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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The Hermeneutical Discussion in India Today

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The Papers published in this issue witness to the fact that the hermeneutical discussion of the West has now entered Indian theological circles. Until a few years ago the very word "hermeneutics" was strange and puzzling, even to many theologians, not to speak of the secular thinker. Today the picture begins to change. And if the discussion develops, it might get to the very roots of the problem of our Indian identity—in the nation as well as in the Church.

For that is what hermeneutics is all about. The way I interpret reality determines my identity to a very large extent. And vice versa. For if the insights of Gadamer and others are to be trusted, it is what I am that affects what I see. My perception of reality is profoundly shaped, not only by my previous personal experience, but also my experiences "remembered"—by my genes as it were. What my people have experienced in the past, what my nation has gone through, how my race has evolved, how the earth has been formed, how the universe has been shaped—all these shape my perception of reality.

The most important task of hermeneutics is to make us aware of the process by which we perceive reality, so that we can take a critical stance towards it, correct it where possible, improve and develop our perceptions—within the limits set by our culture, history and socio-economic frame of existence.

And here is the most worrying misunderstanding of hermeneutics in certain European theological circles. They want to short-circuit the whole cumbersome process of asking ourselves the questions :

- (a) how do I perceive reality?
- (b) can I improve the way I perceive it?

These misinterpreters would reduce the questions as follows :

- (a) what are the rules to interpret the Bible?
- (b) how do I improve my way of interpreting the Bible?

The fact of the matter is that the second set of questions cannot be answered adequately without dealing with the first set, which provides the context for interpreting the Bible.

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The consultations we have had cannot be said to have provided the answer for either set of questions. But they have opened some doors.

For example, Dr Christopher Duraisingh would argue that it is only as a "hyphenated Indian-Christian" that we can perceive reality today, and therefore that we must become critically aware of what it means to be both an Indian and a Christian today. Our tribal friends in the North-East would tell us that it means little to them to say that they are Indians, insofar as they have been very much on the margin of the mainstream of Hindu-Buddhist culture. They have their own way of perceiving reality as Tribals; and they would claim that their perceptions are just as legitimately Indian as those of the Hindu or the Buddhist. And we who are not "Tribals," at least in our own self-understanding, find that aspects of their perception belong to our psychic structure. We are enlightened in our own self-understanding as we listen to them explain theirs.

Fr K.M. George, approaching the question of interpretation of reality from an Oriental Christian perspective, reminds us of the great insight of the Christian tradition, that the tradition of the community plays a decisive role in the shaping of our perceptions, that we cannot comprehend the "being" of God in itself though we can relate to Him as a God who relates Himself to us in Christ, and that language cannot adequately reflect our perceptions without the aid of myth and symbol.

Perhaps the most decisive element in our perception of reality is our training. Most of us Indian theologians have been schooled more in the ways of thinking of the West, than in our own heritage and tradition as a people. Our identity has been obscured and suppressed by our training. We try to think and write in an idiom which at bottom is still strange to us. And we falter in our perceptions, mouthing statements that come less from our own being than from our training.

The main thing we have learned from our consultations is that we have only started to scratch the surface of what is obviously a field in which treasure is hidden. We have to dig deeper, and turn up the dry soil of the surface of our minds, before we can discover our own identity, as people and as Christians.

Strangely enough, we still have to use the tools provided by the West to do that digging. But at some point in the operation we will have to look for new tools and new ways of working. We do not even know yet what kind of tools we need to forge on our own. So we keep using these borrowed tools, until they have turned over the surface soil. Only as we discover what is underneath can we begin to fashion new tools.

The papers presented in this issue represent only some fumbling attempts to scratch the surface, as has been said. We must go on examining the nature of the surface soil and the tools we use to turn it over. The other process—that of forging new tools and discovering new depths—can come about only as we go about our present job with the surface soil.

Indian Christian theology will need to ask the questions about the "meaning of meaning," about the nature of knowledge, and about the way to true knowledge where knower, known and knowledge do not remain three distinct realities. We will need to be clear about language and its limits as well as its function. We will have to examine the assumptions about the scientific method transmitted to us from the modern West.

As Christians we need to know how the Spirit of God, working in the community of faith, creates the Tradition which shapes Christian perception. The Bible is an important element in the operation of the Spirit in the community. But we will certainly need to know more about the larger operation of the Spirit, not only in the community of faith, but also in humanity as a whole, and in fact in the whole universe, before we can understand in perspective what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To be open to the Spirit is the major part of hermeneutics. But the minor part is sharpening our intellectual, spiritual and symbolic tools of perception. It is within that minor part that the papers of this Consultation belong. The major part is the operation of the Spirit today and an openness to it. It is as a step towards moving closer to that openness that these papers are offered.