⁴ He thus ignores, whether willfully or unconsciously, the claims of mystic empiricism, claims found in many schools and authors including Nyāya, to the effect that scripture is the result or record of a special kind of experience, or perception, *alaukika* or *yogi-pratyakṣa*, "extraordinary"

or "yogic perception" – as I shall elaborate below. The book is entitled Perception – *pratyakṣa* in Sanskrit – but not a word is said about the *yaugika* variety. And although early in the book Matilal does note the connection between Buddhist phenomenalism and Buddhist meditational teachings, by the end he has lost sight of this and talks of Buddhist phenomenalism as simply a view about how to make sense of sense presentations, a view that he shows to be inferior to Nyāya realism.

Matilal's forte was, of course, Nyāya, both early or Old "Logic" and the more refined Navya or "New" school. Doubtless, many of the hardheaded epistemologists and ontologists who worked under that flag were indeed for several generations underappreciated. There was, within India as well as outside, much intellectual infatuation with Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta. Considering my thesis here, the question of Nyāya's relation to yoga and religion in general demands comment, but first I want to concede that Matilal's bias only marginally affects, in my judgment, his exposition of Nyāya. The distortion is much more pronounced in his treatment of Nyāya's opponents and the history of classical philosophy as a whole.

For example, in his expert study of Navya Nyāya on absences, published in the Harvard Oriental Series as *The Navya-Nyāya Doctrine of Negation*,⁵ his long introduction and explanation of the basic concepts and tools of the system fail in fact to include this school's concept of God as well as its stand on yogic perception. Nevertheless, Matilal's treatment does not much suffer. This is because little of systematic value hangs on yogic perception; similarly, although God has the perfect bird's eye view such that Nyāya's extreme objectivism fits nicely with its theology, an understanding of God is not much appealed to to resolve non-theological issues and questions. Neither Nyāya's theology nor its views on yogic perception generate the apparatus of cognitive analysis or very many positions concerning the nature of the world. Both the theology and mystic empiricism are given short shrift by Matilal; still, I must qualify my original complaint, to say that the theology in particular does appear to be a separate, and separable, area within Nyāya. Its integration with the rest of the system is much more from the bottom up than from the top down. I repeat, there are few theological restrictions on Nyāya reflection. And mystic empiricism is much less developed in Nyāya than in some other schools. Thus with respect to appreciating Nyāya, Matilal's bias does not have much consequence. The untoward consequences appear when one considers Nyāya's place within classical thought as a whole, in particular with respect to Nyāya's

opponents, but also with respect to Vedāntic theists, who borrow Nyāya conceptions, as I shall explain below.

A proper rebuttal of Matilal's presentations of Nāgārjuna and Mādhyamika Buddhism or of Dharmakīrti and Yogācāra Buddhism is beyond what I can accomplish here. But in these cases – and also with Mīmāṃsā and dialectical Advaita Vedānta – Matilal's sense of the philosophically respectable does make him miss much at the heart of the philosophies. For example, in *Epistemology, Logic, and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis*,⁶ where an entire chapter (out of a total of five) is devoted to Mādhyamika, Matilal misses the soteriological logic of the *śūnyatā* (or "emptiness") concept, seeing it as most importantly informed by the mathematical notion of zero.⁷ He purports to resolve the puzzle of what, if anything, is the Mādhyamika's own philosophic position, by differentiating, with reference to grammatical findings, two types of negation, and by finding degrees of commitment, from the minimal or none to full commitment, entailed by a denial.⁸ There is not much I would wish to dispute in this discussion. But he misses the point of the Mādhyamika dialectic, which is to help one become detached from one's own thoughts and opinions and to achieve a meditational transcendence.⁹ Because of his bias, Matilal fails to frame his discussion of Mādhyamika in the right way, and thus does not do justice to the philosophical/religious stance.

Similarly, Matilal misses the spiritual place of Yogācāra Buddhist epistemology. Dharmakīrti is such an astute reasoner, with so much plain academicism in his thought, that it is easy for Matilal, or anyone, to mine gems without taking into account his Buddhist commitment. But it is important to see Dharmakīrti's pragmatism as grounded in a metaphysical skepticism entailed by Buddhist soteriology. It is also grounded in the Second Noble Truth, which Dharmakīrti understands as stating that our everyday perceptions and conceivings are conditioned by self-regarding desire – desire which we must reject to reach the highest end, the *paramapurusaṛtha*, the goal of our only noble desire, namely, to be a Bodhisattva, an end by which Buddhist soteriological teaching is itself proved correct pragmatically. Matilal, in *Perception* and other works, treats Dharmakīrti as too much like a contemporary nominalist, with his pragmatism founded in nothing more than suspicion of arbitrariness in class concepts, suspicion about Nyāya's so-called "natural kinds."¹⁰

Now Matilal is an appreciative reader of Mīmāṃsā reflection on language and knowledge, but at no place that I know of does he bring out what I (and others) see as the heart of the Exegetes' philosophy,

namely, their defence of traditional religious practices by a constant, rigorous and philosophically respectable refusal to assume a burden of proof. I shall elaborate on this in the next section.

Let me close this one with one further example from Matilal's corpus, concening the great eleventh-century Advaitin, Śrīharṣa, and then with an editorial statement from the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*.

In *Perception*, Matilal states, erroneously, that Śrīharṣa "enters debate simply to refute others and it is not his responsibility to state his position much less to defend it."¹¹ So, according to Matilal, the Advaita dialectic would clear the way for a mystical intuition, which is beyond the purview of philosophy and rational inquiry. But although the importance of a mystical experience is upheld by Śrīharṣa — who is, I might explain, perhaps the greatest of classical Advaita polemicists, famed for his refutations of all views rival to Advaita Vedānta, and in particular Nyāya — Matilal's interpretation grossly misrepresents the intent of Śrīharṣa's refutations. This is to show that there are no viable challengers to the views, intellectually cognized views, about Brahman that are proclaimed in the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣadic views themselves are self-certified (*svataḥ pramāṇena*), the Advaitin claims, but, Śrīharṣa admits, it may appear that these are contradicted by other views warranted on the basis of sense perception, etc. A prime example is the Nyāya view about distinctness, *bheda*, namely, that there are fundamentally distinct individuals. This contradicts the Upaniṣadic teaching that Brahman, the One, is the only reality. The Upaniṣadic teaching seems to be challenged by the Nyāya view of distinctness, but when it is seen that the purported Nyāya challenger self-destructs, failing to be coherent, as Śrīharṣa shows by his dialectic, then Advaita Vedānta, intellectually appreciated Advaita Vedānta, I might again stress, stands, as before, as self-certified.

In other words, Śrīharṣa's refutations are to serve to back Nyāya philosophers and others into the Advaita view, by means of eliminative argument. Śrīharṣa also anticipates the misunderstanding of his project that his refutations will be construed as confined in scope to the particular topics examined and the epistemological positions and ontological categories of Nyāya, et al. And I think that what he says with this worry in mind may have misled Professor Matilal into his anti-intellectual interpretation. That is, Śrīharṣa anticipates the objection that were he concerned with the truth (*vāda*), he would offer an alternative, patched-up view on each of the topics where he has shown the Nyāya view to be inadequate. And in this context — the

context, namely, of someone insisting on a replacement theory – Śrīharṣa says that his reflection should be taken (provisionally) as being in the spirit of a radical *vitaṇḍin*, a debater who has no positive view on that topic.¹² Maybe it is this particular passage that misled Matilal. But surely his bias against there being any intellectual content in a mystically inspired view reinforced if it did not lead to his wrong reading. In any case, Śrīharṣa throughout his major work emphasizes that what principally concerns him is not any individual topic, but rather relinquishment of the entire Nyāya realist view in an embrace of the Advaita alternative. And Matilal misses this entirely.¹³

Matilal's bias shows up in still further works of research, but probably its clearest expression is in a policy statement he made upon inaugurating the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, in 1970. This is the journal he edited for the next twenty years, and the editorship is an important part of Matilal's legacy. Through a policy of favoring research on Nyāya, which he saw as the school least sullied by mysticism and the most relevant to modern concerns, Matilal helped shape the direction of the philosophic subfield of India-studies. And let me say, lest my showing up his bias be misread, that I see his leadership as on the whole (ninety-five to ninety-eight percent, if I had to quantify) as excellent. Nevertheless, there is the bias. In an "Editorial," which runs from page one to page three of the first issue of the first volume, we find this statement: "The field of our contributions will be bound by the limits of rational inquiry; we will avoid questions that lie in the fields of theology and mystical experience. Our method will be, in a very general sense, analytical and comparative, and we will aim at a rigorous precision in the translations of terms and statements. Our aim will be to attract professional philosophers rather than professional internationalists."¹⁴ Thus did B.K. Matilal make plain his desire to steer the discipline into classical logic and philosophy of language and away from, as he says, "questions that lie in the fields of theology and mystical experience." And given that there needed to be a corrective to the wide-spread impression that classical Indian philosophy is all mysticism and religion, we should be somewhat thankful for Matilal's bias. But bias it is, all the same. Is there anything intrinsic to the "fields of theology and mystical experience" that should place them beyond the "limits to rational inquiry?" I now turn to the second part of my presentation, where I shall argue no: not only were theology and mysticism not excluded in classical times from rational or philosophic scrutiny, they should not be excluded period.

First I shall take up the Mīmāṃsaka defence of scripture and

religious and ethical practices considered enjoined by scripture, a defence that centers on a refusal to shoulder a burden of proof. The position, known in philosophy as the doctrine of *svataḥ pramāṇa*, "self-certification," profits by a nexus of Mīmāṃsaka views about scripture as well as about words, sentences, speech acts, and the signifier-signified relation. It also profits from meta-epistemological difficulties of foundationalism. Self-certificationalism is not as outlandish as it may seem at first blush. With respect to a claim arising out of perception, for example, extrinsic consideration, Mīmāṃsakas clearly insist, may override or defeat it, proving it false. Truth, veridicality, or warrant is taken to be intrinsic to a cognitive act, that is, just in case it is true, etc., but when it is false, etc., extrinsic considerations are required to bring its falsehood out. There is greater sophistication and complexity in the view than I have so far indicated in that especially later Mīmāṃsakas carefully differentiate the epistemic logic, so to say, of perceptions as opposed to assertive utterances and a whole range of distinct cognitive acts. But I am trying to get quickly to the main point, which is the Mīmāṃsaka understanding of scripture. The Mīmāṃsaka wants in particular to avoid the relativism, or even nihilism, to which a challenge to the foundations of ethics, or *dharma*, as known scripturally, would apparently lead. How else could a challenge to the foundations of morals be blocked except by finding presumption in their favor? And how may such presumption be found so long as one is willing continually to admit the cogency of a challenge? The only viable foundationalism demands at bottom such intrinsic warrant that all doubt is by it repelled. Such, Mīmāṃsakas aver, is present in scripture's commands) expressed by sentences whose verbs are in the optative mode) enjoining dharmic acts. Thus the deep motivation appears to be fear of, or the loathesomeness of, the otherwise inevitable alternative. Our view is by its own standard better than yours, which is a no-view in that your purported standard would defeat all (ethical) claims.¹⁵

The Veda's commands are further insulated from challenge, according to Mīmāṃsakas, because they have no author (*apauruṣyatva*). The Exegetes see no reason to suppose the existence of God as the author of scripture, and counter the theistic arguments advanced by Naiyāyikas and others. The Veda's commands do engage the hearer and actor in the sacred, and followed they secure an ideal circle of birth and rebirth. Properly speaking, they direct us to become sacrificers, *yajñamāna*: ideally, all acts would be sacrifices, in a thoroughly dharmic life. But the commands are themselves transtemporal, archetypal or "constant" (*nitya*, often mistakenly inter-

preted as "eternal") directives whose sense is independent of the intentions of anyone. The commands, like all sentences, are intentional, having meaning in reference to objects, or, more properly acts, beyond themselves. But their intentionality is intrinsic, not imparted by anyone, nor by conventions. Even with everyday discourse, do we need to know a speaker's or author's intention in order to be able to understand a sentence? Since the intention could be understood only by way of another sentence, an affirmative answer would be incoherent.

Now there may be several objectionable assumptions in the Exegetes' understanding of language and meaningfulness. But my point is only that their approach to defending their religious ethics is philosophically respectable. Many Mīmāṃsaka assumptions are challenged by Naiyāyikas and others who subscribe to a conventionalist philosophy of language. In response to, very intricately interconnected considerations get aired and philosophy in classical India advances. Professor Matilal has made the same observation. But my complaint against him is, again, that the philosophy in all this is not limited to the debate about language and meaning, but also includes the religious motivation and positions of the Mīmāṃsakas. To ignore the religious positions seems a blindness born of mere bias.¹⁶

Next I turn to Nyāya rational theology. As many have pointed out, the Nyāya projects are thoroughly cosmological,¹⁷ and the attempt to specify precisely the locus as well as the mark or attribute (qualifying the locus) that indicates God is fueled by thoughtful objections from atheistic schools as well as by theistic piety. The arguments are intricate and become more intricate over the years as objections are met and there are advances in understanding inference in general. Little needs to be said by me about Nyāya's rational theology being philosophically respectable. Professor Matilal recognized its philosophic value, though, as I have said, he tended to ignore this dimension of Nyāya in his expositions such that one would not know from his work alone how extensive the theology is. Fortunately, there are several fine philosophic explorations of this area of Nyāya by other scholars.¹⁸

How curious it is, however, that little attention has been paid to the appropriation by theistic Vedāntins of Nyāya projects! With the followers of Madhva in particular, explicit effort is made to work out a theology and theistic world view equally and compatibly informed by both scripture and cosmological considerations. Here we find Nyāya advances put to use in a theology in the service of religious practice. It seems to me healthy that there be such combinations. But Matilal's bias would reinforce divorce and estrangement, and dull us to what is

a vigorous intellectual tradition continuing into the very latest classical times.¹⁹

Finally, mysticism in classical philosophy, or, better, mystic empiricism. This is a third classical approach to religious and spiritual beliefs that I find not only philosophically respectable but potentially compelling. Here the core view seems to be a parallelism thesis: as sense experience is informative about physical objects, so mystical experience is informative about a spiritual being or realm. Now I think that there is an implicit mystic empiricism in the Upaniṣads and other spiritual works of India and religious traditions all over the world. This would correspond to the common practice of forming beliefs about one's immediate environment based on one's sense experiences, whether one is a philosopher or not. Thus Upaniṣadic statements about Brahman and the self, at least some of them, would have been based on special experiences; certain Upaniṣadic statements would express or reflect those experiences, whether or not this "mystic founding" itself is claimed. But there is also an explicit, philosophically self-conscious assertion of epistemological parallelism in the writings of many great classical philosophers. For example, the renowned Advaitin, Śaṅkara, draws the analogy: "Knowledge (*vidyā*) of *brahman* is dependent on a real thing, just like the knowledge of the real things that are the objects of such means of knowledge as sense perception".²⁰ Many similar statements could be cited, including claims made by Naiyāyikas.²¹

There are also claims that through yoga and the accumulation of religious merit, the organs of perception are modified, particularly the sense mind (*manas*), such that not only spiritual matters, but physical things that are subtle, remote, or normally hidden, are directly perceived. Perhaps there have been confirmations of the epistemic value of yoga-born (*yogaja*) perception with respect to states of affairs accessible to us all, mystic or non-mystic, and thus the yoga-born "knowledge" would be checked by ordinary means, and be confirmed or disconfirmed. This is now the province of psychical research, and there are interesting, but also disputed and decidedly mixed, results in the area. But my interest is with matters, such as the reality of God or Brahman, that would not easily be known through a non-mystical route, the projects of rational theology notwithstanding. And my point is, first of all, that with respect to such spiritual matters an epistemic parallelism between ordinary and extraordinary perception was commonly upheld by classical Indian philosophers.

Then, second, the possibility that there be such epistemic parallelism, if it is a real possibility, is a possibility that religious beliefs

– about the existence of Brahman or God, for instance – have firm foundations. We who are not mystics, and have not had the foundational experiences, could nevertheless be warranted in subscribing to a religious or spiritual view in that warrant is normally, with qualifications (concerning *āptatva*, etc.), transferred by testimony along with the propositions testified to. When I tell you that my dog Malone has long ears, you are warranted in so believing unless there are warrant – undermining circumstances such as your knowing that I am prone to lie or mislead. Similarly, one might have a right (an epistemic obligation?) to accept the testimony of the Upaniṣads, etc.

Of course, there are several issues, several complex and difficult issues, that would have to be addressed and several questions that would have to be satisfactorily answered to show that the epistemic parallelism thesis is itself warranted. For example, particularly difficult is the problem of apparently conflicting mystic testimony when world mystic literature is brought into view. However, several interesting strategies for disarming the problem have been and need to be further explored (e.g., to limit oneself to what I call a minimalist position).²² This is not the place for an extended discussion. My contention is, I repeat, that the parallelism thesis is a philosophically promising topic, holding forth the possibility of religious or spiritual knowledge – and that its promise is sufficient to establish the philosophical respectability of the mystic empiricism of classical Indian philosophy.

Partly thanks to Professor Matilal, we can feel secure about the philosophical respectability of much classical Indian thought. But this security is not endangered, counter Matilal's apparent fear, by an encounter with the religious or spiritual.

NOTES

1. Oxford: 1986.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 69ff, emphasis added.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
5. Cambridge, Mass.: 1968.
6. The Hague: 1971.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 162ff.
9. See Christian Lindtner, *Nagarjuniana* (Delhi: 1987) for elaboration and a practically knock-down case.

Yogendra Chopra makes a similar complaint against Matilal in "The Significance of Professor Matilal's "Logical Illumination of Indian Mysticism," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 12, no. 1 (Sept.-Dec. 1994). Chopra's thesis

complements mine: Matilal's case for what he calls Indian mysticism being philosophic comes at the expense of at best downplaying the soteriological in it. Chopra accuses Matilal of overemphasizing the semantic puzzles in the dialectics of Nāgārjuna, also with Śrīharṣa (more about whom below), and I endorse the indictment. The difference between Chopra and myself is that he would characterize the soteriological dimension in Indian mysticism as "Other" to philosophy, i.e., Western philosophy, and possibly as therefore valuable, whereas I find nothing intrinsically alien to thoughtful scrutiny in the mysticism, endorsing the approach of certain classical philosophers themselves (see below).

10. *Perception*, op. cit. Practically the same interpretation is presented with respect to Dharmakīrti's forerunner Dignāga in *Logical and Ethical Issues of Religious Belief* (Calcutta: 1982), Chap. 5.

For a view similarly opposed to Matilal's reading of Dharmakīrti but differing somewhat from mine, see Ernst Steinkellner's "The Spiritual Place of the Epistemological Tradition in Buddhism", *Nanto Bukkyō* 49(1982).

11. Op.cit., p. 65.

12. Śrīharṣa's *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhāḍya*, ed. V. Jha, pp. 127-29.

13. For elaboration, see my book, *Classical Indian Metaphysics: Refutations of Realism and the Emergence of 'New Logic'* (La Salle, III: 1995), Chap. 3.

14. October 1970: p. 2.

15. The Mīmāṃsaka epistemology of self-certification reverberates with several modern positions, the anti-evidentialism of Alvin Plantinga and the negative coherentism explained by John Pollock, to mention just two examples. But one does not need to show such similarity to maintain the philosophical respectability of the Mīmāṃsaka project; at least, so I would hope. After all, the Mīmāṃsaka stance is in many ways unique.

16. For the preceding presentation, I am particularly indebted to the work of Puruṣhottama Bilimoria. See his "On the Idea of Authorless Revelation", in *Indian Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Roy Perrett (Dordrecht: 1989) for a well-written and succinct but far more detailed exposition than what I have done here.

17. Arindam Chakrabarti, for example, has pointed this out. His paper, "From the Fabric to the Weaver", in *Indian Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Roy Perrett (Dordrecht: 1989) is an excellent overview of this dimension of Nyāya.

18. See Arindam Chakrabarti's references, for example, in addition to his own piece, *ibid.*

19. The fourth volume of Surendranath Dasgupta's five-volume *History of Indian Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1922) charts the literature, but little has appeared since.

20. *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 1.1.4: *brahmavidyā ... pratyakṣādipramāṇaviśayavastujñānavad vastutantrā*.

21. A particularly good example occurs with Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, *Nyāyamañjarī*, Kashi Sanskrit Series 106, ed. S.N. Sukla (Varanasi: 1971), pp. 95-97.

22. I have a book in progress where I am trying to work out what I call a global spiritual minimalism where many contradictions and tensions disappear in an admission that there is no right to assert more than a minimal core of spiritual doctrine, far less than is asserted in the theologies, etc., associated with world religions. Like William James, I see personal faith responsible for "overbeliefs" that would fill out the minimal core. Other strategies have been tried, with some success, but such prominent thinkers as Vivekananda, S.N. Nasr, Huston Smith and John Hick.

