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## Indology, what is it good for?\*

In December 2008 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution entitled “Combating defamation of religions”. Among the majority of countries that voted in favour of this resolution one does not find a single modern western country, which all voted against it. India and Japan abstained from voting.

As is so often the case with texts of this nature, much room is left for interpretation. It is, however, clear why not a single modern democratic country voted in its favour. The intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, which the resolution justifiably objects to, can only too easily be interpreted to mean that each religion can decide what others can say about it. The memory of the fatwa pronounced against Salman Rushdie comes all too easily to mind. And this understanding of “tolerance” abolishes the very possibility of critical study.

Resolutions of this kind potentially threaten the academic disciplines we hold dear. However, they do more. They potentially threaten the kind of society we wish to live in. Academic disciplines and society are not unrelated. Indeed, I will argue that academic disciplines like ours need a certain kind of society, and that this kind of society needs disciplines like ours.

Consider first the kind of society in which disciplines like indology can exist. Indology, like all other academic disciplines, can only be practised in an open society, a society in which there is freedom of thought and expression, and toleration of alternative views. Not all societies are like that. Worse, it can be argued that no societies were like that until quite recently. Such societies arose, and could only arise, after a most remarkable intellectual, some would say philosophical, development that took place a few centuries ago in a number of countries of Western Europe. I am, of course, referring to the Enlightenment, and I follow Jonathan ISRAEL — author of the much acclaimed recent book *Enlightenment*

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*Contested* (Oxford University Press, 2006) — in believing that from the Enlightenment — or rather, from the kind of Enlightenment which Israel calls Radical Enlightenment — “emerged the values — democracy, freedom of thought and expression, individual freedom, comprehensive toleration, rule of law, equality, and sexual emancipation — which since the late nineteenth century have increasingly constituted the declared quintessential values of western ‘modernity’” (ISRAEL 2006: 42). In other words, disciplines like indology can only exist against a background of Enlightenment values.

However, not only do disciplines like indology need Enlightenment values, Enlightenment values also need disciplines like indology. The two need each other, their dependence is reciprocal. In other words, if we wish to maintain and strengthen a society in which the values enumerated above have a place, we need to maintain and strengthen disciplines like indology.

I say “disciplines like indology”, for obviously the well-being of our society does not totally and exclusively depend upon the survival of a few indology departments. Indology, however, occupies a respectable and non-negligible place among a number of disciplines that one might broadly call historical disciplines. And these historical disciplines *are* vital for the long-term survival of the kind of society we wish to live in. In order to explain why, I have to return to the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment was, in its own self-understanding, a *revolutionary* philosophical movement. The revolution it preached was primarily a philosophical revolution: a refusal to accept traditional views and authorities. It did not call for political revolution, but the new ideas it proposed were such that they could inspire such revolutions, too. The American Revolution (Declaration of Independence, 1776) and the French Revolution of 1789 in particular were associated with new ideas about society that owed much to Enlightenment thought. But the Enlightenment was, first and foremost, a philosophical movement.

What did this philosophical movement revolt against? In brief: tradition. The Enlightenment thinkers pleaded in favour of reason, and the thinkers of the so-called Radical Enlightenment pleaded in favour of reason in all domains, with no exception. They had to argue their case against representatives of Church and State, and some suffered as a result.

Until quite recently it was possible to think that the Enlightenment thinkers had won the battle, that we could from now on live in a world in which the forces of tradition had been pushed into a backseat. No longer. We all know that the forces of tradition are back, with a vengeance. They threaten gains that we had hoped might be perpetual. I grew up in a world in which we learned the sad story of Galileo and the Inquisition as something belonging to a

time long past. We now see that the natural sciences (this time the life-sciences in particular) are being attacked all over again by people who think that they are justified to reject the results of extended and painstaking scientific labour on the basis of what they find in the Bible, or in the Quran, or somewhere else.

Given that even the natural sciences are not free from harassment by the forces of tradition, historical scholarship in all of its forms is an even more inviting target. Most, if not all human groups derive their sense of identity from the past *as they like to think of it*. Religions and nationalisms of all kind come with a vision of their past. Indeed, the very word *tradition* implies that its adherents believe they know something about their shared past, for traditions claim to keep an earlier state of affairs alive. Traditions — whether religious, corporate or national, including, in the Indian context, traditions relating to castes — are by their very nature the enemies of historical scholarship. All is fine as long as historians reveal a past that corresponds to the claims of the traditionalists. Sooner or later they will come up with features that do not fit. At that point the romance will be over.

It is hardly necessary to give examples. We all know that the most extreme opponents in Europe of the values we cherish give themselves an identity through their *historical* claim that the Nazi holocaust never took place: they are the holocaust-deniers, well known to all of us. An example closer to our professional field of interest is the *historical* claim about a Muslim mosque in Ayodhya, presumably built on the place of a Hindu temple dedicated to the god Rama, in 1528 CE. This historical claim has so far led to hundreds of deaths, and has had profound political consequences. Less violent, but potentially equally dangerous, is the recent attempt by certain fundamentalist Hindus in the United States to have textbooks in California changed so as to agree with their vision of India's past. This last example is particularly interesting because the attempt failed in part because of the efforts to block it by the Harvard professor of indology, Michael Witzel.

What these and countless other examples from all over the world show is that history is not an anodyne and harmless topic, researched and taught to provide some light entertainment to readers (or television viewers) with that kind of inclination. Quite on the contrary: it is easy to see what would happen if there were no longer any serious historical research at universities. Various nationalistically and religiously inspired visions of the past would take over, untrammelled by the findings of academic scholarship. The general public would have nowhere to turn for reliable information, and would willy-nilly be obliged to choose between contorted visions of the past, and with it between different political positions of a more or less extreme nature. And it is not hard to imagine what these ideologically

coloured visions of the past would sooner or later lead to: conflict and a form of society which is the very opposite of the society we wish to live in.

What can our society do to preserve itself and its Enlightenment values? Being an open society, it can react in only one way: by opening up the evidence, comparing notes with different traditions and sources, listening to all sides without taking sides, etc. This is, of course, what we academic scholars are supposed to do. We provide a counter-weight against the forces of tradition. In doing so, we play a crucial role in maintaining the values — Enlightenment values — of the only world we wish to live in.

In view of this, we can but hope that our politicians and university administrators realize that historical scholarship (which includes us humble indologists) has an important role to play in society: we are not just profiteers who amuse ourselves and a few others with some recondite pleasures. Politicians and university administrators may wish to economize us away, because we do not always attract many students. This would be short-sighted, for student numbers are not our only, or even our most important justification. The California textbook episode illustrates this. Witzel could stop a dangerous development, not because of the number of students he teaches at Harvard, but because he is familiar with indological scholarship, and could therefore show that the demands of his fundamentalist opponents were historically unjustified. He had not created this edifice of historical scholarship all by himself (with all due respect to his contributions). It is the outcome of a collective effort in which all of us, and many others, have participated and still participate. From the long-term perspective of society, the knowledge we produce is more important than the number of students we train. Indeed, the whole point of training students is to form specialists who can continue our task of providing reliable knowledge. Given the limited number of jobs for specialized indologists in the world, the emphasis on training far more students than are required to fill those places is misplaced, and misjudges our real contribution.

Politicians and university administrators may or may not listen to these arguments. However, there is something that we scholars can do. We should take care not to present ourselves as mere good-will ambassadors of another tradition, providing entertainment to those thus inclined. We are not, or not primarily, entertainers. We have a far more important role to play, viz., to defend the Enlightenment values that we consider vital for the society we live in. This does not mean that we, or all of us, should become politically active; we do not all have to play the hero, like Witzel. (I think this word is not misplaced here; Witzel writes to me that his troubles have been numerous and continue: court cases, slander in the press, etc.)

Most of us do not have to face any of this. But at least we should be engaged in the right cause. As you know, some scholars in the humanities have been doing the opposite.

I started with the UN resolution “Combating defamation of religions”. Some scholars in the humanities understand toleration of other cultures to mean that we modern scholars have to accept them whole, including their various claims. Critical historical scholarship of traditions that are not our own becomes in this way a delicate affair. I have been at conferences where speakers publicly offered apologies for daring to speak about a text which, they claimed, really belonged to others. What these speakers said about those old texts avoided, unsurprisingly, any issues that might give offence to modern “believers” of that text.

This attitude is a betrayal of those to whom we owe it that toleration and mutual respect play a role in the modern world at all. Our Enlightenment predecessors did not hesitate one second to criticize tradition, any tradition. Indeed, this is precisely what they were primarily known, criticized and admired for. There are no ancient texts that “belong” in any essential sense to the tradition that identifies with it. The Mahabharata “belongs” as little to modern Hindus as the Bible “belongs” to modern Christians. Historical scholarship cannot be steered by modern groups that have appropriated the texts they are studying.

A number of scholars think differently, and adherents of certain religions have paid attention. It is in the name of tolerance that the above UN resolution has been passed, a resolution which may move in the direction of destroying the very roots of tolerance. We scholars should not participate in this pernicious game. If we do, the time may come that the representatives of modern democratic countries, too, will take such ideas seriously. They may then vote in favour of a next UN resolution on “Combating defamation of religions”, and as a result impose restrictions on what we scholars are allowed to study, and in which manner. This, as I have argued, will be a first step to a degeneration of not just academic scholarship but of society, and a gradual abandonment of all we hold dear.

The Radical Enlightenment began in the second half of the seventeenth century, when memories of the Thirty Years’ War were still strong in Western Europe. This had been one of the most devastating wars Europe had yet seen, and it had been fought in the name of religion. Later on in the same century, the French Huguenots (who came to play a major role in the Enlightenment) were expelled from France, once again in the name of religion, as were the Jews from Vienna; the next century saw the expulsion of around 20’000 Lutherans from the archbishopric of Salzburg. At present, too, we live in a world that is on fire in the name of religion. This is not the time to give in to religious claims and to soften down our academic criteria so as to avoid offending adherents of various traditions. More than ever, the world

needs its academics to speak out. We in the humanities have a role to play, not by hiding behind forms of travestied “tolerance”, nor by making ourselves the mouth-piece of other traditions, but by carrying out our research with all the integrity, scholarly independence, and sometimes indeed courage, that we can muster.

By way of conclusion I will cite the very last sentences of Israel’s book on the Enlightenment (p. 871):

The democratic, egalitarian, and libertarian quest of the Radical Enlightenment might very well fail in the end — or rather be defeated and overwhelmed. But, if so, this will be at least partly due to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century failure not just of philosophy on all continents but more broadly of the humanities, and the world’s universities, both in general terms and, more specifically, their failure to teach humanity about the historical origins and true character of the ‘modern’ ideas of democracy, equality, individual freedom, full toleration, liberty of expression, anti-colonialism, and our universalist secular morality based on equity.

Here lies our task, and here lies the future of indology.

### Appendix

As an appendix I will present to you a passage from a recent book that shows that the criteria of objective historical scholarship are among the hardest to accept by those who belong to religious traditions. Even religious traditions that declare themselves completely open to the results of modern science, may hesitate to accept the results of modern historical scholarship. The religious tradition discussed in this passage is Tibetan Buddhism which, in the person of the present Dalai Lama, is well known for its embrace of scientific methods and knowledge: the Dalai Lama is famous for his discussions with scientists and for the way he promotes scientific research on certain aspects of Buddhism, most notably states of meditation.

The passage I will present is from a recent book by Donald LOPEZ, called *Buddhism & Science* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). Lopez recounts here that the Dalai Lama visited his university, the University of Michigan, in 1994. Lopez thought that it would be interesting to discuss current Western scholarship on Mahayana Buddhism with him, and asked some graduate students to make a short presentation. Lopez then continues (p. 193-195):

When I mentioned to the Dalai Lama that our graduate students would be making a presentation to him on the origins of Mahāyāna, he immediately asked whether they had supernormal powers, suggesting that only someone who had a clairvoyant knowledge of the past could know how the Mahāyāna began.

During the seminar, three students who were completing dissertations on Indian Buddhism made brief presentations to the Dalai Lama. They explained how nineteenth-century scholars of Buddhism had seen the Mahāyāna as a degeneration of the original teaching of the Buddha. Later scholars saw the Mahāyāna as a lay movement responding to the conservatism of the monastic establishment. After this perceived split, which occurred between the first century BCE and the first century CE, two branches of Buddhism, the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, developed along parallel but divergent courses. More recently, scholars have sought to look beyond the polemical Mahāyāna condemnations of the Hīnayāna and to consider archaeological, art-historical, and epigraphical evidence. This research suggests that the Mahāyāna did not begin as a single and self-conscious movement, but instead was a disparate collection of “cults of the book” centered on new sūtras composed around the beginning of the common era. These were not lay cults, but ones in which monks and nuns were full and active participants. The evidence suggests that so-called Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna monks often lived side by side within the same monasteries, following the same rules, engaging in many of the same practices, throughout the history of Buddhism in India. Indeed, the first epigraphic use of the term Mahāyāna occurs only in the fifth century CE, some five hundred years after the composition of the first Mahāyāna sūtras.

The Dalai Lama listened attentively to all of this, sometimes stopping and asking his translator to clarify a term or point. But at the end of the presentation he remained silent until I asked him for his thoughts on what the students had said. ... He conceded that what the students had told him was interesting and that it would be good for Buddhists to have some knowledge of Western scholarship on Buddhism. However, in the end, he seemed to view Buddhist practice and Buddhist scholarship (at least of the Western variety) as ultimately irreconcilable. He told the students that if he accepted what they had told him, he would only be able to believe in the *rūpakāya*, the physical body of the Buddha that appears in the world to teach the dharma. He could not believe in the *sambhogakāya*, the body of enjoyment that appears to advanced bodhisattvas in the splendor of the pure lands, adorned with the thirty-two marks of a superman. And he could not believe in the *dharmakāya*, the Buddha’s omniscient mind and its nature of emptiness. “If I believed what you told me,” he said, “the Buddha would only be a nice person.”