

2008

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## Recommended Citation

Sharma, Arvind (2008) "The Role of Ethics in Hindu-Christian Dialogue," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 21, Article 8.  
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1407>

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# The Role of Ethics in Hindu-Christian Dialogue

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I would like to offer some remarks on the role of ethics in Hindu-Christian dialogue. I shall argue that the presentations of their respective ethical positions by these traditions are often too flat, which is to say, not sufficiently nuanced so that each side enters into dialogue with an inadequate understanding of the other side. I shall then further argue that the dialogue may be more fruitful, if it proceeded with a mutual recognition of the ethical complexities involved in their respective positions.

## I

I shall begin with the Hindu understanding of the Christian position that Christians are under an obligation to proselytise. An average Hindu is under the impression that every Christian is under an ethical obligation—from his or her religion—to seek converts among the Hindus. How widespread this belief is, especially in India, may be judged from the periodic reports of Christians being questioned, or even assaulted, under the influence of this suspicion.

What then is the Christian position in this regard?

There are three passages from the New Testament which are often cited in this context. They run as follows:

(1) Acts 4:12:

*...for there is no other name under heaven given among human beings, whereby we must be saved.*

(2) John 14:6:

*...I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father except through me.*

(3) Matthew 28:19:

*...Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>*

I would like to propose that it might be fairer to represent the Christian position as marked by a measure of internal tension on this issue, in the light of how I have seen three Christian scholars deal with the matter: Professor Krister Stendahl, Professor Willard Oxtoby and Professor Gregory Baum.

In a lecture delivered at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University several years ago, Professor Stendahl argued that each of these three passages, to a certain degree, has been read out of context. In the case of the first passage Peter, who has been accused of claiming the credit for performing a miracle, is denying that this is so. This is the context, and not proselytization, in which the comment is made. In the second case, the disciples are apprehensive of Jesus Christ leaving them and Jesus is trying to allay their fears by saying that I am going away no doubt, but you also know the way to get to where I am going. Hence the remark. These two are not just apropos, according to Professor Stendahl, so far as proselytization is concerned. The third however is. But the model Matthew has in mind according to him is a minority model, not a

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saturation model. The Church establishes its presence and moves on. It is not supposed to take over the place.

I now turn to Professor Oxtoby. In a series of talks which ultimately appeared as a book entitled *The Meaning of Other Faiths*, Professor Oxtoby addresses some of these passages. But then he remarks:

If the foregoing were all that there were to Jesus' word and example, the central problem of this book might be easily dismissed. But the figure of Jesus also sets aside communal boundaries and exclusive notions of truth. For example, the parables of Jesus appeal not to particular scriptural revelations but to universal human experiences. Certain parables state a universalist ideal quite explicitly: the parable of the good Samaritan, for example, which tells us that the truly good person was not the priest of one's own community but the magnanimous outsider.

Indeed, the most telling argument and the most profound challenge to take other people and their traditions seriously comes from Jesus' own word and example. He was the one who defied social pressure to associate with the "tax collectors and sinners." He was the one for whom wealth and status meant nothing in themselves, for whom a poor person's simple devotion could outweigh the pious prayers of even the high priests. When Jesus met the woman at the well in Shechem, he showed himself ready to accept another human being as a child of God regardless of national identity or personal background. Jesus' attitude toward other persons as individuals exhibits a consistency with his golden rule, to treat the other person the way you would wish to be treated yourself.

Jesus voices his desire that his way of discipleship be for everyone. "Go therefore," some manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel quote him, "and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). This passage, though frequently cited in support of a universal Christian claim to truth, also serves as evidence for a central Christian concern for all humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere he puts the point more generally, and provides historical depth to it, as follows:

The search for truth, understood in doctrinal terms, has always been highly valued in the Christian tradition—more so than in a number of other religions. Yet true belief is not the sole concern of Christian commitment or the defining characteristic of Christian identity. The Gospel authors said, "Believe," but they also report Jesus as saying, "Love." The core of Christian identity lays on us an obligation to love our neighbour—including our non-Christian neighbour—that must be weighed against the obligation to assert the truth of our creed. What, then, if our insistence on preaching our belief is an offence to the integrity and identity of our non-Christian neighbour? Christ's commandment to love that neighbour may imply that we curtail our insistence on our own rightness. Put simply, to tell the Hindu, for example, that he cannot find salvation or fulfilment in his own tradition and community is morally a very un-Christian thing to do.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Gregory Baum is of the view that the Church should voluntarily desist, at least for now, from proselytizing.<sup>4</sup> He makes the following argument. The idea of kenosis—of self-emptying—may be applied to all three key ingredients of Christianity—namely, God, Christ and Church (and not just to Christ [Philippians 2:7]). God allows human beings scope for the exercise of free will, voluntarily limiting his own potency, so that human beings may be able to exhibit uncoerced faith. Christ practises kenosis and empties himself of his nature in such a way as to be truly human as well. Professor Baum is of the view that the Church can also do the same (probably already hinted at in Philippians 2:5?).<sup>5</sup> Just as God does not discard omnipotence but voluntarily limits its operation and Jesus voluntarily accepts human nature without discarding the divine, the Church can, without *giving up its claim to universality*, voluntarily abstain from proselytizing out of respect for others.

I think Hindus, especially in India, need to realise that there is an internal tension on this

point within the Christian tradition, at least as we know it now. The case for Christianity being a proselytizing religion is not as open-and-shut a case as they have been led to imagine, wittingly or unwittingly.

## II

I shall now turn the tables as it were, in a manner of speaking, and address a Christian understanding of a Hindu position. The average Christian is under the impression that every Hindu is under an ethical obligation to follow his or her caste duties and that as these duties are particular to the caste, Hindu ethics is therefore particularistic, and that in fact Hinduism lacks a universal ethic, a vacuum which Christianity abhors like nature. It is only too willing to fill this gap, either through its own discourse of ethics, or the secular discourse of human rights.

What then is the Hindu position in this regard?

Caste duties and obligations are an important feature of Hinduism, even in its self-perception. Hinduism proudly describes itself as *varnaśrama dharma*, or a religious system distinguished by the institutions of *varna* and *asrama*. Caste is not a Hindu word to be sure; and answers in English to two words in Hindu terminology: *varna* and *jāti*. The point could be made that *varna* denotes class and that *jāti* more properly denotes what we call caste. Nevertheless, each *jāti* is usually notionally connected to one of the four *varnas*, so that, while it may not be entirely accurate, it is not unfair to refer to this ramifying network of *jāti* and *varna* as the caste system. Moreover, different *varnas* are assigned different duties, so the point that Hindu ethics might be particularistic in its orientation survives this philological challenge. Some of the Hindu texts, such as the *Manusmṛti*, set it out as their goal to elaborate in great detail this theme of what we have referred to here as particularistic ethics. The second verse of the *Manusmṛti* spells this out: "Please, Lord, tell me precisely and in the proper order the Laws of all the social classes, as well as of those born in between..."<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, more to it. Various law-books, including that of Manu, do set out to achieve such a goal but in trying to do so, they

do something more which has important implications for our present discussion. They do not just describe the specific duties of the various castes, they also describe duties common to all castes. The tenth chapter of Manu, which is a text of twelve chapters, contains the following verse (X.63):

Abstention from injuring, truthfulness, refraining from anger, purification, and mastering the organs—this Manu has declared, is the gist of the law for the four classes.<sup>7</sup>

The text is very clear: *caturvarnye' bravinmanuh*. These are the dharmas of all the four *varnas* taken as a whole. They are common to all, as such words as *sadharana* or *samana* or *samasika* or even *sanatana* are used to describe them in the various texts.

Similarly, in the context of the discussion of the various stages of life, even Manu provides a list of ten virtues which are meant to be cultivated in every and all stages of life. This list is so popular that is often used in Hindu texts, and by the votaries of Hinduism, to define the constituents of *dharma* in general. The list runs as follows (VI.91):

Resolve, forbearance, self-control, refraining from theft, performing purifications, mastering the organs, understanding, learning, truthfulness, and suppressing anger: these are the ten points of the Law.<sup>8</sup>

The reader is bound to note how this case parallels that of the *varnas*. Just as the discussion of the different duties of the *varnas* is rounded off with an enumeration of five duties common to all *varnas*, the duties of the different *āśramas* are described and the discussion is again rounded off, as it were, with an enumeration of this list of ten duties common to all *āśramas*.

This means then that Hindu ethics is *not* just particularistic, it also possesses a universal dimension. This changes the picture, because now Hindu ethics must address the issue of what to do when the two come in conflict—when what are called the *visesa dharmas* and *sadharana dharmas* come in conflict.

Sometimes it is suggested that in such cases the particular takes precedence over the *common*. Non-violence may be encouraged as a general virtue but the soldier must fight and perform the *ksatriya's dharma*. The *Bhagavadgītā* is often cited as illustrating this point of view. But such is not always the case. Some commentaries on the *Yogasūtra* specifically reject such an approach—and emphasize the universal over the particular. In other words, a point of ethical tension is involved.

### III

We set out to examine the role of ethics in Hindu-Christian dialogue. We identified a position within Christianity which seemed to embody an ethical imperative to proselytize. Upon further examination, however, we discovered that the point was not that straightforward—it involved a tension within the tradition, between the directives to convert one's neighbours and to love them. Then we identified a position within Hinduism which seemed to represent a particularistic ethic. Upon further examination we discovered that the matter, again, was not that straightforward, that both particularistic and universalistic strands are present in Hindu ethics and that tension could arise in trying to reconcile them.

Matters may now be brought to a conclusion. It is being proposed through this paper that the discussion of *ethical tensions* with these two traditions may turn out to be as fruitful a source of mutual dialogue as the discussion of their *ethical positions*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Krister Stendahl, "From God's Perspective We Are All Minorities", *Journal of Religious Pluralism* 2 (1993):3.

<sup>2</sup> Willard G. Oxtoby, *The Meaning of Other Faiths* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 31-32.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102. He goes on to say (*ibid.*, pp. 102-103):

The recognition of this point is not new. It has been around for at least the half century since Hockings commission questioned the effectiveness and rationale of Christian missions. It was well stated in

1960 by E.L. Allen in *Christianity Among the Religions*: "The Christian is under two obligations in this matter, one to truth and one to love, and these have equal claim upon him. On the one hand he must stand by that which convinces him of his truth.... On the other hand, he will look with charity, as on all men, so on all manifestations of the spiritual life."

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued for an appreciation of the faith of other persons as persons. He charges the Christian West with arrogance in its historic approach to Asia and Africa. In a lecture in 1961 he said: "It is far too sweeping to condemn the great majority of mankind to lives of utter meaninglessness and perhaps to hell, simply on the basis of what seems to some individuals the force of logic.... The damnation of my neighbour is too weighty a matter to rest on a syllogism" ("Christianity in a Religiously Plural World," in *Religious Diversity*, 1976).

These are strong and challenging words. There may be a temptation, among those who agree with them, to meet the vocal objections of some of our dialogue partners by watering down the content of Christian assertions. Maybe we should not say that the church is sole heir to the promises to Israel, or maybe faith in Christ is not the only means by which God saves people, even anonymously. Perhaps a better way to tone down what has been perceived as arrogance is not to make statements that are exclusive, let us make it clear that the exclusiveness is seen from the viewpoint of participation in our own community.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Ian Henderson for these references.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Olivelle, *The Law Code of Manu* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.