

Nicola POZZA

University of Lausanne, Switzerland

nicola.pozza@unil.ch

SCOPE AND LIMITS OF “INCLUSIVISM” IN MODERN SOUTH ASIA: QUESTIONING TAGORE’S AND AGYEYA’S “UNIVERSALISM”

ABSTRACT During the twentieth century, it had become increasingly common among scholars working on modern India to oppose Indian leaders and authors advocating the idea of multicultural and secular India to those promoting a nation based solely on the so-called “Hindu way of life.” While the discourse attributed to the former category has regularly been qualified as “universalist,” “inclusivist” or “tolerant,” the kind of nationalism fostered by the latter has variously been called “communalist” or “exclusivist.” While these antagonistic positions might certainly fit with the positions of iconic and emblematic figures such as M.K. Gandhi or V.D. Sawarkar respectively, they might well be misleading and too restrictive when applied to the discourses of authors such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and S.H. Vatsyayan ‘Agyeya’ (1911-1987), to take into consideration only two among the most influential and celebrated authors and poets of modern India. Based on the analysis of Tagore’s and Agyeya’s texts, this contribution questions the accuracy of such a dichotomist categorization and more specifically the assertion that the works of twentieth-century authors considered as “universalists” were actually presenting *a picture of a united India with both Hindus and Muslims looking forward to a peaceful future together* (Cush and Robinson, see footnote 3). It shows that, notwithstanding the real cosmopolitan worldview of both these authors, the Muslim realm is almost completely absent from their works. In conclusion, it is argued that far from being an exception, the position of these writers is illustrative of what can be called a “non-exclusive Hindu nationalism,” which was pervasive among the Indian intellectuals of the twentieth-century India.

Keywords: Tagore, Agyeya, Modern India, Literature, Inclusivism, Universalism, Nationalism, Hindu, Religion

INTRODUCTION

*Our impulse to give expression to Universal Man produces arts and literature. [...] They are the superfluity of wealth of which we claim our common inheritance whatever may be the country and time to which we belong; for they are inspired by the universal mind.*¹

This quotation from Rabindranath Tagore's *The Religion of Man*² provides, no doubt, a vivid instance of the spirit of Universalism that is so strongly associated with the figure of the poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1913. It seems to confirm the statement given by scholars, such as Cush and Robinson, that works of the twentieth-century Indian authors considered as "Hindu universalists" were presenting a *picture of a united India with both Hindus and Muslims looking forward to a peaceful future together*.³ From the analysis of some of the works of Tagore and Agyeya, it becomes clear that this picture of the so-called "inclusive"⁴ brand of Hinduism is not so plain and univocal. Moreover, despite the idea – and ideal – of tolerance behind the position that is constantly associated with this perspective, its discourse may also have participated in the subsequent polarization of India between Hindus and Muslims; at least it has not prevented the rise and success of the Hindutva and the Sangh Parivar.⁵

The paper begins with the examination of the notions of "religion" and "universalism" in the texts of the Bengali author Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), in order to provide a more precise picture of the kind of references and cultural realms that lie behind the alleged universalism of his discourses. A few examples are also drawn from

¹ R. Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, London 1988 (1931), p. 94.

² A book based on lectures delivered by the author in 1930 at Manchester College, Oxford (ibid., 'Note,' n.p.). On Tagore's life, see K. Dutta, A. Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore. The Myriad-Minded Man*, New York 1995.

³ D. Cush, C. Robinson, 'The Contemporary Construction of Hindu Identity: Hindu Universalism and Hindu Nationalism,' *DISKUS*, Vol. 2.2 (1994), at <http://basr.ac.uk/diskus_old/diskus1-6/CUSH_ROB.TXT>, 10 September 2014.

⁴ In the frame of this contribution, the term "pluralistic" would be more accurate than the one used here, i.e. "inclusive." However, the latter has now become dominant when opposed to the "exclusivist" perspective. It will thus be kept here when dealing with the secondary literature. *Simply put, the name "inclusivism" comes from the idea of including, so an inclusivist approach towards others has to do with willingness to include the other or something of the other's. [...] [A]n inclusivist privileges one tradition, keeping it primary, and absorbs something foreign into that tradition. Pluralism, in contrast, is more of a "separate but equal" or "different strokes for different folks" position* – K.B. Kiblinger, *Buddhist Inclusivism. Attitudes Towards Religious Others*, Aldershot 2005, pp. 1-2 (*Ashgate World Philosophies Series*). On the history of the concept of "inclusivism" within Orientalism, see W. Halbfass, *India and Europe. An Essay in Understanding*, Albany, N.Y. 1988 (1981), chap. 22.

⁵ On the development of this politico-religious ideology, see, among many others: Ch. Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s. Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilisation*, New Delhi 1996 (1993); G. Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Delhi 1990; J. Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India*, New Delhi 2000. The generic denomination "Sangh Parivar" includes Hindu nationalist associations such as the RSS (Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh), the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad), or the former BJS (Bharatiya Jana Sangh), the old denomination of the now ruling BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party).

his short stories and from his novel *Gora*.⁶ In the next part, focus is put on the narratives of the Hindi poet, novelist and essayist Saccidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan 'Agyeya' (1911-87). Certainly less famous and less translated than Tagore outside India, he was nevertheless one of the major writers of the Subcontinent. Although he did not explicitly speak of "universalism" in the same way Tagore did, he too firmly stood against the communalist rhetoric and agenda, be it of the Hindu kind or of any other one. Before the conclusion and in light of the results obtained in the preceding chapters, a short part is dedicated to questioning the division that has been made by scholars between the so-called "Hindu universalism" and "Hindu nationalism."

It may be useful to recall here that in order to provide an accurate interpretation of the texts used, a distinction between the two following levels of discourse must constantly be made: first, the level of the writer's intentions and explicit formulations, and second, the level of reading and interpretation by a concrete reader.⁷ To the level of the writer's intention belong such assertions as the following, given by Tagore on his general impressions about the Muslims in response to the critics that had been made on his supposed anti-Muslim bias:

*I know many Muslims, and I respect them. Many are intelligent, humorous, liberal, creative, thoughtful, and experienced in literature of many languages... whether they are Hindu or Muslim, this discrimination had never arisen in my mind; I only know them as human.*⁸ Or: *It is because I have no displeasure or disrespect to Muslims in my mind that these are not reflected in my writings.*⁹

If one were to take Tagore's words for granted, the matter would be immediately closed. The actual absence of reference to Muslim culture in the essay such as *The Religion of Man* would only mean that it is a way to prove one's respect to the Other. We will actually see that another interpretation of his silence about Muslim culture can be extrapolated from a close reading of his texts.

It must, however, be clarified from the start that no intention is made in this contribution to come to a conclusion on whether Indian intellectuals such as Tagore or Agyeya were in the end anti-Muslim or not, only because of the almost complete absence of

⁶ Tagore's views on topics such as nationalism or religion strongly changed during his life. The specific "universalist period," on which this contribution is focused, belongs to the second half of his life. On Tagore and his views on nationalism, see his main book on the topic: R. Tagore, *Nationalism*, London 1918; see also S. Chaudhuri, 'The Nation and Its Fictions: History and Allegory in Tagore's *Gora*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2012), pp. 97-117, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2011.648907>>; and T. Sarkar, 'Rabindranath's *Gora* and the Intractable Problem of Indian Patriotism,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 30 (2009), pp. 37-46. For a short presentation of the historical and intellectual context at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, see W. Halbfass, *India and Europe...*, chap. 13 and 14.

⁷ According to textual approaches like the act of reading (Umberto Eco) and the interpretative semantics (François Rastier).

⁸ R. Tagore, 'Bibidha Prasanga,' *Prabasi* (1936), pp. 457-58, quoted in S.H. Khan, 'Divergent Views of Tagore by Muslims in Colonial Bengal, 1926-47' in K.M. O'Connell, J.T. O'Connell (eds.), *Rabindranath Tagore. Reclaiming a Cultural Icon*, Kolkata 2009, p. 359.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

Muslim references in their works. Such dogmatic and committed positions are left to politicians and politically engaged literary critics. What is argued here and aimed at is to illustrate that notwithstanding the cosmopolitan worldview of these authors, their discourse is illustrative of a position that was pervasive among the Indian intellectuals of the twentieth-century India. The nature of this discourse, in which “Hindu” values and cultural references are predominant and in which “Hinduism” becomes equivalent to “universalism,” can be best labelled as “non-exclusive Hindu nationalist,” as will be shown hereafter.

TAGORE’S UNIVERSALIST VIEW ON THE “RELIGION OF MAN”

Having a modernist education and growing up in a cosmopolitan family, Rabindranath Tagore was perfectly in line with the Indian elite of his time. His view on the notion of religion¹⁰ is a fine instance of the evolutionist, humanist and universalist approaches that were spreading in the world at that time. These three modernist perceptions are quite explicit in his essay *The Religion of Man*, published in 1931 as a compilation of the Hibbert Lectures he delivered in May 1930 at Manchester College in Oxford. One has, therefore, to keep in mind that the speeches contained in this book were first of all meant for a Western audience. This little book was, moreover, first published in Great Britain. This fact is important for our purpose, because it means that Tagore, while preparing his lectures, certainly did not have a specific Indian community in mind; he was not to deliver a speech mainly for Brahmos, Hindus or Muslims. The audience of these lectures was mainly made up of educated Westerners, eager to know more about Indian spirituality – one year before, the Indian philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan had also been the guest of these Hibbert Lectures.

Evolutionism in Tagore’s *The Religion of Man* encompasses two cultural realms, the first referring to the Western view on religions prevailing at that time, the second belonging to the Brahmanic tradition. They can respectively be illustrated with the two following quotations:

¹⁰ In this contribution, the term “religion” is always used and defined the way the quoted authors define it. Although the Sanskrit word *dharma* is not wholly equivalent to the English term “religion” – it has different meanings and covers more aspects than the latter – it has nevertheless been regularly used in the last two centuries in the Indian languages as a translation and equivalent of “religion,” and vice versa. Indian philosophers and religious leaders, including Tagore, have been using both of them since then, although they were and still are perfectly aware of the differences between the terms. While stressing these differences when needed, they would also use them as synonyms from time to time, like in this quotation: *This is man’s dharma, man’s religion, and man’s self is the vessel which is to carry this sacrifice to the altar* – R. Tagore, *Sādhana: The Realisation of Life*, Leipzig 1921 (1916), p. 128 (*Collection of British Authors*, 4560). For an overview of the evolution of the concept of religion in the European context and in relation to India, see R. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “the Mystic East,”* London–New York 1999; for a brief presentation of the concept of *dharma* in “traditional Hinduism” and its modern reinterpretations, see W. Halbfass, *India and Europe...*, chap. 17 and 18.

Our method of worship has followed the course of such changes, but its evolution has been from the external and magical towards the moral and spiritual significance (p. 46).

His religion [i.e. Man's religion], which is in his realization of the infinite, began its journey from the impersonal dyaus, 'the sky,' wherein light had its manifestation, then came to Life, which represented the force of self-creation in time; and ended in purushah, the 'Person,' in whom dwells timeless love (p. 42).

Mention is made here of the Puruṣa, the cosmic man of the Veda and later of the conscious, eternally free principle of the Sāṃkhya school. In the chapter containing this quotation, like elsewhere, all explicit textual and philosophical references belong to the Indian world. There are only two noticeable exceptions in the whole book, one when the author makes use of Lao-Tzu's citations to comment upon the nature of man, and the other when he uses a whole lecture (chapter V) to deal with the figure of Zarathustra, the "great prophet of Persia" who is credited by Tagore to have been *the first who addressed his words to all humanity, regardless of distance of space and time (p. 51)*:

Though surrounded by believers in magical rites, he proclaimed in those dark days of unreason that religion has its truth in its moral significance, not in external practices of imaginary value; that its value is in upholding man in his life of good thoughts, good words and good deeds (p. 47).

Zarathustra was the first prophet who emancipated religion from the exclusive narrowness of the tribal God, the God of a chosen people, and offered it the universal Man. This is a great fact in the history of religion (p. 49).

Let us note that this "exception" does not shake too strongly the overall prominence of the Sanskrit-Indian world of references in the book:¹¹ on the one hand, the example of Zarathustra belongs to a very remote time and, on the other hand, it is also part of the Indo-Iranian world.

The humanist dimension – the second of the three approaches mentioned above – is best expressed in the following extract from a chapter where Tagore speaks on his religious background:

I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man, in which the infinite became defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and co-operation (p. 60).

When one reads these lines and notices the presence of capitalised "Man," it must be acknowledged that this term is usually associated with the notion of *Puruṣa*, the primordial man in Brahmanism, embodied in each of the individuals who constitute humanity. This emphasis on the Hindu concept of *Puruṣa*, or "God" as he calls it sometime, is never totally absent from the poet's vision, even when he speaks of the various "religious creeds":

But, whatever may be the name and nature of his religious creed, man's ideal of human perfection has been based upon a bond of unity running through individuals culminating in a supreme Being who represents the eternal in human personality (p. 91).

¹¹ And only slightly minimizes the following affirmation made by Frost: *Other faiths such as Daoism or Zoroastrianism rarely received a mention* – M.R. Frost, "That Great Ocean of Idealism": Calcutta, the Tagore Circle, and the Idea of Asia, 1900-1920' in S. Moorthy, A. Jamal (eds.), *Indian Ocean Studies. Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives*, New York 2010, p. 267 (*Indian Ocean Series*).

From this last quotation can also be extrapolated the third aspect of Tagore's conception of religion, that is its universalist dimension. Let us recall the first quotation used as the epigraph to this article:

Our impulse to give expression to Universal Man produces arts and literature. [...] They are the superfluity of wealth of which we claim our common inheritance whatever may be the country and time to which we belong; for they are inspired by the universal mind (p. 94).

There is no doubt that Tagore's view on religion was not sectarian, exclusivist or dogmatic. He would, however, always stress the idea of a "true religion" (in the *singular*) seen as the realisation of some abstract and eternal truth, beyond historical and circumstantial realities.¹² Thus, when he has no choice but to recognize the existence of differences between cultures and civilizations, he finds a way to emphasize their shared origin or belonging:

The civilizations evolved in India or China, Persia or Judaea, Greece or Rome, are like several mountain peaks having different altitude, temperature, flora and fauna, and yet belonging to the same chain of hills (p. 34).¹³

This emphasis on a shared origin and value between cultures does not mean, however, that one should take his comments and assertions as face value, meaning an equal treatment towards them in regard to their respective cultural sources and references.¹⁴ Before acknowledging his "universalism," one has to question how inclusive of all cultures, and Indian cultures to start with, was his picture of the universal man, and to what extent the references to the Muslim realm, for instance, are taken into account in his works.¹⁵

¹² Of foremost importance to the Indian thinkers of the discussed period was the distinction made between "the" religion, seen as singular, and the various religions, in plural. When "religion" (singular, in English) is mentioned in their texts, it is usually linked to the term *dharma*, and stresses the idea of a moral value that is shared by the whole humanity, beyond geographical and historical specificities and circumstances inherent to religions (plural). Accordingly, Tagore and most of the other Hindu intellectuals of that period considered "*dharma*" and "religion" (singular) as two sides of the same coin, speaking of the "inner nature" of human being and it being shared by the whole humanity. In this sense, both terms are viewed as something positive, even highly praised, and are either seen as something eternally true, like in the expression "*sanātana dharma*" – more than once also called "*hindū dharma*" – or in connection to the realms of morality and ethic. In opposition to the highly praised notion of *dharma* the plural word "religions" is used. The latter is seen as a sectarian, historically and contextually limited part of religion in the singular.

¹³ For Tagore, limitations belongs to the form, to the restricted world of social rules and prohibitions, while the spirit – the "real part" of Man – transcends them: *The spirit advises us to cross seas and mountains and develop our minds by seeing the world, but the form puts an expiatory ban on sea voyage. The spirit tells us to revere all good men irrespective of their caste, but the form enjoins respect for the Brahmin, however unworthy* – R. Tagore, *Towards Universal Man*, London 1961, p. 189; first published in Bengali in 1917.

¹⁴ Thus, I would be more sceptical about Tagore's Universalism than is Choudhuri in his article on this topic: I.N. Choudhuri, 'The Other and the Self: Tagore's concept of Universalism' in S. Dasgupta, Ch. Guha (eds.), *Tagore. At Home in the World*, Los Angeles–New Delhi 2013, pp. 104–124.

¹⁵ As a reminder, the aim of this paper is not to come, through an exhaustive reading of his correspondence and his biography – a task widely exceeding the frame of this article – to a conclusion on whether

SOURCES OF REFERENCE IN TAGORE'S WRITINGS

Muslim Bengalis had contrastive opinions, to say the least, on the way Tagore considered Muslims and their culture. The few instances given below will serve as an illustration of the different, if not opposite, perceptions of Tagore's personality in this respect.

In an article devoted to this question, Shahadat Khan writes that, *an editorial by the [Mohammad] Akram [Khan]-edited newspaper, Mohammadi, entitled 'Rabindranath o Sampradayikata' or 'Rabindranath and communalism,' denounced Tagore as, "anti-Muslim," "critic of others" and "envious," and warned that if Tagore's anti-Muslim stand were to incite a riot, Muslims could not be blamed.*¹⁶

In opposition to this view, Golam Mustafa, an "Islamic liberal" as Khan calls him, wrote:

*The ideals and thought that Rabindranath Tagore, king of the poets, has expressed in his lyric poems have wonderful semblance with Islam. Any Muslim can easily accept his [Tagore's]... thought and ideals. Nowhere in the vast Rabindra-literature could we find anti-Islamic hostility.*¹⁷

Khan also mentions a middle position, held here by the writer Kazi Abdul Wadud, who considered Tagore to be one of his mentors: *Wadud also acknowledged that Tagore did not write in detail about 'mussalmaner dharma' or about the founder of Muslims' religion, but pointed out that by the same token "Rabindranath did not write in detail of any other religion either."*¹⁸

This statement by Kazi Abdul Wadud might sound wise and balanced. However, reading carefully Tagore's *The Religion of Man* does not provide the same impression of a balanced perception on the various existing religions and cultures. On the contrary, the emphasis that Tagore puts on Hindu references appears to be all the more important, because his universalism is actually never to be taken for some absolute, transcendental reality, independently of any specific religion. Nearly every time Tagore uses some explicit literary reference or mentions some author or text, these belong first of all to the Hindu cultural realm.

The most cited textual source is by far the *Upaniṣads*. Together with it or on different pages is regularly mentioned the absolute Brahman or the *Vedas*, especially the *Atharva-Veda*. To the named texts belong also the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyāṇa*... and *Robinson Crusoe* (!) Historical figures explicitly mentioned are the Buddha, Lao-Tzu, Zarathustra, Kalidasa, Kabir and the Bauls. Muslims (or rather "Mohammedan" as they were called then) are mentioned only twice, once in connection with the cultures that

er Tagore was favourable to the Muslims or depreciative of them. It seems even highly impossible to take a stand on that matter, especially in the case of Tagore, about whom everything and its opposite has been considered true.

¹⁶ S.H. Khan, 'Divergent Views of Tagore...', p. 359.

¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 362.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

influenced the family of Tagore,¹⁹ and another time in association with the poetry that was still alive among Bengali villagers. However, in this case, the vocabulary used in collocation stresses once more the difference between the historical aspect of their religion, which is described in negative terms (“an obsolete religious sect,” “the religion itself is dead”) and the poetic voice expressed in operatic performances, which *still continues preaching its philosophy to a people who*, in spite of their different culture, *are not tired of listening* (p. 113, my emphasis). Nevertheless, when Tagore gives precisions on his origins or his affinities, he consistently mentions the *ṛṣis* and speaks of *my Vedic ancestors* (p. 57), *our Upanishad* (p. 15), or considers the word “Yoga” as what characterizes *[t]he special mental attitude which India has in her religion* (p. 41).

In brief, both the cultural references given in the book – which all belong to the religions, philosophies and literatures originated in India, except for a few European and East Asian references – and the emphasis put on the historical and sentimental link between the author and the *Upaniṣads*, the *Puruṣa* or the *ṛṣis*, show that the so-called “universalism” of Tagore is actually limited to a specific vision of India, in which there is no real place for Islam and Muslim traditions, except for Sufism.

This fact should not, however, be read as a pure rejection of Islam. Tagore was *not* a communalist and did *not* nurture anti-Muslim rhetoric.²⁰ Rather, his attitude must have been the result of his own social and religious backgrounds as well as the product of a Hindu universalist approach valued by his Western audience in this case. A relative lack of acquaintance with the Muslim world might also explain the absence of reference to Islam in his works.²¹ It is true that Tagore, after 1920, had visited some Islamic countries as well (besides East Asia and the West) and expressed his *affinities with romantic and devotional Persian poets*.²² Nevertheless, his feeling of “closeness” with Islam remained limited to the realm of Sufis’ poetry and did not result in a fully equal and inclusive approach towards Muslims.²³ Once more, this does *not* mean that he was adverse to Muslims and other non-Hindu communities, or that he should have treated all cultures and religious traditions in an equal way. No, his selective sources of interest

¹⁹ *The unconventional code of life for our family has been a confluence of three cultures, the Hindu, Moham-medan and British* – R. Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 105.

²⁰ Quayum, in an article openly advocating Tagore’s “global and humanitarian outlook,” stresses the same idea: *Tagore was never a communal thinker and that he never sought wittingly to subvert or humiliate the Muslims or their religion in his life or in his works* – M.A. Quayum, ‘A Herald of Religious Unity: Rabindranath Tagore’s Literary Representation of Muslims’ in idem (ed.), *The Poet and His World. Critical Essays on Rabindranath Tagore*, New Delhi 2011, p. 73.

²¹ Although most tenants of his zamindari were Muslims, it seems that Tagore *had relatively little intellectual contact with Islam and educated Muslims* – K. Dutta, A. Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore...*, p. 119.

²² S. Bose, *A Hundred Horizons. The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*, Cambridge, Mass. 2006, p. 261.

²³ See for instance the bias with which he interpreted the Communal Award affair in 1936: *he had placed the major share of the blame on the British for “divide and rule” and on the Muslims for accepting the British “offer of an intoxicant;” he gave scarcely a nod to the hubris shown by many Bengali Hindus towards the Muslims, of which he had long been aware* – K. Dutta, A. Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore...*, p. 340.

must rather be seen as the result of his socio-historical background and his philosophical education, set in a context in which Hinduism at large (and Western interpretation of it) was occupying such an important place that it would, whether one likes it or not, be seen as equivalent to the idea of universalism.

This selective approach is also true of his fictions. For instance, in his short stories like *Kabuliwalla* (*The Man from Kabul*), or *Kshudhita Pashaan* (*Hungry Stones*) that seems at first hand to speak of the Muslim world, it is never valued as such. The plot of *Hungry Stones* deals with an extraordinary story related at night in a waiting room of some junction station by a Bengali gentleman to the narrator. The gentleman relates his stay as a tax collector in a deserted palace, which had been 250 years before a luxurious resort of revelry for a Moghul king. Strange things happened to the collector, as if the wonders of the past had come back to life. The story seems to focus on the marvellous time of the Moghul emperors and the reader may first think that Tagore's aim is to emphasize the majesty of that period. However, the real target of this short story is the Orientalist vision and fancies that Theosophists had of the East. Indeed, the story starts and ends with the information that the first-person narrator is travelling with a relative described as a Theosophist. The given details, which open and close the story, make us understand that the narrator wants to dissociate himself from the stand of his relative, in other words from this dreamy-like vision of India and its past. Thus he ends the story with the words:

The identity of our gentleman remained unknown. Neither was the end of the story heard.

I said, "The man found us fools and had a good laugh at our expense; the story was false from beginning to end."

On the pretext of the arguments that followed, my theosophist relative and I agreed to part company for ever.²⁴

The whole palace-sequence was then only a pretext for the narrator to distance himself from the apparently marvellous period of the Moghuls.

In *The Man from Kabul*, an Afghan hawker comes to Calcutta and befriends the narrator's five-year-old daughter, who reminds him of his own daughter at home. Here too, it is apparently humanism and universalism that are promoted by the narrator: *The moment obliterated the fact that he was an Afghan fruit seller and I a respectable Bengali Babu.*²⁵ In reality, the social and geographical differences put between the two characters are of such importance that no concrete relationship can be postulated, despite the alleged message of the story. The Afghan fruit seller is a complete stranger in regard to the rich Bengali Babu, and to the readers for whom these short stories were meant. He is so much a stranger that he can only be seen as the complete Other. Here too, like in *The Religion of Man*, the rare culturally specific references belong to the Hindu culture, while the only thing that really links the Bengali Babu to the man from Kabul is their love for their respective daughter, beyond any cultural specificity.

²⁴ R. Tagore, *Selections from Galpaguchchha*, Vol. 3: *Street Patra and Other Stories*, trans. by R.K. Chattopadhyay, New Delhi 2010, p. 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

This double procedure, with a claim for universalism and humanism on the one hand, and the use of cultural references belonging mostly if not exclusively to the Hindu world on the other, is already present in Tagore's most famous novel, *Gora* (1910). The end of the novel, where Gora addresses Poresh Babu as his new guru, looks programmatic in this respect:

*You are the one with the mantra for this freedom. That is why, in our present times, you could not find a place within any community. Make me your disciple. Initiate me today into the mantra of that deity who belongs to everyone, Hindu, Muslim, Christian or Brahmo, whose temple doors are never closed to any community or any individual, who is not merely a deity for Hindus but the deity of Bharatvarsha!*²⁶

Before this ending chapter, when Gora is still pursuing his nationalist agenda, it is the Hindu India that constitutes the model of his anti-British struggle. Sumit Sarkar rightly points at this partial attitude regarding Indian nationalism when he comments on the novel:

[Gora] *admires the Muslim, he is furious when he sees the low caste Hindu exploited and insulted by the high caste Hindu. Despite that, he feels that in colonial times, patriotism must be based on total love and respect for all that Hindu India has or is. There is no other comparable cultural resource with which we can approach and confront the racism of foreign rule.*²⁷

Many other instances of that symbolic representation of the Other can be given. But let us now turn to another major writer of India, whose knowledge and vision was at least as cosmopolite as Tagore's one – S.H. Vatsyayan 'Agyeya.'

TAGORE'S HEIR IN THE HINDI WORLD: S.H. VATSYAYAN AGYEYA

Agyeya has been one of the most important writers of Hindi literature and is still highly praised in India.²⁸ Although his fame has not crossed the borders of his country, contrarily to Tagore, his influence on modern Hindi and Indian literature at large remains uncontested. Agyeya never showed any hint of sympathy for the commu-

²⁶ Idem, *Gora*, trans. by R. Chakravarty, New Delhi 2009, p. 507 (*Penguin Modern Classics*).

²⁷ T. Sarkar, 'Rabindranath's *Gora*...', p. 42.

²⁸ The son of an Indian archaeologist, Agyeya was born on March 7, 1911, on the spot of an archaeological camp in current Uttar Pradesh. Due to his father's occupation, Agyeya had the opportunity to travel and live in almost every part of the Subcontinent. Later he also travelled to Europe, Japan and the United States, where he gave classes and lectures. He was arrested and jailed in 1930 for sedition against the British power. It is there that he wrote his first poems and mentally built the plot of his first novel or "autofiction," *Shekhar: Ek jivani* (*Shekhar: A Biography*). After some collections of short stories and poems, he organized the All India Anti-Fascist Convention in 1942, before enrolling in the British Indian Army in 1943, in order to fight against what he considered to be the biggest danger for humanity, that is fascism. The same year, he edited a groundbreaking anthology of poetry (*Tār saptak*) gathering together seven poets of the new generation, including him. He left the army at the end of World War II and dedicated his time to creative writing and essays, and to the edition of several revues, both in English and in Hindi, besides two noteworthy novels.

nalist policy. At the same time, he constantly addressed his criticism against his own Brahmanic social milieu. While his cosmopolitanism may have been even deeper than Tagore's, Agyeya shared with him an affinity to the literatures and philosophies of the Sanskrit tradition in parallel with a deep interest in Western culture and literatures. And like the Bengali author, he remained surprisingly silent in his works about Muslim culture.

For the purpose of this paper, two short stories of the pre-Independence period have been selected as an illustration of the way Indian culture and history was pictured by Agyeya: *Seb aur dev* (*Apples and gods*) and *Bandoṃ kī Khudā, Khudā ke bande* (*The God of servants, the servants of God*). These two texts, the former written in 1937 and the latter in 1941, provide very rich information regarding Agyeya's worldview on India and its relation to the colonial power before Independence. It is also worth choosing them because both stories show an important similarity regarding their plot: in both cases, the story deals with an intellectual city-dweller who wants to get rid of the noise and the turmoil of his city, which symbolizes the damage of modern civilization and the influence of the West on India. The city-dweller decides to go for a lonely walk in the foothills of the Himalayas, in search of some hidden treasure of that still "pure" part of the country, as he believes it to be. The opposition between the "artificial" life of the modern civilization and the "purity" of the Indian countryside and mountains represents a *topos* of the 1930s-1940s, in the line of Gandhi's philosophy, itself indebted to British romanticism through Theosophy. In both stories, this dualism and the quest for a deeper truth is narratively translated into a parallel evolution suggested between the thought processes of the character and his concrete walk on the paths of the Himalayas. Moreover, these two texts are very interesting for our purpose because their cultural content is much more explicit than in most of the other stories by Agyeya.

In *Seb aur dev*, the narrator shows the influence of the colonial, romantic and anthropological discourse on the behaviour of the main character, an Indian professor of archaeology based in Delhi. On vacation, the professor decides to go for a walk in the mountains, filled with the hope to find some lost treasure:

*Here too, in the charming Kullu valley, he has come thinking that he will find relics of the most ancient civilization of India and samples of the handicraft belonging to the Hindu era.*²⁹

Although at first the reader can easily feel some sympathy for the professor and his enthusiasm towards the "pure" and "authentic" land he is "exploring," the narrator reminds him of the alteration modern civilization has made to hilly civilizations. In order to accentuate the negative effect the European hegemony had on the Subcontinent and its ancient civilizations, the narrator introduces the counter-example of Fa Xian, the Chinese Buddhist monk who went to India without disturbing the people he met at the beginning of the fifth century (399-414), during *the glorious and ideal time of the Gupta* (p. 377).

²⁹ *Yahāṃ kullū pahār kī suramya upatyakāṃ meṃ bhī ve yahī socte hue āye haim kī yahāṃ bhārat kī pracintam sabhyatā ke avāṣ; unḥem mileṅge, aur hindū-kāl kī śilp-kalā ke namūne* – Agyeya, *Agyeya kī sampūrṇ kahāniyāṃ*, Delhi 1997, p. 376; my translation.

The main point in this part of the short story is a basic valorisation of Indian culture against British conquest and domination. Most important is therefore the question of nationalism. But of which kind of nationalism is the story talking about? Is it an instance of the secularist kind of nationalism, stressing the diversity and cultural plurality of the Indian civilization? Or is it more of the kind of Hindu nationalism, favouring the exclusive preservation of Brahmanic values? At first sight, one can think that the narrator speaks the voice of secularist nationalism directed against British colonialism. However, the following part of the story, which relates how the professor finds a beautiful statue of the Devi, next to a statue of Ganesh and a Shivaling, the phallic symbol of Shiva, adds some explicitly Hindu religious tone to the story. Here, like in the texts of Tagore we have seen before, Indian history and culture is predominantly viewed through the lens of Hindu references. If a Chinese monk is mentioned as the model of a by-gone age and if several references are also made to the European civilization, Muslim contribution to India's history and culture is clearly left out in this story.

A similar pattern can be observed in the short story *Bandom kâ Khudâ, Khudâ ke bande*, written four years later. Except for the title of the story, with an explicit use of the Persian term for God, every proper name is linked either to the Sanskrit realm or to the European colonialism, but for one reference to an un-named Chinese philosopher. The main character has a significant name: Anand. It therefore bears evident links with the theology either of the Advaita Vedanta or of Kashmir Shaivism, but also with Buddhism.³⁰ Agyeya used to intertwine diverse cultural spheres in his writings and would never stick to a single cultural background. This narrative device is also present in this short story, especially in the first half, where the narrator plays with several literary and geographic references (J. Ruskin, D.H. Lawrence, implicitly Gandhi, and the English renaming of some of the Himalayan summits). He does so in order to stress the dynamical tension existing at that time between India and Europe on the one hand, and between the modern urban civilization and the ancestral realm of the mountains as they were imagined on the other. Nevertheless, despite the intercultural background of this short story and its rich intertextuality, not a single reference is made to the Muslim world except the title.

This "oblivion," as it were, of Muslim presence and contribution to India runs throughout the works of Agyeya. In fact, this is a *topos* of the pre-Independence years in the writings of Indian intellectuals such as Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and of course Tilak and Sawarkar. Actually, Muslim are either "forgotten," especially in the case of so-called "Hindu universalist" writers, or explicitly rejected and condemned for their "invasions" and "destruction" of the Hindu civilization in the case of strong "Hindu nationalists" such as Sawarkar. It must, however, be clearly stated once more that ignoring Muslim culture does not automatically amount to denigrating it. Tagore and Agyeya might have been very reserved with regard to non-Hindu and non-Christian sources; even so, it does not mean that they were hidden "Hindutvavadins."

³⁰ Ananda being the Buddha's cousin and his personal assistant who played an important role in the diffusion of the Buddha's doctrine.

However, if not “Hindutvavadins” and not ultimately “universalists” how can we describe their position, which is far from being unique in modern India? Let us now see if classifications done by other scholars can help us clarifying the kind of discourse authors like Tagore and Agyeya were promoting.

ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN “HINDU UNIVERSALISTS” AND “HINDU NATIONALISTS”

During the twentieth century, it had become increasingly common among scholars working on modern India to oppose Indian leaders and authors advocating the idea of multicultural and secular India to those promoting a nation based solely on the so-called “Hindu way of life.” In this view, the latter was categorized as “Hindu nationalists” and seen as people promulgating a discourse that most explicitly favours Hindu values and a cultural picture of India exclusively based on references of “Hindu” origin at large (i.e., including Buddhist, Jain and Sikh traditions) against Muslim, Christian and other “non-Indian” notions and practices. In opposition to their exclusivist standpoint were situated Indian authors and leaders broadly labelled as “secular nationalists” – Nehru being usually seen as the foremost model of them.³¹

This dichotomy is of course simplistic. From one end of the nationalist scale to the other end many varieties of nationalisms are found. Actually, in the first half of the twentieth century, every committed Indian was a nationalist.³² Moreover, although the distinction made between the two trends is accurate to a great extent, it must, however, be added and acknowledged that “humanist” and “secularist” are attributes that should not be exclusively linked to the so-called “liberal Hindus” or to “Hindu universalism.” Some nationalists of the Hindutva family also claim “integral Humanism” to be part of their moral position.³³ From the opposite perspective, Ashis Nandy has stressed the fact that the term “secularist” should not be seen as a property strictly limited to “liberal

³¹ The latter kind of nationalism *emphasized the composite character of Indian society and refused to give the same sort of primacy to the Hindu element in India's history and self-consciousness. This is what would later come to be called “secular” nationalism, “real” or “Indian” nationalism as Jawaharlal Nehru had called it, “something quite apart from [...] the] religious and communal varieties of nationalism and strictly speaking... the only form which can be called nationalism in the modern sense of the word”* – G. Pandey, ‘Can a Muslim Be an Indian?’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1999), p. 609. For an exposition of Nehru's view on the “Secular state” and the policy to adopt in regard to religion in modern India, see R.D. Baird, ‘Religion and the Legitimation of Nehru's Concept of the Secular State’ in R.D. Baird (ed.), *Essays in the History of Religions*, New York 1991, pp. 119-139 (*Toronto Studies in Religion*, 11).

³² For the ways nationalism in India can be classified, see for instance Z. Baber, ‘Religious Nationalism, Violence and the Hindutva Movement in India,’ *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000), pp. 61-76, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1007197222204>>; G. Pandey, ‘Can a Muslim...’, pp. 608-629; A. Varshney, ‘Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety,’ *Daedalus*, Vol. 122, No. 3 (1993), pp. 227-261; or J. Zavos, *The Emergence...*

³³ See P. Appiah, *Hindutva, Ideology, and Politics*, New Delhi 2003, p. 74. As an example of this view, see D. Upadhyay, *Integral Humanism*, Noida 1992 (1968).

nationalists” like Nehru. Hindu nationalists are wrongly categorised as “religious” according to Nandy. They are actually much less “religious” and much closer to a secularist position than they are generally seen and labelled.³⁴

Notwithstanding these remarks, another distinction, proposed by Cush and Robinson,³⁵ might hold our attention with regard to the way Tagore’s and Agyeya’s discourses can be described. Cush and Robinson have divided twentieth-century Hindu political and religious figures into two main groups, namely the “Hindu universalists” and the “Hindu nationalists.” What they call “Hindu universalism” is characterized, according to them, by a tolerant and respectful attitude toward all religions, and consists in a form of liberal and secular nationalism.³⁶ They qualify this kind of attitude as “inclusivist,” a quality that has been strongly, and not unproblematically, linked to the notion of “Neo-Hinduism” – as Paul Hacker had labelled it earlier.³⁷ Subsequently, they divide “Hindu universalism” in two sub-categories: it can be either hierarchical (for instance in the case of Vivekananda, who put his practical Vedanta at the summit of the religions pyramid), or non-hierarchical (as in the case of Gandhi).

In the opposite direction stands what these authors call “Hindu nationalism,” to which they give the main characteristic of being exclusivist. To the proponent of the exclusivist position is attributed the claim to be in full possession of the truth and that other different worldviews are clearly in error. For the advocates of this sort of politico-religious attitude, “Indian” exclusively means “Hindu,” and “Hinduness” or *Hindutva* is the ground on which Indian culture and nation must be built.³⁸ What links both positions (the “universalist” and the “nationalist”) is their conception of “Hinduism” seen

³⁴ *In this sense, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Shiv Sena, though called fundamentalist, are two of the most secular parties in India, for they represent most faithfully the loss of piety and cultural self-doubts that have come to characterize a section of urban, modernising India* – A. Nandy, ‘The Twilight of Certitudes: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism and other Masks of Deculturation’ in Y. González Torres, M. Pye (eds.), *Religion and Society. Proceedings of the 17th Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), Mexico City, 5-12 August 1995*, Cambridge 2003, p. 112. For a review on the various criticisms made vis-à-vis secularism, see A. Sen, ‘Secularism and Its Discontents’ in R. Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and Its Critics*, New Delhi 2008 (1998), pp. 454-485 (*Themes in Politics*). For a broader perspective on the topic, see R. Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism...*

³⁵ D. Cush, C. Robinson, ‘The Contemporary Construction of Hindu Identity...’

³⁶ The postulated equivalence between “Hindu universalism” and “secular nationalism” is in itself not unquestionable.

³⁷ On the problematic nature of and Orientalist agenda behind these two concepts coined by Hacker, see J. Bagchee, V.P. Adluri, ‘The Passion of Paul Hacker: Indology, Orientalism, and Evangelism’ in J.M. Cho, E. Kurlander, D.T. McGetchin (eds.), *Transcultural Encounters between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Abingdon–New York 2014, pp. 215-229 (*Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia*).

³⁸ Here too, Cush and Robinson divide this category into two sub-categories, namely the “henoexclusivist” (a neologism based on the notion “henotheism”) and the “monoexclusivist.” The former holds that his/her truth applies to all people irrespective of language, culture, etc., and attempts consequently to convert others to what s/he considers to be the only true worldview. The latter is equally convinced of the truth of his/her position, but will limit its application to his/her own people or his/hew own country. Nevertheless, the henoexclusivist remains convinced of the sufficiency of this worldview and has no desire to learn from other worldviews, sometimes even viewing this curiosity as forbidden.

“as a unity-in-diversity.” What divides them on the contrary, write Cush and Robinson, is their respective view on Indian history and its cultural components:

*Whereas the **inclusivist nationalism associated with Hindu universalism** responded to these conditions by asserting a holistic and integrated view of Indian history, within which Muslims and even the British made a valuable contribution, **exclusivist Hindu nationalism** portrayed both the Muslims and the British as invaders and located the basis of nationality in Hindu religion and culture. [...] Accordingly, Hindu nationalism appealed in the course of its campaigns to characters and ideals drawn from the Hindu tradition. This was often coupled with an aggressive anti-Muslim stance.*³⁹

According to this division a major difference between the two kinds of nationalism is based on their approach, respectively inclusive and exclusive, to Others, i.e. on the way they include or reject non-Hindu cultures and worldviews. This concerns the relational dimension of nationalism. Regarding its historiographical aspect and the way “Hindu universalists” build their theory, Cush and Robinson add an important remark in their conclusion:

*Hindu universalism reads itself back into the tradition by adducing specific scriptural passages and appropriating them as precursors of its pan-religious vision. However, this process necessarily involves an extrapolation from texts which make no mention of non-Hindu worldviews. It therefore raises the question as to whether there are limits to inclusivism, as Hindu nationalism assumes.*⁴⁰

In fact, this concluding remark highlights the central point of our contribution. In the case of Tagore and Agyeya, two Indian writers and artists whom nobody would describe as “communalist” or “exclusivist,” it would nevertheless be strange, according to the results obtained in the previous parts of this paper, to associate the idea of inclusivism with their perception and representation of India. Indeed, the two poets were certainly not proponents of Hindu exclusivism, but labelling their attitude as wholly inclusive is misleading too. Therefore, another designation should be proposed in order to describe their discourse more accurately.

CONCLUSION

While Tagore and Agyeya cannot be associated with the “exclusivist” branch of Hindu nationalism – according to Cush and Robinson’s terminology – it is all the same inadequate to categorize them as pure “Hindu universalists.” Their discourse, which was pervasive among the Indian intellectuals of the twentieth-century India, was indeed *non-exclusivist* in nature: it never straightforwardly denigrated non-Hindu societies or denied them any right to be part of the Indian culture. Nevertheless, qualifying their position as “universalist” in the sense of a truly inclusivist approach towards all Indian cultures would somehow twist the facts. After a close reading of Tagore’s and Agyeya’s

³⁹ D. Cush, C. Robinson, ‘The Contemporary Construction of Hindu Identity...,’ highlights are mine.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

texts, it appears that the picture that comes out at the end is certainly not the *picture of a united India with both Hindus and Muslims looking forward to a peaceful future together*.⁴¹ Rather, the lack of genuine pluralism and secularism within their otherwise broad-minded representation of India suggests us to label their discourse as *non-exclusive Hindu nationalist*. They, and many of their commentators, would certainly disagree with such denomination. But the texts they left, and the interpretation one can have of them now, justify the scepticism we can have regarding the extent and nature of the “inclusivism” that is associated with their so-called universalism and cosmopolitan worldview. Theirs is the reflection of a then common perception of Indian history, which was more or less unconsciously limited to the Hindu part of it.

Another explanation seems however plausible when trying to understand the actual predominance of Hindu references in their texts. It can also be that their emphasis on Hindu culture was a more direct way to reach Brahmanic Hindu readers, targeted by their criticism against orthodoxy and conservatism. Both authors were very sceptical about the traditional practices and beliefs of Hinduism, and the best way to reach their potential audience was to set their narrative and argumentative texts in a context that would be familiar to the readers, in order to create in them an initial feeling of identification before shaking their convictions through disturbing, unconventional or more universalist-oriented conclusions.

On a more concrete dimension, and to conclude with the main argumentation of this volume, one can venture saying that this kind of partial universalism is certainly not the best solution for today’s societal and religious troubles in India. Religious, or politico-religious conflicts, might rather find an issue only as long as *all* cultural differences are taken into account, in a truly pluralistic perspective.

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Nicola POZZA, Ph.D. teaches Hindi grammar and literature at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland). After a Ph.D. on the topic of freedom in Agyeya's fictions, his current researches deal with twentieth-century India in its literary and intellectual aspects, in relation to Translation Studies and travel writings in Hindi. He is also a translator of Hindi literature (Agyeya, Geetanjali Shree, Rahi Masoom Raza) into French.