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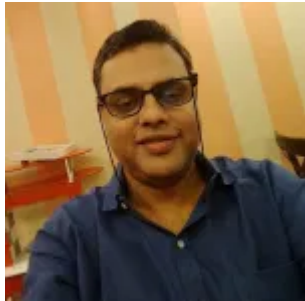
The Problem of Religious Relativism: An Interreligious Approach

February 3, 2021 Team ICM Faith / Spirituality

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By Subhasis Chattopadhyay –

This post is in response to an email I received from a Benedictine [Abbott](#) who is one of the most learned men I have ever met. He is a cloistered Roman Catholic monk whose

[monastery's](#) Gregorian Chant (plainchant) is authentic to the original. These monks adhere to the Catholic doctrine in its full glory in trying circumstances. He had wanted to know about religious relativism from the perspective of the Sanatana Dharma. I thank [Fr. Anderson](#) for his question because without good questions there cannot be any serious thinking.

Prefatory clarification:

Shakti is akin to the Power of YHWH. Or, Shakti is YHWH since Power is not an attribute of YHWH but YHWH is Power. This Power when Willing becomes *Prakriti*. For those who know Hindi, Prakriti has nothing to do with nature or pantheism. This has been pointed out by [Acharya Shankara](#) who through his commentaries on the *Upanishads*

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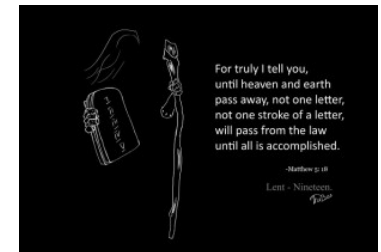
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negated the Buddhist concept of sunyata or nothingness leading to dependent origination (Pratītyasamutpāda/ प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद). So when one says one worships Shakti, it is not a worship of the feminine as understood within the human sciences. Shakti is that One. But the lexical importance of Shakti is that under no circumstances is YHWH conceived as weak as the Christian tradition affirms. Shakti is Power, Self-Effulgence and contrary, to popular misreadings, is not the feminine principle of any independent qualia. There is just the One.

One of the concepts that need clarification in any dialogue between the Sanatana Dharma and other religions is the problem of religious relativism. Let me illustrate: if you are a Jain, then you know that initially there were [Tirthankaras](#) who had nothing to do with [Hinduism](#) and quite independently informed humanity of their radical theories of non-violence. If you happen to be a Buddhist of any persuasion; perhaps you are a [Theravadin](#) or, you are a [practitioner of Vajrayana](#), you know that there is nothing foundational about anything whatsoever. If you happen to be a Christian, say you are a Methodist of strict adherence, you firmly understand that the Bible is the Word of YHWH and can be interpreted by Church Elders/Ministers and by non-centralised private revelations within acceptable limits. If you are a Roman Catholic, you read the Bible and while you do have the autonomy to interpret the Bible as far as God’s grace manifests in you; yet you choose to abide by the interpretations arrived at through centuries of exegesis accepted as Catholic doctrine ratified by the sacred College of Cardinals and various Papal Bulls and encyclicals. In



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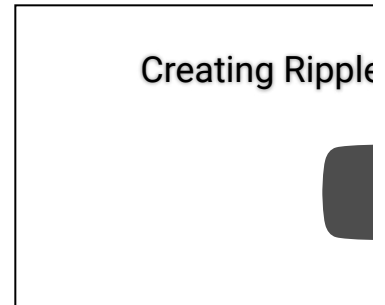
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passing, we note that this is an act of humility where one chooses to submit to a time-tested intellectual tradition without losing the autonomy to theologise. Catholic theologians are aware that their conclusions may not be accepted by the Magisterium and the beauty of Catholic theologising lies in the readiness with which women and men of the highest calibre are willing to discard their own opinions in deference to more mature minds inspired by God. This is not only true for Catholicism. Theologies within the Sanatana Dharma as practised by those who live out their Faith from day to day too finally defer to the *Shastras*. Under no circumstances are we above the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, the *Brahmasutras*, the *Tantras* and the *Agamas*. (Sri Avinavagupta, one needs to remember, wrote a commentary on the Kashmiri recension of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This freedom that both the Sanatana Dharma and Roman Catholicism provides us can be another beginning for dialogue, but that is for another day.)

Returning to the topic at hand, Jainas claim patrimony of their 'ford-makers'; Buddhists of their lineages of Buddhas and the Abrahamic religions, of their revealed sacred Scriptures. So according to Jainism; if one eats meat even where vegetables are unavailable; then that is akin to murder and eternally hellish worlds await such souls. Euthanasia is abhorred by Roman Catholicism but Jain ascetics cease food intake and finally water intake in their quests for release from the eternal cycles of birth and rebirth as found within all branches of Jainism. So, it makes sense for a Jain to think that Christians in their

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willingness to eat meat cannot be holy no matter what the degree of asceticism practised by Christian Saints. This is codified in oral and written Jain doctrines. Conversely, it is impossible for a Roman Catholic to find reasons in thinking Mother Teresa of Calcutta is less than holy just because she ate meat. The Sanatana Dharma, on the other hand, simply says that any path practised wholeheartedly with existential fidelity is a valid way to reach sanctity (Yogic union with the Supreme Godhead). So, the question of religious relativism arises from within the Abrahamic religions and Jainism and Buddhism. It does not arise in the case of, say, Daoists. But here we will confine ourselves to a dialogue between the followers of the Sanatana Dharma and Roman Catholic Christianity.

The Law(s) Eternal as had been pointed out [in the last post](#) in this website, are not eternal verities. They are true and valid for this [Yuga](#). They are true in most cases but, say within Shakta worship, eating of meat, while not necessary, is not prohibited. And within the Sanatana Dharma, those who follow the Vaishnava way of life, do not touch meat ever. But, within Vaishnavism, there is a strong mode of Tantric praxes, as found within the Pancaratra texts. While Vaishnavites also sometimes worship Shakti; they are mandated to never touch meat or fish because that would be taking life needlessly. Even within Shakta worship, eating of meat is strictly optional and best avoided since all living and nonliving matter too are the One. The 'bhutas' are not star-dust but Brahman as pointed out in the last post. All of the Sanatana Dharma gestures towards non-qualified non-dualism, or, Advaita

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Vedanta which can be found in various forms throughout India and wherever followers of the Sanatana Dharma live. So, Kashmiri Shaivism and Tantric 'kulas' in Nepal are all syncretic. The question of religious relativism does not arise; for we are the One. Not parts of the One; neither are we anything other than the One. Thus when the Sanatana Dharma says that all paths lead to the Self; what is meant is that since there is no other; the question of other religions does not phenomenologically arise. So while materialists and other hedonists will eventually awaken from their dialectical slumber; the easier route is to follow one of the established major non-cultic religions and through well-tested praxes, attain 'mukti'. All the major religions in the world stress on compassion for others; truthfulness and a certain degree of inwardness. These suffice. The problem of other religions and the problem of religious relativism is a very Manichean problem. Mani's theory is not unique. It is found in Jainism much earlier. The point here is that religious relativism is a non-issue within the Sanatana Dharma. The *Bhagavad Gita* says:

Sankhya yogau prithak balah pravadanti na pandita I

Ekam api astitah samyak ubhayoh vindate phalam II


संख्या योगौ पृथक् बलः प्रवदन्ति न पण्डित ।

एकं अपि अस्तितः सम्यक उक्थयोः विन्दते फलं ॥



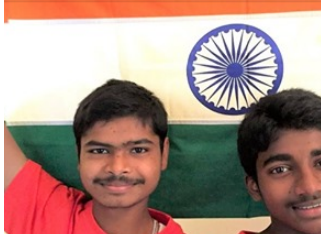
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Simply put, it is childish to crib over theism or, non-dual Yoga leading, or not leading to the experiences of the One. The life of action and the life of contemplation lead to the same results if one abides in Brahman (YHWH). Samkhya (philosophy) speaks of numerous entities and the thrust of (most) Yogic philosophy is the realisation of the Self which lies dormant within (as Kundalini Shakti). But the Supreme Godhead says that it is an error to see differences amongst paths and religious praxes. This is the point where we must begin our theological journey. It makes no sense to theologians of the Sanatana Dharma to speak of religious relativism. This, as has been noted above, is rooted in [the Sanatana concept of time](#) which is only real and valid in this cycle of involution which began as an evolution.

Religions, according to the Sanatana Dharma are human constructs whereas Dharma is for all and what may be roughly equated to natural justice. Dharma is not natural justice or moral codes. When in the Yoga Sutras, the ancient seer, Patanjali says that certain rules are absolutes transcending spatiality and temporality, he speaks for a certain Vedantic tradition. He is certainly not speaking for the millions of Shakta worshippers who visit Kamakhya or Tarapith each year. We have to keep in mind that the main mode of Sanatana worship is Tantric and has little to do with outwardness. The body through nyasa following 'bhutasuddhi' (cleansing of the body-mind complex through various branches of Yoga including liturgical actions which makes the eight-limbed Yoga system finally accessible to most) becomes divine. With this note of caution against accepting the *Yoga Sutras* without

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sufficient exegesis, we still quote from this text to show that yes there are certain verities which at least, for this Yuga are fixed. Anything more than this would be just imaginary word-padding:

[जातिदेशकालसमयानवच्छिन्नाः सार्वभौमा महाव्रतम्॥२.३१॥](#)

The great austerities in the form of vows, to be practised always among all people include truthfulness, non-violence, chastity and a rejection of capitalism (hoarding). The self-study of holy texts and inner and outer cleanliness and daily and continuous remembrance of Ishwara (YHWH) are some of the verities which cannot be rejected as anything less than absolute in this Yuga. (Some commentators take these to mean celibacy and vegetarianism.)

So the first critique of interreligious dialogue that needs clarification is this problem of religious relativism. The Sanatana Dharma does not admit of relativism, moral or religious because there is no scope for duality within the Dharma. So we respect and not tolerate all major religious traditions in the world for in our *Upanishads* is explicated the truth of Creation: the One has become the many. Relativity implies duality. Such is not found within any of the branches of the Sanatana Dharma.


Subhasis Chattopadhyay is a bibliophile; and has completed formal studies in the Bible and separately, in Hinduism from the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. His Biblical studies were completed from

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