

*Transcultural Encounters*  
**The FIND Forum in Intellectual Dialogue**

13-15 November 2015, Zagarolo

*Differences*

Many forces are re-shaping today's India-Europe axis. Against the backdrop of post-colonial world dynamics, the problem of *differences* can be seen as the epicenter of a rich and complex field of interpretative tensions. Recent publications have revealed the scope and relevance of this question. For instance, Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Penguin, 2009) was withdrawn from circulation in 2014, and the publishing house Penguin had to face various lawsuits. The provocative inclusion of sources and perspectives in Doniger's work that are external to mainstream Brahmin literature in Sanskrit was perceived as offensive by a section of Hindu conservatives. Around the same time, Rajiv Malhotra's *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* (HarperCollins, 2011) stirred up an international controversy: Malhotra attacked the presumed bad faith of American and European scholarship in analyzing Hindu sources – a scholarship which, according to Malhotra, is the shining example of persistent cultural colonialism. The task of interpretation, he contended, should mainly be left in the hands of practicing Hindus when it comes to elucidating traditional sources. Both controversies, Doniger's and Malhotra's, extended beyond the field of academic publications, with debates in national newspapers and magazines in India, Europe and the USA.

If the colonialist project was based on a fixed, limited and rather inflexible idea of identity that translated into belief in Western superiority, post-modernity has intensified and consolidated the crisis of *all* identity models. Not only the colonialist assumptions of imperialist countries and their early political manifestations (blood ties, dynastic heritage, ethnic particularities) have been deeply questioned, but even the roots of the universalist utopia of the Enlightenment, which historically appeared as a reaction to the ideology of cultural superiority, still maintained a homogeneous idea of identity. This plural critique took a variety of forms, from the early post-war period to the present. In *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1948), Adorno and Horkheimer present the shadow side of the paradigm of progress and rationality as a whole. Three decades later, contributing one of the standard works in a new type of knowledge, Jean François Lyotard rejects

all “grand narratives” in his *The Post-Modern Condition* (1979).

Throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, post-modern Western culture became increasingly aware of the limits of identity construction at every level of experience and thinking. This awareness was reflected in philosophical theories inquiring into *the other* inside *the same* – in other words, assessing the intrinsic difference in the very core of Western subjectivity, before considering it as an independent and external entity, an “other”. French authors such as Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot or Jacques Derrida explored this direction. Considerations of a “constitutive otherness” within the idea of one’s own “sameness” inevitably led to an intensified sensitivity toward cultural differences. The universalist utopia, part and parcel of the modernity project, was progressively demystified through a new emphasis on cultural relativism. The new paradigm of ethnological studies is exemplified in Sarah Caldwell’s book *Oh Terrifying Mother* (Oxford University Press, 1999), which is an inquiry into the worship of the Goddess Kālī in Kerala. In this book, the paradoxes and ambiguities of religious experience and local frames of reference are incorporated as parts of anthropological reflection, leading to an inevitable subversion of the objectivity criteria prescribed by modern science.

In its confrontation with the East, the radicalized experience of difference becomes impossible without an awareness of the existence of marginalized, forgotten or repressed spaces of variation *within* “the other”. This complex difference is found not only in interpretative methods of inquiry and theoretical constructs, but also in social action and meaningful experience within specific contexts. Alain Daniélou’s work, for instance, offers a subversive hermeneutical interaction based on a perception and study of differences “from inside the other”. In spite of its epochal limitations, Daniélou’s work reveals the value of the space of perception in confronting differences: when the space is external to the identity of the experiencing subject, the experience seems to increase in intensity and richness. Beyond the classical inter-subjective schemes, *hermeneutical interaction* revolves upon a much deeper problematic: the internal difference(s) *within* the culture of “the other”. The politics of integration requires not only the familiar assumption of a homogenous identity in the dominant pole, but also in the construction of a unity in the other, thus denying its internal differences. Reflecting on “differences” means not only questioning the unifying assumptions of the identity pole, but also inquiring into variations within the “foreign body”. This enhanced attention to the singular aspect of differences implies a radical change in perceptive

openness to the “unseen differences in the other”. Here appears the real transcultural challenge.

Today it is necessary to rethink differences in East and West beyond typified dealings with Western or Eastern specificities and also beyond utopian and dystopian projections. Elements defying the mainstream frame of reference within the Indian tradition can be found and assessed in their influence on certain attempts by Western thought to perceive its own intrinsic differences. An example of this is the problem of relations between religion and morality. It is not enough to affirm that after Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, a critique of the moral foundations of religion suffices to eliminate the religious problem. Research into non-European religious practices and modes of experience shows that there is a dimension of the *homo religiosus* prior to morals (*homo ludens?*, *homo crudelis?*), a dimension that cannot be reduced or neutralized by general labels such as mysticism or irrationality. The contributions of David Gordon White and Hugh Urban in the field of Indology point to this blind spot of identity construction, far beyond anthropological, religious and political markers, a spot where the other is different beyond its difference from them. At the very end of this reflection on “identity” and “difference”, the initiative of abandoning such categories altogether – as suggested by François Jullien in his book *De l'Être au Vivre* (Gallimard, 2015) – remains a possibility and pushes the question of difference beyond its semantic scope and its dominant geo-political location: the India-Europe axis.

### *Dynamics of the forum*

This forum intends to provide a space for active, profound and creative reflection based not only on the expertise of each participant, but also on an ability to go beyond his or her own field of knowledge and action. This would thus contribute to a dynamics of thinking in which:

1. There is no absolute separation between objectivity and subjectivity, knowledge and self-reflection. The inter-space between these two poles can be seen where reflection takes risks and engages itself in a transformative process.
2. Each act of thinking, if carried out with full awareness of its conditions and consequences, means putting oneself “at risk” (through the adventure of experiment, the possibility of critique,

the difficulty of true questions and the precariousness of genuine answers).

3. The exercise of interaction does not stop at the usual limits imposed by the constitutive and regulative rules of the culture from which each participant stems. Interaction pushed beyond conventional limits is always a gain for each individual involved in the discussion and also for the group as a whole.

The workshop is organized as follows: Each participant will receive a list of items for discussion, one of which will be the subject of her/his own exposé. The exposé (lasting around 30 minutes) should be conceived as an initial approach to the subject in question and, at the same time, as an indirect bridge to the other items of discussion. The initial exposé can be undertaken in a variety of forms: conventional presentation of a paper or of a set of elaborated points, contextualized commentary on specific scholarly or literary passages, introduction of audiovisual materials illustrating the topic, analysis of historical and/or contemporary events of social relevance... During each group discussion, attention will be focused on the possibility of refining some of the arguments of the exposé and exploring new directions of creative interpretation. At each session, one of the participants will briefly respond to the presentation and initiate the discussion.

#### *Aims of the forum*

The initial purpose of the event is to inaugurate a continuous space of debate on subjects with specifically transcultural relevance. “Differences” will be the first event within a series of forums devoted to broadening the horizon of interpretations concerning the India-Europe constellation. Transcultural Encounters, which will take place twice a year, will be the subject of a new kind of publication combining, in an elegant magazine format, creative intellectual contributions, in-depth interviews and refined visuals.