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The Brahma Kumaris as a ‘reflexive Tradition’: Responding to late modernity

By John Walliss

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1 Reflexive Tradition

In this study John Walliss tries to incorporate the results of various recent social theories into the scientific study of religious traditions – especially that of Anthony Giddens on the emergence of a posttraditional society – and he tries to take into consideration how traditions may persist and even flourish in modern society. He combines this with fieldwork on a neo-Hindu tradition, the Brahma Kumaris. In his introduction the author draws the relations between sociology, religion and sociology of religion itself. He signals a ‘gradual divorce’ over the last decades between mainstream sociology and sociology of religion. The last couple of years, however, we may find a kind of ‘partial resynchronization’ in two ways: ‘Firstly, there is a growing interest in aspects of contemporary religiosity within more mainstream work. . . Secondly, partly as a reaction to the above, sociologists of religion and religious studies have begun to explore the relationship between religion and issues within social theory. (viii)’. Walliss completely bypasses the secularization debate because he considers this discussion to be partisan and ‘frankly boring’ in the way in which it has developed over the last decades. More than just secularisation is at stake when it comes to the position of religiosity in the Western world.

In the introduction (Responding to Late Modernity) and the chapters I (Beyond Tradition and Modernity) and II (Reflexive Traditions and the New Age Religious Life) we find lucid descriptions of themes like ‘Powers of Traditions’, ‘Tradition and Modernity’, ‘Detraditionalisation’, ‘New Age Religion’, and ‘Reflexive Traditions’, to name just a few. ‘Reflexivity’, ‘Reflexive society’ and ‘Reflexive Tradition’ are key concepts used by Walliss in his study. In industrial society, the main focus was on the distribution of products, or ‘goods’. The successor of this society can be said to be ‘reflexive’, because while continuing this production, it is concerned primarily with the distribution – prevention, minimisation, channelling – of the ‘bads’, i.e. the dangers resulting from industrial society. These

dangers can no longer be denied and it is no longer possible to hold one group in society responsible for them. Moreover, the products from industrial society have such drastic side-effects that they lay a heavy burden on the shoulders of posterity. This is especially true if we think of the environment and nuclear waste for instance. In short this is what can be said to be that 'reflexive' about reflexive traditions or society. This Reflexiveness is then further linked in this study to personal reflexivity.

In chapter II, Walliss relates the concept of 'reflexive traditions' – which he derives from Philip Mellor – to the New Age religious life. It is important to keep in mind, however, as Walliss states on p. 19, that New Age is not a unity and that even though the term New Age might suggest a rather homogeneous religious group, in fact New Age has developed into a general term to denote a wide variety of (semi)religious or spiritual groups and movements. It is even unlikely that any of the instigators of what by outsiders could be described as typical New Age movements, would appreciate to see his or her chosen path designated as such.

Walliss (p. 27) locates New Age religions between detraditionalisation and re-traditionalisation because in the process of constructing the 'new' and rejecting the old, elements are taken from the ancient material handed over by older traditions, and in these strands of old traditions and the applications of these we may recognize many of the characteristics of this 'new thinking'. Walliss finds evidence for this in the process of how New Agers use the 'old way of thinking' in reconstructing their reflexive (spiritual) biographies.

Following Reender Kranenburg (1999), Walliss calls the Brahma Kumaris a neo-Hindu sect, but in the meantime, over the last decade, the movement has actively embraced many of the aspects identifiable as 'New Age' (p. 29) and he carefully links these developments to the conceptual framework worked out in the first chapters.

2 The Brahma Kumaris

As a movement the Brahma Kumaris predate the New Age movement, but over the years the Brahma Kumaris have developed characteristics that link them to New Age thinking proper. Walliss points out in chapter III 'From World-Rejection to Ambivalence: A Genealogy of the Brahma Kumaris', how the Brahma Kumaris developed and got their recent characteristics which, in his view, legitimise the choice to designate them as 'reflexive'.

The Brahma Kumaris were founded by Dad Lekhraj, who is considered by members to be 'the incarnation and descent of God, the World Father, into the corporeal world' (p. 33). He was born at Sindh in 1876 as a member of the Kripani family, the members of which usually were devotees of the Vallabhasampradaya. Lekhraj was a man of considerable education. He worked as a wheat trader and later on his business concerned diamonds. Due to these undertakings he became aware of the particular sufferings of women in his society. On the other hand, as Walliss says (p. 33), he also came into contact with royalty, above all the noble families of the Raj, mainly due to his activities as a diamond trader. He is even

said to have known the British Viceroy and the king of Nepal. Being a Vallabhite he originally worshiped Narayan, a form of Vishnu. He disapproved, however, Lakshmi's low position compared to that of her husband Vishnu. Lekhraj was a devout Hindu, he was a vegetarian, and frequently went on pilgrimage tours. He became sensitive to the aforementioned position of women in traditional Indian society and one aspect in this matter Walliss does not mention: in imitation of Krishna having liaisons with the for the most part married or at least engaged gopis (i.e. cowherd girls), the main gurus of the Vallabhasampradaya, the Maharajas, had adulterous affairs with the wives of their devotees. This led to discrimination and misuse of women within the Vallabhite community and it even gave rise to the notorious Maharaja Libel case that came to trial in Bombay in the late 19th century. These traditions within the Vallabhasampradaya may as well have contributed to Lekhraj's eye for the role of women and his attempts to improve their status. In 1936, at the age of sixty, his wife advised him to retire and to direct his life towards spiritual pursuits and it is at this time that he begins to receive his visions of Vishnu and Shiva. One of his main visions concerned the establishment of a perfected paradise after a kind of universal destruction of the cosmos. This destruction was necessary for an ideal world to be established. Lekhraj received a message that he was an avatar (i.e. incarnation) of Krishna. Here we see one more parallel with the Maharajas in the Vallabhite community who are considered to be *amsha* (i.e. partial) incarnations of Krishna. Lekhraj got messages about hidden interpretations of the Bhagavadgita and yet another parallel came to be established between Lekhraj and Krishna. As Krishna found his counterpart in Radha, his favourite girlfriend, Lekhraj found his counterpart in one of the group's prime female followers named Radha, later Om Radhe and still later Jagadamba Sarasvati. Lekhraj himself changed his name into Prajipita Brahma (the father of humanity) and later on into Brahma Baba, 'Father Brahma'. He himself claimed these changes of his name to be inspired by divine intervention. Lekhraj's teachings and his growing group of followers faced many difficulties from the very beginning. Lekhraj attracted many female followers that gave him the reputation of being a womaniser who kept a big harem. Once more it might be important to keep the erotic symbolism of the Vallabhasampradaya in mind. The husbands of the women who had joined the group formed anti-Om *mandli* groups who even attacked the settlements of the group at times. Lekhraj took his retreat to Kashmir and from there he started to give his sermons and messages to his followers. These messages were called Murlis, 'flute-playing' in reference to Krishna's calling of his beloved by his magical flute play.

Of primary importance in the revelations Lekhraj is said to have received is that the members of the Brahma Kumari 'university' should undergo 'death-in-life', they should 'die towards the outer world'. They had to renounce their families and thus they got the opportunity to be 'divinely reborn' in a 'divine family' (p. 37). To stress this spiritual rebirth the members were given new divinely inspired names. Hindu mythology was reinterpreted by Lekhraj in order to lay a foundation for his teachings and to connect these to greater Hinduism, an ancient tradition often built upon by Indian teachers and founders of new religious

groups. Thus, the number of Krishna's wives, i.e. 16,108 was interpreted as referring to the total number of Brahma Kumaris that would be there at the end of times. The stainless saligram stone, a fossil ammonite that symbolises Krishna or Vishnu in his marriage to Tulsidevi, the sacred basil plant, symbolises the soul of the Brahma Kumaris while the 108 beads of the mala, or rosary, represent the 108 stainless followers of Lekhraj. The Mahabharata was reinterpreted and the Brahma Kumaris came to be considered as the Pandavas while the entire Indian population came to be seen as the Kauravas. The Yadavas, whose entire tribe was according to the Mahabharata addicted to alcoholic drinks and was rooted out by interior struggles by the means of a magical iron club, were identified with Western scientists. The period of thirteen years at the beginning of the Mahabharata during which the Pandavas were to remain in hiding was equated to the years during which the Brahma Kumaris were to keep their activities more or less hidden from the outside world.

Community life was very strict and listening to the Murlis was an essential part of the daily routine. So were meditation and other activities considered to be spiritual. Weeks of silence could be part of the process of spiritual purification and interior control could be stretched to the extreme. Delinquents could be summoned to nightly courts in which the offenders had to defend themselves versus Lekhraj and the whole community.

In the beginning of the 1950's, however, this was about to change. Lekhraj had given warnings that the division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan would imply an outbreak of violence between Hindus and Muslims. The Brahma Kumaris moved their headquarters from Sindh – which became part of Pakistan after 1947 – to Mount Abu in Gujarat, the place where according to Hindu mythology Brahma and Sarasvati had done their penances 5000 years ago. By this time Lekhraj's fortunes had run out and he started to accept gifts from well-wishers and even dowries of parents who understood their children would never marry. This change of attitude implied a shift in emphasis as well. Up to now the attitude of the Brahma Kumaris towards the outside world was best characterised as 'world-rejection'. After the earlier mentioned essential destruction of the world there would follow a golden age, so it was believed. The shift to Mount Abu, however, implied a renewed outlook on the universe that is rightly called 'ambivalence' by Walliss. In 1952 Lekhraj launched his active proselytising and 'world service'. Later on other centres were founded all over India and 'world service' even became one of the most important activities of the Brahma Kumaris. Radha who was by now called 'Mama' died in 1965, Lekhraj in 1969. The university was taken over by two women, Dadi Prakashini and Didi Manmohini who continued the activities as introduced earlier by Lekhraj. By now there are some 450,000 active members of the movement spread out over 77 countries. In the 1980s and 1990s the movement tried to become more and more affiliated to, among others, the Department of Public Information of the United Nations and UNICEF. After the university's original centre in London was demolished another centre was set up there, the Global Co-Operation House. In the meantime medical centres with a spiritual objective were set up in various places. At present the movement is

deeply involved in a range of activities that strive after the creation of a better, an idealized world in the process of which workshops on stress reduction are organised in schools, prisons, hospitals, drug clinics, homes for the elderly et cetera. In the teachings a selection of Western Christian ideas or ideas prevalent in New Age religion are combined with the Brahma Kumaris' teachings with selective traditional Hindu values. Walliss calls the latest development in the Brahma Kumaris' attitude towards the world 'utopian' in that they are actually trying to change the world into an ideal utopia, a 'reflexive utopia'.

After Lekhraj's death, problems arose as to the exact position and authority of his teachings and the Murlis. During his life, Lekhraj claimed that he was 'just a soul selected by god to be a medium'. After his death, however, he became a main focus of devotion. After death, he was thought to be part of an angelic realm, from which he at times would continue to spread messages. This idea led to various members of the community claiming to receive visions and messages from Lekhraj. In order to prevent the community from falling apart, it was decided that only the Murlis – received by the trance medium Sister Gulzar – were to be regarded as real visions and true revelations. She received these messages at specific times on Mount Abu. Thus Lekhraj gave his first Murli after his death on the 21th of January 1969.

Chapter IV deals with some of the essential teachings of the Brahma Kumaris that are often called Raja Yoga and are – as is to be expected – at times adjusted to fit in with the later ideological developments taking place within the movement itself. For studying Raja Yoga and other practices, Walliss participated in courses but also relies on literature and videos produced by the movement itself. He relates the Brahma Kumaris to traditional Hinduism and describes some of their spiritual practices: Positive Thinking and Stress-Free Living. Chapter V provides us with a typology of the members of the Brahma Kumaris, which Walliss divides into Instrumental users, Eclectic Users, Interpretative Drifters and Spiritual Searchers, while chapter VI deals with what and how the world of the future is to be. Millenarianism is a central concept in Raja Yoga.

The conclusion, 'In Search of Post-Traditional Religiosity' brings us back to the concepts described in the Introduction and first chapters, and the theories on posttraditional society. 'Late Modernity' has its heavy demands on the individual human especially in a society characterized as it is in this book as 'detraditionalized'. Yet the Brahma Kumaris movement shows that there are forces such as 'Tradition Persistence' as well as 'Rejuvenation'. 'Moreover, at another level the example of the Brahma Kumaris demonstrates both the re-invigoration and the ongoing re-creation of tradition... (p. 115)'. Due to this Raja Yoga was reinterpreted and a milieu of reinterpretation came into being, to 'suit a world affirming cultic milieu (elaboration), such as the ongoing globalisation, New Age-ification and instrumentalisation of the original, world-rejecting theodicy' (etcetera, p. 116).

In his conclusion Walliss questions whether the tools developed in the form of the 'reflexivity' of traditions are applicable to other traditions as well. In the final words of his conclusion he argues that the study of contemporary traditions needs to address three important issues: the need to move beyond the either/or of the

radical detraditionalisation debate and to take both aspects of traditionalisation and renewal into account. Secondly he points out the importance to study the developments and changes within particular traditions themselves by the means of detailed ethnography. The last issue concerns the need to examine the continuing appeal of certain traditions for individuals and by extension, social groups. In his study, Walliss has been successful in constructing a theoretically firmly based foundation for his target set. He does not go too deeply into theoretical issues and endless conceptualizations wherein the religiously inspired individuals and the group or groups in which they participate – after being the object of research of so many religious studies – seem to be outcasted.