

Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism. Rajiv Malhotra

Harper Collins Publishers India, 2011, 474 pp. Hardback, Rs. 599

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Received: 10 November 2012 / Accepted: 24 January 2013 / Published online: 21 May 2013
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“I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think that we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her cultural and spiritual heritage, and, therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them—a truly dominated nation”.

-Lord Macaulay’s remark on 2nd February, 1835 to the British Parliament (as cited in Advani’s *My Country My Life* 2010, p. 133)

“When therefore it is said that India shall rise, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall rise. When it is said that India shall be great, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall be great. When it is said that India shall expand and extend herself, it is the Sanatan Dharma that shall expand and extend itself over the world. It is for the Dharma and by the Dharma that India exists.”

-Sri Aurobindo’s Uttarpara speech on 30th May, 1909

Cultural analyses of human behavior do indicate significant differences in the perception and thought between

West and East. The emphasis on cultural side of behavior is attributed to two major factors: one is political and the other is intellectual. While the former focuses on the aggressive control and subjugation of Asian and African countries by the imperial forces, the later deals with attempt by the Western scholars and thinkers to trivialize the beliefs, rituals, and faiths of the people. Both these factors are linked with a common base, i.e., perceived superiority and civilizational value of West over the rest. Such an approach is argued to be inspired by certain inherent philosophical and religious assumptions of the West. The volume “*Being different: An Indian challenge to western universalism*” by Rajiv Malhotra explains the philosophical, civilizational, and cultural differences between India and the West. Because the topic that the author has dealt with is so broad and full of intricacies, it may be difficult to achieve any conclusive and unambiguous understanding without using broad categories. Thus, at the very beginning, Rajiv has mentioned that Judeo-Christian religions are used to convey the foundational value system of contemporary West while *dharmic* traditions as spiritual traditions of India conveying India’s living system. In doing so, Rajiv has rationally challenged the axiomatic belief that dharmic traditions and Judeo-Christian religions teach similar principles. Further, he has endeavored to critically appraise Western perspectives from dharmic traditions, thus indicating the nature of differences between India and the West. In doing this, Rajiv has exemplified his readings of dharmic systems and systematic perusal of Western philosophy and Abrahamic religious texts.

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Knowing the Divine: Some Foundational Differences

The Indian civilization differs greatly from the European civilization. Despite this, it is generally assumed that both

are similar, if not identical in terms of values, and differences are trivial. Rajiv points out that recognition of differences is a key to mutual respect among various religions. In the present scenario, Judeo-Christian religions argue for tolerance towards other faiths. “Tolerance” as per Oxford Dictionary (2012) refers to willingness to accept other’s opinion despite lack of agreement. Therefore, tolerance neither means absence of disagreement nor it means paying respect to other faiths. Tolerance implies authority of one belief system over others. Hence, mutual respect replaces the perceived authority and democratizes the differences rather than viewing them as irreconcilable. In order to institutionalizing mutual respect, it is essential to highlight the differences between Judeo-Christian and dharmic systems.

Historically, Indian religions have never propagated their views by using the tactics of force and indoctrination. They have always used embodied spiritual experiences as a benchmark to attain realization. Contrarily, Judeo-Christian religions have rejected the embodied spiritual experiences and propose that humans attain realization by following the word of the book or by following the footsteps of Prophets and reliance on miracles rather than experiences. Such a religious belief is based on the dependence on history. It implies dependence on a particular historical event crucial for spiritual journey of a man such as Jesus’s sacrifice paving the way for man’s meeting with God. In contrast, dharmic system stresses upon the spiritual experiences of seers and incarnations, and not the historicity. The Indian approach subscribes to the primacy of experiences and claims that spiritual knowledge is eternal and can be attained by anyone at any point of time without locating oneself in any specific set of ideas and paths. The Dharmic system emphasizes that the divine is knowable and process/paths to know the divine depends on the temperament of the seeker. The Bhagwad Gita speaks of multiple paths reaching to same destination, i.e., the Brahman. It is held that the various systems evolved in the spiritual process are not rigid and there is always a continuous development within the field. Further, additional approaches may also arise due to changes in the need of society. The flexibility in Indian thought systems can be attributed to its dialogical tradition and embodied knowing. Meditation and contemplation (a form of embodied knowing) helped the seekers understand most intricate aspects of the world, society, and universe. In recent times, Sri Aurobindo devised the system of ‘integral yoga’ from his experiences. In the Indian society, spiritual seekers are not adored simply because of his or her robe or of chanting mantras. He/she is adored because what he/she says is found to be true/valid in the course of spiritual experiences of his/her followers. Even among mystical personalities, one may have reservations and differences in relation to other philosophical positions. For instance, Sri

Aurobindo (1973) disagreed and modified Shankaracharya’s famous quote “Brahma Satyam Jagat mithya” into “Brahma Satyam Jagat Brahma” (p. 73). This illustrates that the Indian society and particularly the Indian dharmic systems strongly emphasize embodied knowing and give space to diverse interpretations. In contrast, in the Judeo-Christian worldview, it is the Church’s prerogative to canonize someone as a saint. Numerous mystics had received the wrath of Church because they followed the path of embodied knowing which differed greatly from the one endorsed by the organized church.

Dharmic Traditions in Theory and Practice

Church is an organized institution guided by history and reliance on the authority of a particular text. This makes Christianity to qualify as religion where church sponsored prescriptions and its firm implementation is expected from the followers. In the dharmic system, however, there is no institution that guides its theory and practice. The Dharmic system gives primacy to individual’s spiritual evolution, gives infinite space to the seekers to communicate their experiences to world, and freedom to experiment in *sadhana*. That is why in the contemporary times a central institution like Church gives decree in various matters, thus leading to a sort of proselytization of communities of different faiths as in the case of tribal in India. This inability of church to respect native’s faith arises from its discomfort with the diversity in beliefs. Since ancient times, philosophical systems of India have equipped themselves with considerable intellectual strength which is able to cope and encourage diverse forms of thoughts and practices.

The context sensitivity of dharmic worldview makes it highly malleable and suitable to the needs of a particular section of society or sect or group. Various *devis* (goddesses) and *devtas* (gods) have been contextualized in villages so that villagers relate themselves with divinity in their own local sense. In the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, *Deeh Baba* (a form of Shiva) is seen as local *gram-devta* (village-god) to save villages in the times of difficulty. Similarly, the Vedic times were highly symbolic (Sri Aurobindo 1998) and sages expressed truth in the language of nature-gods or other worldly affairs. In order to educate people regarding the importance of nature, seers linked nature with religion. *Peepal* tree/sacred fig is highly revered in dharmic traditions. Likewise, rivers like Ganga, Godavari, Yamuna, and Narmada have been conferred the title of goddesses. Another example could be of *Chhath Puja* which is simply a show of gratitude to the Sun-god for his support to all the living beings on earth. These systems were constructed so that people may care for their nature and environment and believe every entity as part of the divine. However, Judeo-Christian

faith interprets these activities as paganism. Due to this, many indigenous cultures were destroyed and temples and idols were broken in pieces (Shourie 2011). The sole aim was to convert people of other faiths.

The Dharmic tradition is composed of various sects, schools, and life system. Despite differences in their approach, they have built-in unity due to sharing of common ground. While Judeo-Christian religions manufacture unity and sometimes force it. Rajiv says that dharmic systems possess integral unity as the core mechanism governing the entire cosmos. He cites four philosophical branches: Advaita of Shankar, Vishistadvaita of Ramanujan, Sri Aurobindo's involution and evolution, Buddhism's school of Madhyamika, and Jainism to support his arguments. Despite differences among various schools, all philosophical streams shared a commonality, that is, integral unity. Integral unity refers to the inherent cohesiveness, interdependence, and oneness among all the parts. Thus, parts cease to exist and Ultimate Reality is seen as a whole. The Judeo-Christian belief system espouses synthetic unity wherein man, objects, and world are seen as separate from God. In other words, there is separateness between the creator and the creation. That is, God may have created universe, world, man, animals, and so on, however they are separated from God and the separation line is marked by the notion of an original sin. Original sin is the innate sinful nature of humans, which in turn, is a consequence of the sin committed by Adam.

In the dharmic system, humans are not seen as passive recipients of God's blessings or curse. In addition, the union with God is believed to be in the form of integration of ascent and descent of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo's ascent and descent of consciousness symbolizes the man's aspiration to attain the divine and divine's willingness to enter man's consciousness. The Judeo-Christian faith believes in the authority of God in every activity of mankind. God knows beforehand all human actions, feelings, emotions, beliefs, and spiritual aspirations before the act/behavior is committed (Shourie 2011). Unlike the Judeo-Christian system, the dharmic system postulates that the fruit of action depends on the choices one has made in life whether present or past. Therefore, it is not that the God decides everything, for the Divine is omnipresent but the choices of karma are up to the hands of humans.

'Westernness' of Dharmic Notions and our Response

The imprints of Indian thought on Western scholarly works have been gradually forgotten and absorbed within the Western fold. Rajiv has cited evidence from linguistics to convey this point (see, p. 238). The modern linguistic discipline has its roots in the Panini's Sanskrit grammar.

According to Rajiv, West's father of structuralism Ferdinand de Saussure profoundly studied Panini's work on Sanskrit grammar and formed the foundations of contemporary post-structuralism and post-modernism. However, after his demise, his students erased many of the Sanskrit notes relevant to the work. Similarly, one can also find the traces of Indian thought in the work of William James on psychology of religion. According to Wilhelm and Rawlinson (2012), Sanskrit also influenced German transcendentalism, American transcendentalism, and the work of Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, Kant, and Emerson.

According to Rawlinson (2012), the ancient Greek philosophy including Plato's and Pythagoras's work were heavily influenced by the Indian philosophical system. He also noted early influences of Buddhism on Christianity. For instance, parables mentioned in Lalita Vistara and Jatak Kathas have close resemblance in Gospels. Moreover, there is also similarity between Lamaistic ritual and Catholic (Rawlinson 2012). Gnosticism in the West also derived many ideas from India particularly Buddhism (Rawlinson 2012). The story of Barlaam and Josaphat written by John of Damascus is similar to the story of Buddha attaining Bodhisattva. These examples and many others depict widespread influence of the Indian thought, particularly Buddhism on Christianity and European literature (see, Rawlinson 2012).

This forgetfulness of the influence of Indian culture on the West becomes more painful when unique Sanskrit words, which connote specific meaning, are absorbed into Western Biblical notions. Rajiv notes that the concepts of Ishwar, dharma, karma, devtas, rishi-guru-yogi do not have any exact resemblance or replacement in English language or Judeo-Christian religious terminology. All these Sanskrit terms have meanings that could be understood when they are non-translatable. For instance, Ishwar cannot be God because God (as per the Judeo-Christian faith) is the creator and his creation is distinct from him. Moreover, God shows his wrath when man does not oblige him or start revering other Gods, showers blessings when man is obliged to his dictum, and has special regard for chosen people of a particular place (Shourie 2011). In contrast, Ishwar is defined as one *who is one, who is motionless yet faster than mind, who is in motion yet remain motionless, who is far yet very near, who is external yet is within ourselves, who is omnipresent, who is infinite splendence, who is formless, who is pure, who is omniscient, who is truth, who is bliss, and who is consciousness* (Sri Aurobindo 1973). The dharmic principles never compel anyone to show reverence to the divine or have belief in that. Whether one receives happiness, difficulties, or adversity in life depends on the karma. At the same time, it is said that Ishwar is present where dharma and truth reside. That is the only condition, which is expected from people. However, the condition is not enforceable, as

dharmā does not have any institutional authority like Church. Ishwar in dharmic terms may be a one and Supreme Being or may be a manifestation of Supreme in the form of personal god/goddesses. Moreover, there is no delineation of specific path to attain divine. The prerogative to choose a path is of the devotees who are told to consider the compatibility between their temperament and personality, and path.

Another example is misrepresentation of dharmā as religion. The Supreme Court of India in one of its landmark judgment on Hindutva has held that Hinduism does not correspond to any religion; rather it is a way of life (Jois 2002). This verdict is of special importance as it signifies deeper comprehension of ancient Indians in matters of dharmā. Religion is of Judeo-Christian origin depicting differences between “the believer and the unbeliever; the chosen and the rejected; the blessed and the damned; the truly faithful and the heretic” (as cited in Jois, n.d.). Hinduism is like an umbrella term which in actuality denotes *Sanatan Dharma* composed of countless paths leading to God. One can create his/her own idiosyncratic path without anyone’s approval.

Another term borrowed from the West to undermine the relevance of dharmā is ‘secularism’. Secularism in modern sense indicates that the nation states shall have no interference in the religious affairs. This approach is a logical consequence of the conflict between state and church, and between church and science. In other words, religion is treated as separate from worldly affairs. Though India has not adopted this position, many scholars still preach this definition of secularism. Gandhi’s concept of secularism states *sarv dharm sambhav* as the principle of state towards religions. Further, there has never been conflict between state, dharmā, and science because their perceived separation is fallacious in dharmic system. Dharmic system believes that dharmā pervades the entire existence and even Supreme Being cannot be expected to act that contravenes the principles of dharmā.

After independence, India adopted the modus operandi of the Britishers. Education has been the biggest victim of our western-centric approach. Although there are many pitfalls, the most important limitation has been the absence of spiritual teaching. Character is the defining condition for a person’s growth and his/her subsequent contribution to nation and society. It is surprising that children are not taught moral and ethical stories pertinent to the shaping of children’s behavior in righteous direction. The trend that has emerged is using Christian terminology to conceptualize our traditions and mythology. A growing section of English educated class denotes Trideva (Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh) as Hindu trinity, thus interpolating Christian trinity. Moreover, spirituality is seen as separate from everyday life and activities, thus limiting the penetration of spirituality into the life schemes. Here, it is notable that the sages and seers of India took active interest in the welfare of society.

The ancient Indian texts give numerous examples of sages such as Vishwamitra, Vashistha, Ved Vyas, Parshuram, Dronacharya, and Kripacharya advising kings about duty to society and citizens. The sages also took active interest in educating the masses. In modern era, Sri Aurobindo was one such sage who actively participated in India’s freedom movement, wrote numerous nationalist articles, and motivated the Indians to undertake revolutionary activities. To some extent, alienation from spiritual tradition could be attributed to our education system, which regards mythological stories as imaginary and creative works of ancient authors. It is true that most stories do not have earthly touch; however, they do convey significant spiritual principles in symbolic form (Sri Aurobindo 1998).

Issues that Need Further Exploration

Rajiv profoundly explains the reasons to gaze at West from dharmic lens. He delineates historical, social, and philosophical factors that enabled the West to see the Indian civilization with a prejudiced, ill-conceived, and closed-mentality. However, the author while explaining his thesis intermittently discussed the ramifications of the Western worldview for the Indian society and what could be the probable internal reasons that led the ongoing process of assimilation of the dharmic system. The detrimental influence on the Indian society and its dharmic foundation is not simply the work of Judeo-Christian universalism. There must have been some weaknesses in the Indian mind that allowed enchantment towards foreign elements and disdain for dharmā. Since ancient times, cultural unity has been present among the Indians. Despite common cultural roots, the nation was divided into several small and large kingdoms. The division had been given so much prominence that even at the time of foreign invasion the only asset kingdoms had was disunity. History offers two prominent examples of this kind. First, when Alexander invaded India. At that time, powerful Nand dynasty had not taken any constructive action toward forming a united army composed of all states/kingdoms of India. Instead, the Magadh (centre of Nand dynasty) king Dhananada was immersed in hedonistic pursuit and exploited greatly his own citizens. It was the lack of unity and nationalist feeling that India could not stand against the Greek. In the same situation but capturing a different picture given by the concerted effort of Chanakya and Chandragupta which pushed back not only the Greek army but also established for the first time a politically united India. Second example is of the time when Muslims invaded India. In 712, the Arabs captured Sind while rest of the India remained untouched for almost 300 years (Nehru 2004). A full-fledged conquest of India came from Mahmud of Ghazni who looted the Indian treasures and murdered a number of

Hindus in the northern part of the region while the southern, central, and eastern part of India flourished in tranquility (Nehru 2004). In this particular small portion of history of Muslim invasion, it is conspicuous that it was not the whole India, except Rajputana, which offered resistance to Ghazni. These illustrations indicate that loss of political freedom may have resulted in current cultural submissiveness among Indians (Nehru 2004) but it also indicates lack of nationalist fervor and cultural affirmation which may have pushed the Indians to the brink of inertia.

Moreover, the strength of dharmic system that acts as buffering to outside aggressiveness *often* transforms into weakness that succumb to the outside influences. The peculiarity of Indian culture lies in its assimilative, pluralistic, and regenerative capacity. The numerous schools and their interpretations are the products of these characteristics of Indian culture. These same features have also led the Indian culture to transform Islamic influences in medieval period, British mindset in modern period, and globalization in contemporary period into its own unique traditions (Kakar 2012). However, these very features had assisted foreign invaders to conquer India. It becomes pertinent to delve deeply into the character of Indian civilization that produces such contradictory consequences.

Overall, Rajiv has presented a perspective of Western outlook by dealing its deeper philosophical and religious assumptions that are often hidden. This book would

certainly provoke its readers to rethink about the many assumptions that are taken for granted. It is worth reading for the students and scholars of cultural psychology and intellectual history of the modern period.

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