

Hindu Theodicy and Jana Gopāla

David N. Lorenzen

In the view of Max Weber, a theodicy refers to the way in which different religions represent how what happens to persons after death is determined by their actions in their present lives. The standard Hindu theodicy claims that our behaviour in this and previous lives leads to a better or worse rebirth. This essay discusses how this Hindu theodicy was modified by religious thinkers who wished to accommodate this system to a more egalitarian and fluid social system through the infusion and elevation of the concept of religious devotion or bhakti. The main example used is the work of a seventeenth-century Hindu poet named Jana Gopāla. His views are compared to those of earlier Hindu texts and to those of an eighteenth century Italian Christian missionary in India.

It's modern civilization, this godless civilization, that makes men attach such importance to their own skins. ... Only the soul is immortal, alas! But what does the soul count for now? One's skin is the only thing that counts. ... Men no longer fight for honor, freedom and justice. They fight for their skins, their loathsome skins.

Curzio Malaparte, *The Skin*: 130.

1. Introduction

One of the chief aims of any religion is to provide a blueprint of how society should be organized in order to avoid conflict between individuals and groups within society and to provide the solidarity necessary to protect society and the religion itself from outside rivals and enemies.¹ In complex

¹ I would like to thank Purushottam Agrawal, Monika Horstmann, John S. Hawley and Pinuccia Caracchi for their critical comments and help with some of the material presented in this paper. Sanskrit and Hindi words in Roman transcription use the standard scholarly method for Sanskrit including diacritics with the following exceptions. The unaspirated mute palatal is written as “ch,” and the related aspirate as “chh.” Also words now commonly used in English like Krishna, Vishnu, Purana, Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Hindu are given their common English spellings. Proper names in the Hindi texts of Jana Gopāla often have quite different (and inconsistent) forms and spellings from the same names in Sanskrit texts, but I have Sanskritized the names to make them easier to recognize. The *Brāhmaṇa varṇa* is written as “Brahmin,” the god *Brahmā* as “Brahma,” and *Brahman* (ground of being) as “Brahman.”

societies that embody unequal distributions of wealth and power, people regularly seek ways to justify or to compensate for this inequality and the associated sufferings and injustices. Religions do this by claiming that after our deaths we will receive rewards and punishments for the good and bad behavior and the good and bad fortunes experienced in our present lives. The sets of ideas that embody this claim are called “theodicies.” Without these promises of just rewards and just punishments after death, most religions argue, there is little incentive for people to behave in an honest and moral way. Without these promises, life would be ruled only by the principle that the big fish eat the smaller fish, what Sanskrit texts call *matsya-nyāya*, or by the rule that only one’s own skin counts, as in the above quote from Malaparte’s novel.

In a text written in 1913, the sociologist Max Weber posited the existence of three main ideal types of theodicies: the theodicy that seeks justification for worldly suffering by rebirth in a different body, the theodicy that seeks justification in a future victory of one’s descendants, and the theodicy that seeks justification in an existence in heaven or hell after death. Weber (1967: 275-76) wrote:²

One can explain suffering and injustice by referring to individual sin committed in a former life (the migration of souls), to the guilt of ancestors, which is avenged down to the third and fourth generation, or — the most principled — to the wickedness of all creatures *per se*. As compensatory promises, one can refer to hopes of the individual for a better life in the future in this world (transmigration of souls) or to hopes for the successors (Messianic realm), or to a better life in the hereafter (paradise).

These three types of theodicy respectively correspond, in Weber’s view, mainly to, first, the religions native to India (those of the Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs) that offer future rewards and punishments in a rebirth in a new body; second, the religion of the Jews that offers future rewards and punishments for the community on earth; and, third, the religions of the Christians and Muslims that offer future rewards and punishments for each person in heaven and hell.

All these religions have, of course, long been present in South Asia and all of them have had to contend with, and adapt to, the dominant social norms of South Asia. From late Vedic times, these dominant social norms have been those of the Hindus that are centered on the hierarchical social institution labeled *varṇāśrama-dharma*, the duties assigned to one’s *varṇa* or hereditary rank and stage in life (*āśrama*). For Hindus, a future rebirth in a better body depends on our past actions, our karma,

² Very few recent scholars of South Asia have made much use of the theodicy concept and Weber’s discussion of it. One of the few to do so is Lawrence Babb 1983: 163-81.

our each having followed a moral life appropriate to our *varṇa*. The concepts and practices associated with *varṇāśrama-dharma* changed substantially over the centuries, but three basic ideas remained constant: first, that society was and should be organized in a hierarchy; second, that the parts of the hierarchy were each associated with certain occupations; and, third, that one's place in the hierarchy was determined by blood, by hereditary descent.

The present essay discusses some of the ways in which some texts and sects of Hindu religion attempted to incorporate and mollify persons of lower social rank by introducing important changes in the way that the links between the social hierarchy of *varṇāśrama-dharma* and the theodicy of rebirth were conceptualized. The discussion will highlight the views of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and of the seventeenth-century Dādū Panthī author Jana Gopāla. The discussion will end with a brief look at the critique of the Hindu theodicy made by the eighteenth-century Catholic missionary Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano in his Hindustani “Dialogue between and Christian and a Hindu about Religion” and his presentation of the Christian theodicy that he claims tells the truth about what happens to us after death.

One of the earliest theodicies of Hindu tradition appears in the early *Chhāndogya-upaniṣad*.³ In it, different sorts of human souls are said to take one of two different paths after death. The wise sages who meditate on faith and austerity (*śraddhā tapa ity upāsate*) take a path that leads to Brahman and the gods. Those who practice sacrifices and do good works (and also, apparently, those who behave badly) take the path that leads to the world of the fathers (*pitṛ-loka*). The former do not return to earth, the latter do return and take birth again in different *varṇas* according to their behavior in their former lives.

Closer to early modern and modern Hindu ideas about what happens to us after death is the theodicy found in pre-modern Dharma-śāstra texts such as the *Mānava-dharma-śāstra*. This text describes in some detail how a person who behaves in a moral fashion and follows the customs of his *varṇa*, his social and occupational class, will, through the accumulation of positive karma, eventually be reborn as a male Brahmin. In this Brahmin body, he then has the possibility of a salvation that is usually described as a total escape from the cycle of rebirth: either a life with God in heaven or personal dissolution into the ground of being known as Brahman. If a person acts against the approved social norms, he will, through his bad karma, be reborn in ever lower circumstances, even as an animal. This theodicy obviously fosters a model of society that is deeply hierarchical, male-centered, and permits

³ See *Chhāndogya-upaniṣad* 4.15.2 and 5.10.1-7. The second of the two earliest Upanishads, the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka-upaniṣad* 6.2.2 also mentions these two paths, although in less detail.

very little occupational mobility. It assumes that Brahmins and other upper-caste males are, in some innate sense, superior to all women regardless of their castes and to all men from lower castes. Not surprisingly, this theodicy has never been fully acceptable to many of these persons. The traditional theodicies of Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikh religion do not promote the idea of reward and punishment via caste identity, but they do also rely on a similar idea of rebirth in higher or lower bodies that is determined by karma in order to foster the norms of proper social behavior.

One obstacle to convincing people to accept this idea of rebirths determined by karma, as Lawrence Babb (1983) has ably discussed, is that in everyday life Hindu persons (and presumably also Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists) generally prefer to attribute their own (and possibly others') personal misfortunes and suffering to the power of arbitrary fate or to the bad actions of other persons rather than to the consequences of the karma associated with their own actions in this life or in past lives. Neither of these explanations (i.e. fate or the evil actions of others) has much directly to do with religion. They have the effect of nullifying the Hindu theodicy by breaking the religious link between karma and rebirth. In other words, in everyday practice the theory of karma and rebirth may not be as influential as its religious proponents would like.

Another factor to consider is the fact that the theodicies that promise rewards and punishments after our death for our behavior in this world are always backed up by more pragmatic policies that aim to lessen the sufferings and injustices that we face in this life *before* we die. A variety of different policies are emphasized in different religions. For instance, in Buddhism there is an emphasis on compassion (*karuṇā*) as a way to alleviate the suffering of others. In Jainism an emphasis is placed on avoiding harm to living creatures (*ahimsā*). Islam emphasizes charity and obedience to the law. Christianity stresses charity and brotherly love.

None of these ideals is absent from Hindu texts, but Hindu texts generally subordinate them to the idea that the power of devotion, or *bhakti*, can lessen, and even short-circuit, the rigid functioning of the law of karma and its link to *varṇāśrama-dharma*. The key text here is, of course the *Bhagavad-gītā* and its advocacy of the path of *bhakti-yoga* combined with righteous, *varṇa*-appropriate action. By means of this “discipline of devotion” to God, the suffering devotee, particularly the female and/or low class devotee, is offered a way to shorten the lengthy series of rebirths and achieve salvation in more direct fashion. Krishna says: “For those who take refuge in Me, ... though they are lowly born, women, *Vaiśyas*, as well as *Śūdras*, they also attain to the highest goal.”⁴

⁴ Verse 9.32 (trans. by Radhakrishna). See also the quite similar passage in the later *Íśvara-gītā* 4.10-11 (2015).

This inherent tension between *bhakti* and the maintenance of the norms of the social and political order becomes more explicit, but also more problematic, in various religious stories of the Hindu Puranas that attempt to argue both that karma determines rebirth in accordance with the parameters of *varṇāśrama-dharma* and that *bhakti* can short-circuit this process. The key text here is the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, a Sanskrit text dedicated to the worship of Vishnu probably written in the Tamil region in the tenth or eleventh century. By the fifteenth century, if not before, the *Bhāgavata* had become the single most important text for Vaishnava religion in both northern and southern India.

2. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*

The seventeenth-century poet and story-teller Jana Gopāla wrote retellings in Hindi/Braj of three *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* stories: those of Dhruva, Prahlāda, Bharata.⁵ Two of these stories reinforce the idea of the relentless operation of karma from one life to the next through backstories about the previous births of their protagonists. Prahlāda is the son of Hiranyakaśipu, who in a previous life had been Vishnu's gatekeeper named Vijaya. Vijaya had blocked some sages from passing through the gate and had been cursed to be reborn in a demon womb as Hiranyakaśipu. Bharata, the protagonist of the second story, had, in a previous life, been reborn as a deer after having become obsessed with caring for one instead of fulfilling his hereditary obligations. The Kṣatriya prince Dhruva's story does not have a similar previous-birth backstory. Nonetheless, in the text (4.8.17) Dhruva's mother consoles him for his rejection by the king saying that a man reaps the sufferings he has given to others in previous lives.

These defenses of the idea of karma and rebirth in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* stories, need to be set alongside the strong arguments for a direct salvation through *bhakti* put forward by the *Bhāgavata* in these same stories. In a 1966 article titled "The Social Teaching of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*," Thomas Hopkins showed how the *Bhāgavata* defends the right of low caste persons, even *Śūdras* and members of what are now known as scheduled tribes and castes to achieve salvation or *mukti*. In other words, the *Bhāgavata* short-circuits the theodicy of the worldly suffering of virtuous low-caste people in a similar, but more decided and direct fashion than the *Bhagavad-gītā*. According to the *Bhāgavata*, this salvation is obtained through proper conduct coupled with *bhakti* to Vishnu and his avatars. Here is one passage from the Purana that Hopkins uses to illustrate its view that lower caste persons are as

⁵ See *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (1971: books 7, 5, and 4 respectively). Jana Gopāla makes his reliance explicit in his *Dhruva charitra* where he says (1.2): "This is a story told in the fourth chapter of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*." There are in fact numerous verses in all three of Jana Gopāla's retellings of the stories of Dhruva, Prahlāda, and Jaḍa Bharata that indicate a direct reliance on the *Bhāgavata* text.

eligible for salvation as Brahmins. The speaker here is the demon devotee Prahlāda, to whom I will return shortly:

I consider a dog-eater (*śvapacha*) whose mind, speech, activity, purpose and life are fixed on the lotus feet of Vishnu to be better than a learned Brahman possessed of the above twelve qualities who has turned away from His feet. The former purifies his clan (*kula*), but the latter, whose pride is great, does not.⁶

What Hopkins does not adequately stress in his essay is the fact that the *Bhāgavata* also repeatedly defends the hierarchical norm of a human society built around the four *varṇas*, not only in the frame of the stories themselves, as has been noted, but also in the more didactic chapters that accompany them. For instance, immediately after the end of the Prahlāda story the *Bhāgavata* dedicates a full chapter (7.11) to an exposition by the sage Nārada of the proper social and religious duties and economic professions of the four *varṇas* and of the still lower “mixed races” (*saṃkara-jāti*): the Antyajas and the Antevasāyins (7.11.30). In other words, the *Bhāgavata* repeatedly juxtaposes passages that partly deviate from traditional social and religious norms through the promotion of the power of bhakti with passages that offer didactic defenses of those same norms.

Beginning in about 1500 CE, many of the religious stories of the *Bhāgavata* were retold in vernacular versions. In North India, these retellings were mostly composed in the Braj language. Sheldon Pollock, Christian Novetzke and other scholars have debated about the role of state actors in fomenting the historical process of vernacularization of written documents and literature in India.⁷ Pollock’s main claim is that state actors were instrumental in initiating this process, and he uses texts in Kannada as his prime example. Novetzke argues that vernacularization into Marathi was initiated principally by religious authors, most notably by the author of *Līlā-charitra* (1278 CE) and by Jñānadeva, the author of the *Jñāneśvarī* (1290 CE.)

Pollock and Novetzke both accept that the decision to write in vernacular languages had important political and social dimensions regardless of whether it was state actors or religious authors who initiated the process. Novetzke, in particular, also argues that “vernacularization is to be understood as the process of social critique that is implied and enacted when idioms of power are transferred into the field of everyday life” (2019: 92). For the texts Novetzke discusses, this social critique tends to favor the non-elite classes and he generally assume that this non-elite bias is inherent

⁶ *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* 7.9.10. Translation mostly based on Hopkins (1966: 17).

⁷ See Novetzke (2012, 2019) and Pollock (2009).

in the very process of vernacularization. To some extent, this may be the case, but early vernacular religious texts in North India in fact express a wide range of social and political points of view, both conservative and egalitarian, both Tulasīdāsa and Kabīra.

When we get to the vernacular retellings of the stories found in the *Bhāgavata*, the social messages of the retellings tend to divide into two camps: those that support a relatively liberal *varṇāśrama-dharma* tempered by *bhakti*, and those oppose the whole idea of an innate social hierarchy. Roughly speaking, these two camps correspond to retellings by *saguṇī* and *nirguṇī* authors respectively. Since most of the vernacular retellings of the *Bhāgavata* stories have not been adequately studied, this contrast needs further research. One obvious difference is that *nirguṇī* authors such as Kabīra and Raidāsa generally preferred to avoid even references to (or at least *positive* references to) stories about Krishna, stories that are a favorite of *saguṇī* authors.⁸ The one important exception is in songs (*pad*) written in the *viraha* mode, a topic that is discussed below. This absence of Krishna in *nirguṇī* texts is hardly surprising since *nirguṇī* authors mostly, if somewhat inconsistently, opposed the idea of avatars and other embodied forms of God.

The *Bhāgavata* stories discussed here—those of Prahlāda, Dhruva, and Bharata — are retold in vernacular languages, mostly Braj, in early modern North Indian texts attributed to Raidāsa (Prahāda), Agradāsa (Prahāda, Dhruva), Rāmchandra Dube (Prahāda, Dhruva), Paramānandadāsa (Dhruva), Madhukaradāsa (Dhruva), Muralīdāsa (Dhruva), Śaśinātha Mathura (Dhruva), and Gurudāsa (Prahāda).⁹ All three stories are retold in Braj by the early seventeenth-century Dādū Panthī author Jana Gopāla. All three stories are also briefly retold in Rāghavadāsa's (ca. 1720) vernacular *Bhakta-māla*. The pious demon Prahlāda, in particular, is also frequently invoked in songs by *nirguṇī* poets such as Kabīra, Raidāsa, the Sikh Guru Amara Dāsa, Rajjaba, and Bhikhā Sāhab.¹⁰

⁸ The anti-Krishna, anti-avatar songs of Kabīra, particularly in the *Kabīra-bijaka*, will be discussed in a future essay. For a preliminary discussion of this topic, see Lorenzen (1987).

⁹ These names are taken from the manuscript catalogues of the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute, Jodhpur (vols. 3 and 4, 1974 and 1978) and from that of the Jaipur Palace library (Bahura 1976). In these archives the manuscripts of the Hindi *charitras* by Jana Gopāla are by far the most numerous. As far as we know, none of the other texts have been published. The *charitras* of Agradas (in the *saguṇī* /Brahmin line of spiritual descent from Rāmānanda) in particular would make an interesting comparison with those of Jana Gopāla.

¹⁰ For some of these many *nirguṇī* references to the Prahlāda story, see Lorenzen (1996: 15-35).

3. Vernacular retelling and Jana Gopāla

All these three stories, even in their *Bhāgavata* versions, feature protagonists who radically deviate from accepted Hindu social norms, the norms of *varṇāśrama-dharma*. Prahlāda rejects his hereditary duties as both demon and royal prince in favor of dedication to the holy Name of Vishnu. Dhruva, as a young prince, responds to an insult by abandoning the royal palace and going to the forest to live as an ascetic. Bharata, once a great emperor, becomes an ascetic and retires to the forest where he falls in love with a young deer. When Bharata dies, he is reborn as a deer. Finally, he is reborn as a Brahmin who is regarded as a fool (*jaḍa*) but eventually becomes the priest of King Rahūgaṇa.

Why did these three stories, in their vernacular retellings, become so popular from about the fifteenth century in North India? The most plausible general explanation is that in early modern North India, the challenge from Islam opened up a space for some lower and middle caste groups to develop a more socially, and linguistically, liberal Hindu religion embodied in a great variety of religious sects, some led by Brahmins, some not. Purushottam Agrawal (2009) has claimed that this process created an early indigenous modernity (*deśaja ādhuniktā*) in North India that he associates especially with the ideas and influence of Rāmānanda and Kabīra.

I have elsewhere used the term “non-caste Hindu religion” to describe the *bhakti* movement associated with Rāmānanda and his non-Brahmin disciples led by Kabīra.¹¹ At least in North India, the major part of this non-caste Hindu religion is formed by the various so-called *nirguṇī* sects that reject the worship of embodied forms of God and prefer a formless (*nirguṇa*) God or Supreme Spirit. Nonetheless, two other characteristics of non-caste Hindu religion seem to me to be more important. First, the founders of the sects associated with non-caste Hindu religion were all non-Brahmins and a large majority of their followers have come from castes belonging to the modern categories of Other Backward Castes and Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Second, the religious ideas expressed in the literature of these sects either openly reject the hierarchical structure of *varṇāśrama-dharma* or pay minimal attention to it.

Today traditional North Indian religious groups that follow this non-caste religion together with a mostly Vaishnava-inflected *nirguṇa* theology include the Kabīra Pantha, the Dādū Pantha, the followers of Raidāsa, and the now non-Hindu Sikh Pantha. The mostly Shaivite Nāthas descended from Gorakhnātha can also be included.¹² Among groups that follow a *saguṇī* theology (but not a *saguṇī* social

¹¹ See especially Lorenzen (1987).

¹² Not included here are religious groups founded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some of which claim to be socially progressive.

ethos) the followers of Mīrābāī, who are devotees of Krishna, can be considered to be followers of non-caste religion from the point of view of their generally more liberal views about caste and gender.¹³ On the other hand, nowadays the followers of Rāmānanda himself, the Rāmānandīs, are both worshippers of embodied forms of Vishnu and socially conservative supporters of *varṇāśrama-dharma*.¹⁴

In his Braj version of Prahlāda's story, one directly based on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, Jana Gopāla repeatedly mentions the Brahmin (*vipra*) status of Prahlāda's demon teachers and strongly contrasts their Brahminical teachings with Prahlāda's devotion to Vishnu. Since Prahlāda is the son of the demon king Hiranyakaśipu, the demon teachers' lessons are said to emphasize the statecraft appropriate for Kṣatriya royalty. The conceptual tension between Prahlāda's *bhakti* and the Kṣatriya statecraft of his Brahmin teachers is also present in the *Bhāgavata* version of the Prahlāda story. In the earlier *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* Prahlāda's demon teachers are said to be reciters of the *Sāma-veda*, but the text does not specify exactly what they taught to Prahlāda.¹⁵ Both Jana Gopāla and the *Bhāgavata* also evade a clear answer to the question of whether Prahlāda should be considered primarily as a royal Kṣatriya or as a demon without caste status. Where the *Prahlāda charitra* most clearly diverges from the story told in the *Bhāgavata*, however, is in Jana Gopāla's outright denial of the presence of innate pollution in the demon body of Prahlāda or, by extension, in the bodies of all low-caste human persons.

For example, in three verses found at the very beginning of the *Prahlāda charitra* (1.2-4), Jana Gopāla invokes, rather perfunctorily, the four Vedas and *varṇāśrama-dharma*, but he does so without noting anything more than differences in the styles of worship – not differences of rank, purity or occupation – and then extends the possibility of salvation even to Muslims:¹⁶

Corresponding to the four yugas, the Veda has four parts: the *Ṛg*, *Yajur*, *Sāma*, and *Atharva* Vedas. Through the fifty-two syllables, the sound OM becomes manifest as the three worlds.

There are four *varṇas* and four *āśramas*. Their various dharmas have been indicated. One person may dedicate himself to yoga, another to sacrifice (*jīga*). Another sets his mind on pilgrimages and religious vows.

¹³ On this topic, see Mukta (1994).

¹⁴ A large part of the Rāmānandī sect was earlier more socially radical than most of its present day adherents. On this topic see especially van der Veer (1989).

¹⁵ *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* (1989: chapter 17, verse 48).

¹⁶ It is likely that the author of the *Bhāgavata* had little knowledge of Muslims, but the text also never extends the possibility of salvation to either Christians or Jinas, groups that were undoubtedly better known to the (likely southern India) author of the text.

Another says that charity and virtue are best. Another says that one should save the soul. The Hindus and the Turks proclaim two separate paths. If one meets the True Guru, the two become one.

Three verses subsequently spoken by the sage Nārada — in response to a query by the god Indra about how a demon such as Prahlāda came to be a devotee of Vishnu — offer a similar argument. Here Jana Gopāla asserts the equality of all living bodies and emphasizes that it is only by their conduct that humans are differentiated into high and low. This is again an argument that goes well beyond the “even a dog-eater” argument of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. Here is what Jana Gopāla, via Nārada, says (2: 21-24):

Then Nārada said: “Listen, o lord of the gods, For Hari, the lord of the three worlds, no one is high or low. One is called high or low according to one’s conduct. Hari’s devotees worship Hari and become one with Him.

“If a poison is given to high and low persons, they will both die when they eat it. Likewise, if high and low persons sit together in a boat, they both will cross to the other shore.

“Thus there is no special cause [to determine who is born] into Hari’s family. Both Untouchables (*antija*) and Brahmins (*vipra*) should worship Him as their savior (*tāraṇa*).

Moreover, no physical body is high or low. All bodies are made from the same five elements.”

Jana Gopāla forcefully reiterates his view about the relation of *bhakti* and *varṇa* in a song (*pad*) found in several different sources. Jana Gopāla says:¹⁷

As long as you stick to the ways of caste,
what benefit is won
By tying on a garland of beads
or giving yourself a *tilaka*?

While Brahmins stick to Brahmin-hood,
and Vaiśyas stick to commerce,
While *Kṣatriyas* refuse to leave their daggers,
not one of them knows *bhakti*.

¹⁷ This translation and text of the *pad* (with variants) are found in Agrawal and Lorenzen (forthcoming: *pad* no. 8). The *pad* begins: *joloṃ jāti svabhāva liye*.

While caste remains, there are no *bhaktas*.

Think about caste and *bhakti*.¹⁸

Straddling two horses or two boats,
no one reaches the goal.

No trust? Consult the *Bhāgavata*
about the ways of Sants.

His servants are apart from other *varṇas*,
their love is recalling Hari.

Nārada's concern is saying Nārāyaṇa,
and not with finding caste.

Love filled Mādhava does not give birth
to Brahmins and *Chaṇḍālas*,
So says Jana Gopāla.

4. Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano's Christian-Hindu Dialogue

In the case of the other two principal religions of the Indian subcontinent — Islam and Christianity — rebirth into differently ranked social classes is replaced by a single eternal destiny for humans, or at least human souls, in heaven or hell. This theodicy has proved to be compatible with both radically egalitarian social and political movements and with rigidly conservative social and political movements. Here I want to look at the example of a text that espouses a quite conservative view of the implications of Christian religion for the proper ordering of society.

This text is the “Dialogue between and Christian and a Hindu about Religion” (*jabāba-svāla aika krīstīāna aura aika hīndu ke bīcha mo imāna ke upara*) written in Hindustani by an Italian Capuchin missionary named Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano (1709-1761).¹⁹ Giuseppe Maria presented the text to the king of Bettiah in northwestern Bihar in the year 1751. The Dialogue is of course fictitious and meant to show the superiority of Christianity over Hindu religion. To do this, the author had to point out what he considered to be the major failings of Hindu religion and the major virtues of Christian religion. His

¹⁸ The reading *na* maybe is better, but it is found in only one of four texts available to me. The phrase would then mean: “Think about *bhakti*, not caste.”

¹⁹ Ed. and trans. in Lorenzen (2015).

arguments included both an attack against the ideology of caste and rebirth and a parallel defense of the practical need for social hierarchy based on an economic and political division of labor.

Although Christianity never had the same impact on North India that Islam did, European Christian missionaries were active in the region from at least the early part of the eighteenth century. The history of Christianity in south India of course begins in the early centuries CE and was reinforced in this region and in Goa and coastal Maharashtra by a second wave of missionary activity under the auspices of the Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Capuchin mission to which Giuseppe Maria belonged, however, was not sponsored by the Portuguese but instead was directly financed by the Vatican through the congregation known as Propaganda Fide. Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano and his successors, most notably Marco della Tomba, did manage to establish a small Christian community in Bettiah.

The thorniest problem faced by the European Christian missionaries was the endogamous nature of caste (*jāti*) in Hindu society. The conflict over what to do about caste practices between the Christian missionaries Roberto Nobili (1577-1656) and Gonçalo Fernandes (1541-1619) is well known.²⁰ The norm of caste endogamy gave the leaders of Hindu castes the ability to effectively ban Christian converts from finding marriage partners for their children. The only practical solutions were for whole castes to convert or for the Christian converts from one or more castes to form a new Christian caste. The latter solution was eventually adopted in Bettiah with the encouragement of Giuseppe Maria's successor, Marco della Tomba (1726-1803).²¹ This caste of Bettiah Christians still exists.

On the other hand, the practical difficulties posed by the Hindu caste system did not mean that the missionaries necessarily supported a significantly more egalitarian social order. The Christian theodicy that Giuseppe Maria presents in his *Dialogue* argues that a solid social and economic hierarchy is necessary for the proper functioning of political and economic life in this world. Where Giuseppe Maria's theodicy differs from that of Hindu religion is in the afterlife. After death there will be no possibility of any rebirth. After death all human beings will be judged equally for their moral and religious behavior in their earthy life and be eternally rewarded in heaven or punished in hell accordingly. In the *Dialogue*, the Christian says this:²²

²⁰ See especially Zupanov (1999).

²¹ See Lorenzen (2003: 15-20).

²² Lorenzen (2015: 173-174, 235). Compare this with the following from the famous speech on hell found in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2001: 86): "What did it avail then to have been a great emperor, a great general, a marvellous inventor, the most learned of the learned? All were as one before the judgement seat of God. He would reward the good and punish the wicked."

Among all persons who have been born in this world, no one has had merit [from a previous birth]. All were equal [at birth]. But the Supreme God, for the welfare of the world, makes someone a raja and makes another a subject. He makes some wealthy and some poor. But he has given his word to all persons that he will give joy in salvation or misery in hell to each according to what he has earned. He will not pay attention to who was a raja, who was a peasant, who was wealthy, who was poor. ... Moreover, if a poor person has earned merit, he will get salvation. And if a raja has earned sin, he will get hell ... If a poor person acts in his own condition in accordance with the Supreme God's commands, then after death he will get as great a reward in heaven as the greatest emperor can get.

In order to make this model of hierarchy in this world and equality after death plausible, Giuseppe Maria evidently feels that it is necessary to argue against not only the theodicy of karma and rebirth but also against the idea that “each person's karma is written on his forehead by Brahma” (*sabha ādamīvo ke līlāra mo apanā apanā karma brāmhā so liṣā jātā hai*. Lorenzen 2015: 149, 214). As was noted above, Lawrence Babb (1983) found that fate or destiny and the bad actions of other persons were the two principal everyday explanations that people in India commonly use to account for their own bad fortune, not karma from their past lives. Giuseppe Maria draws the ultimate logical conclusion from the reliance on fate that this leads to moral nihilism: what is the point of worshipping gods or of practical human effort to achieve goals or to behave in moral fashion if everything important is fore-ordained by what Brahma has written on one's forehead?

As for the idea of karma and rebirth, Giuseppe Maria cannot attack it directly for the obvious reason that it involves unprovable assumptions about what happens to us after death (as of course does his own proposal of an after-death experience of heaven or hell). What he does instead is to claim that social inequalities in this world should not be understood as the product of karma but rather are a God-ordained necessity for society to function. The Christian of the dialogue says (Lorenzen 2015: 170-71, 232-233):

You do not understand things correctly if you believe that people get good births and bad births because of what they earned in their past life, since the real cause of people's separate fates is nothing other than the welfare of this world. This is because it is necessary for the welfare of this world that [our] portions (*aṃsa*) in this world not be equal. Rather one must be greater than another, and one person must be subject to the command of another. This is because if all men were kings, when who would be the kings' peasants? If all were wealthy, then who would do the work of the wealthy persons' servants. ... [etc.]

Giuseppe Maria's Christian vision of the afterlife is, of course, subject to its own logical and philosophical objections, but the Hindu of the dialogue is never allowed to present them in any serious fashion. Perhaps most notable in this regard is the logical conflict between God's omniscient foreknowledge, a knowledge that implies fatalism (what is written on one's forehead), and human free will. This is the problem that many Christian thinkers — for example John Milton in *Paradise Lost* — have traditionally wrestled with.²³

It is also worth noting that the Christianity presented in Giuseppe Maria's Christian-Hindu dialogue is a sort of stripped-down, simplified version of Christianity, one that omits several doctrines that complicate the contrast with Hindu religion. It is clear that this minimal version of Christian doctrine was purposely put forward by missionaries such as Giuseppe Maria in order to not confuse new Hindu converts. One of the key omissions is the doctrine of original sin. This could easily be taken as a sort of universally inherited bad karma that infects all humans. A second key omission is the doctrine of the Trinity. As many have noted, the Trinity definitely complicates the claim that Christianity is a strictly monotheistic religion. The elevation of the Virgin to the status of Queen of Heaven is open to a similar objection.

Two other Christian doctrines that have a more direct connection with the main Christian theodicy were also studiously ignored in Giuseppe Maria's text. One is the early doctrine, most prominent in the second and third centuries, of a universal bodily resurrection and final judgment of human beings at the impending End Time. This doctrine could be taken as claiming that we all will be reincarnated, though not transmigrated to a different body, instead of passing directly to an eternal life in heaven or hell. A second doctrine that complicates Giuseppe Maria's straightforward theodicy is that of purgatory, an idea that was not fully developed until after about 1150 CE. According to this doctrine, the souls of persons who were destined for heaven but were neither absolute saints nor absolute sinners would have to spend time in purgatory purging their sins before God's previously made final judgment was put into effect. Since these souls could be helped to a quicker passage to heaven through prayers and monetary donations to the Church from living friends and relatives, the existence of purgatory did in fact make it easier and quicker for rich and influential persons to enter

²³ In Milton's *Paradise Lost* (3. 111-119), God says that Adam and Eve cannot "... justly accuse / Their maker, or their making, or their fate, / As if predestination overruled / Their will, ... / ...; they themselves decreed / Their own revolt, not I. If I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault, / Which had no less proved certain unforeknown." In other words, here Milton claims that foreknowledge is like memory. God knows what will happen but does not cause it to happen (Milton 2005: 84). Unfortunately for this argument, God's foreknowledge is, more correctly, like a memory of an event that has yet not happened.

heaven, the very thing that Giuseppe Maria denies. The hapless, imaginary Hindu in Giuseppe Maria's *Dialogue* has, of course, nothing to say about any of this.²⁴

5. Denying theodicy

In his comments on the sociology of religion, Max Weber notes that one important strain of religious thought, a strain evident in at least Judaism and Islam, has the effect of religiously negating the idea of a theodicy leading to rewards and punishments after death (Weber 1964: 142-43):

As people continued to reflect about the insoluble problem of the imperfections of the world in the light of god's omnipotence, one result was inevitable: the conception of an unimaginably great ethical chasm between the transcendental god and the human being continuously enmeshed in the toils of new sin. And this conception inevitably led to the ultimate theoretical conclusion, apparently assumed in the Book of Job, that the omnipotent creator God must be envisaged as beyond all the ethical claims of his creatures, his counsels impervious to human comprehension. Another facet of this emerging view was that God's absolute power over his creatures is unlimited, and therefore that the criteria of human justice are utterly inapplicable to his behavior. With the development of this notion, the problem of theodicy simply disappeared altogether.

This view that God's behavior and God's justice are often inscrutable, impervious to human understanding, is of course present (though not usually dominant) in virtually all religious systems. In Judaism and in Christianity this view is closely tied to the idea of *deus absconditus*, the hidden or absconded God, a Latin phrase borrowed from the vulgate translation of Isaiah 45.15. In the Christian New Testament, a vivid example of this idea is the cry of Jesus as he is being crucified: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"²⁵ Christian thinkers such as St John Chrysostom and Martin Luther made this *deus absconditus* a major part of their theologies.²⁶ Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano's Christian-Hindu *Dialogue*, however, ignores the idea completely, presumably because it is simply too pessimistic an idea for prospective new converts to accept.

²⁴ On the Christian ideas about a universal final judgment and about purgatory, see Brown (2015) and Le Goff (1981).

²⁵ Mark 15.34. John S. Hawley noted to me that Jesus's words are taken directly from Psalm 22.

²⁶ Although I am not enough of a Biblical scholar to properly document this claim, it seems to represent a consensus among experts. Luther, in his famous "Disputation Held at Heidelberg" of 1518 directly cites the *deus absconditus* passage in Isaiah 45.15. Luther here argues that what we can know of the invisible, hidden God is learned through our knowledge of the suffering of Jesus on the cross. See Luther (2018: 40-42).

In *bhakti*-oriented Hindu religion, more specifically Vaishnava *bhakti*, a key example of this idea of *deus absconditus* appears in the laments of the *gopīs*, or female cowherds, who have been abandoned by the cowherd Krishna, whom they love so desperately that in order to be with him they are willing to abandon their husbands and families. In this mode of separation (*viraha*) the *gopīs* are known as *virahaṅīs*. In the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, the text known as The Song of Solomon, also called The Song of Songs, has a similar theme in verses 5.2 to 6.3. The commentator of *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary* (Mays 2000: 472) argues that the Song of Songs is a set of very human love songs. The Jesuit scholar Francis X. Clooney (2014), however, prefers to view the Song of Songs as metaphorical, like the Hindu *virahiṅī* songs. In his study titled *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence*, Clooney compares the Biblical text of The Song of Songs, to a South Indian Hindu text about the *gopīs* called *Holy Word of Mouth (Tiruvaymoli)*.

The laments of the *gopīs* are, of course, a standard motif of the many *virahiṅī* songs in Hindi composed by early modern poets such as Sūradāsa, Mīrābāī, and Tulasīdāsa, and even by *nirguṇī* poets such as Kabīra, Dādū, and Jana Gopāla. In these songs the composers take on the persona of the abandoned female lover and call out to their errant male lover, who is God himself, to return to them. Here is a beautiful song lyric in this mode composed by Jana Gopāla:²⁷

I long for a sight of Him, but He
neither speaks nor shows Himself.
Nothing touches Hari's heart.
He never feels remorse.

Without water, a fish flops about,
and life leaves its body.
Unless an act of mercy is shown,
its hold on life is lost.

The lotus deeply loves the sun
that causes it to grow,
But if the lotus has no water
the sun will only burn it.

²⁷ Agrawal and Lorenzen (forthcoming): song no. 6. It begins: *hoṃ darasa piyāsī mujha kāhe na diṣāve*.

Calling “my love, my love” the rain bird
 flies from place to place.
 But the cruel cloud delays its thunder
 and never speaks a word

I spend my life flopping about,
 burning, and calling out.
 Jana Gopāla says life is hard
 for those who fall in love.

As Weber notes, the net effect of describing God as hidden, unconcerned about his devotees’ distress, and ultimately incomprehensible, is to religiously cancel, or at least make extremely doubtful, the operation of any logically ordered theodicy. In the absence of some divine controlling hand, the theodicy of karma and rebirth – not to mention the escape clauses of salvation through bhakti and the grace of God – remains a problematic, uncertain mechanism. Only hope remains. The *deus absconditus* might possibly someday return or reveal himself, but the certainty of the promise to provide a future reward either in a future life or in heaven is lost. We cannot know our future fate. In practice this decidedly pessimistic view of the nature of God and God’s justice never entirely replaces the more hopeful rules of theodicy in Hindu or other religions, but it remains a vision that inserts a dire warning in the minds of the devotees about the inscrutability of God and God’s will.

6. Summary

What I have tried to show here are some of the historical modifications found in different constructions of the dominant Hindu theodicy, and also how this Hindu theodicy was attacked and compared to a Christian theodicy in Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano’s fictional Christian and Hindu dialogue. Three versions of the Hindu theodicy are highlighted: those found in the *Mānava-dharma-sāstra*, in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, and in texts by the Dādū Panthī author Jana Gopāla. One element of these theodicies offers a key point of comparison. This is the element of social mobility and hierarchy. Here the views of both the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and Giuseppe Maria are clearly aligned against Jana Gopāla. Both Giuseppe Maria and the *Bhāgavata* accept the possibility of salvation for people in low-status occupations, but both postpone the possibility of social equality and occupational mobility to another life after one’s death in this life: the life of the saved in heaven and the damned in hell for Giuseppe Maria, and either

a rebirth, for better or worse, or a final escape from rebirth (*mukti*) for the *Bhāgavata*. Reading between the lines, it is reasonable to suggest that both Giuseppe Maria and the *Bhāgavata* would accept the possibility of downward occupational mobility in our present lives (for example, kings and priests and merchants becoming thieves, or, in Hindu law, the possibility of becoming an ascetic renouncer or of taking up an “emergency or *apad-dharma* occupation), but neither Giuseppe Maria nor the *Bhāgavata* would easily accept the propriety of upward occupational mobility (for example, carpenters or weavers becoming religious leaders, despite Jesus and despite Kabīra).

For Jana Gopāla, a person from a Baniya shopkeeper family, things were not so simple. He accepted rebirth, but did not accept the predetermination of social status and occupation through past karma that the standard Hindu theodicy proposes. Following the ideas of Kabīra and Dādū, Jana Gopāla evidently believed that there is a divine spark in everyone and that a single underlying Brahman, or Ground of Being, is the basis of all physical reality. For this reason, for Jana Gopāla social and occupational hierarchy was apparently not predetermined by karma from past lives or by the functional requirements of society itself. He could not, of course deny that in practice one’s birth in a family of a certain class largely determines one’s status and, at least partly, one’s occupation, since these were the dominant social norms of the Hindu society to which he belonged. Nonetheless, for Jana Gopāla, love and devotion toward the Supreme God, one loosely identified with Vishnu, and the moral behavior and compassion fostered by this God were the things that he hoped could help hold society together.

Jana Gopāla’s refusal to accept the necessity and validity of a social and occupational hierarchy predetermined by past karma was particularly true in religious matters. For groups such as Jana Gopāla’s Dādū Panth, the Brahmins had no right to a monopoly control over religious rites and religious education. This horrified more traditional Hindus like Tulasīdāsa. In the Kali Yuga, Tulasī says (1989: 985), “The *Śūdras* dispute with Brahmins. They cast angry looks and scold: ‘Are we something less than you? Whoever knows Brahman becomes a noble Brahmin.’” Jana Gopāla, for his part, says (*Prahlāda charitra* 2.25): “The Brahmin and the Untouchable share a single essence. Gold is not different [no matter what shape it takes].”

References

- Agrawal, Purushottam. 2009. *Akath kahānī prem kī: Kabīr kī kavītā aur unakā samay*. Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.
- Agrawal, Purushottam and David N. Lorenzen. forthcoming. *Jan Gopal: Early Modern Hindu Poet and Story Teller*.

- Babb, Lawrence. 1983. "Destiny and Responsibility: Karma in Popular Hinduism." In: *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, edited by Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, 163-181. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bahura, Gopal Narayan. 1976. *Literary Heritage of the Rulers of Amber and Jaipur*. Jaipur: Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum.
- Bhagavad-gītā*. 1960. Ed. and trans. by S. Radhakrishnan. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. 1971. Sanskrit text with an English translation by C. L. Goswami. Gorakhpur: Gita Press.
- Bṛhad-āraṇyaka-upaniṣad*. Edited and translated by S. Radhakrishnan in *The Principal Upanisads*. London Allen and Unwin.
- Brown, Peter. 2015. *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chhāndogya-upaniṣad*. See *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka-upaniṣad*.
- Clooney, Francis X. 2014. *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hopkins, Thomas. 1966. "The Social Teaching of the Bhagavata Purana." In: *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, edited by Milton Singer, 3-22. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Īśvara-gītā*. 2015. Ed. and trans. by Andrew J. Nicholson in *Lord Siva's Song: The Īśvara Gita*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Jana Gopāla. Translations and an edition of his three *charitras* (of Dhruva, Prahlāda and Jaḍa Bharata) and selected song lyrics will appear in Agrawal and Lorenzen (forthcoming). See also Lorenzen 1996 for a separate translation and edition of the *Prahlāda charitra*. In the essay above, the translations from the *Prahlāda charitra* are based on the text in Hindi Sahitya Sammelan manuscript no. 1900.
- Joyce, James. 1992. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.
- Le Goff, Jacques. 1981. *La naissance du Purgatoire*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Lorenzen, David N. 1987. "Traditions of Non-Caste Hinduism: The Kabir Panth." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 21/2: 263-83.
- Lorenzen, David N. 1996. *Praises to a Formless God*. Albany: State University of New York Press [this contains an edition and translation of Jana Gopāla's *Prahlāda charitra* by the author and Shukdeo Singh].
- Lorenzen, David N. 2003. "Europeans in Late Mughal South Asia: The Perceptions of Italian Missionaries." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40/1: 1-31.
- Lorenzen, David N. 2015. *A Dialogue between a Christian and a Hindu about Religion by Giuseppe Maria da Gargnano*. Mexico City: El Colegio de México [this is an electronic publication available without cost].

- Luther, Martin. 2018. *The Essential Luther*. Edited and translated by Tryntje Helfferich. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Malaparte, Curzio. 2013. *The Skin*. Translated from Italian by David Moore. New York: New York Review Books [original: *La pelle*. Roma – Milano: Aria d'Italia: 1949].
- Mays, James L. (gen. ed.). 2000. *The Harper-Collins Bible Commentary. Revised edition*. San Francisco: HarperCollins [the Song of Songs commentator is Michael V. Fox].
- Menāriyā, Oṃkāralāla. 1974 and 1978. *Rājasthānī-Hindī hastalikhita grantha-sūchī*, vols. 3 and 4. Jodhpur: Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute.
- Milton, John. 2005. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by David Scott Kastan. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. First published in about 1667.
- Mukta, Parita. 1994. *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Mānava-dharma-śāstra*. Edited by J. L. Shastri as *Manu-smṛti*. Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass. Translated by G. Bühler as *The Laws of Manu*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988.
- Novetzke, Christian Lee. 2012. “The Brahmin Double: The Brahminical Construction of Anti-Brahminism and anti-caste sentiment in the Religious Cultures of Precolonial Maharashtra.” In: *Religious Cultures in Early Modern India: New Perspectives*, edited by Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook, 100-120. London: Routledge.
- Novetzke, Christian Lee. 2019. “The Political Theology of Bhakti, or When Devotionalism Meets Vernacularization.” In: *Bhakti and Power: Debating India’s Religion of the Heart*, edited by John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma, 85-94. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Pollock, Sheldon. 2009. *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rāghavadāsa. 1969. *Bhakta-māla*. With a modern Hindi commentary by Nārāyaṇadāsa. Jaipur: Sri Dadu Dayal Mahasabha.
- Siṃhala, Brajendrakumāra (ed.). 2010. *Sarabaṃgī* by Rajjaba. Raigarh: Brajmohan Samvadiya
- Siṃhala, Dharmapāla (ed.). 1990. *Sarabaṃgī* by Rajjaba. Jalandhar: Deepak Publishers.
- Tulasīdāsa. 1989. *Rāma-charita-mānasa*. With the Hindi commentary of H. Poddar. Gorakhpur: Gita Press.
- van der Veer, Peter. 1989. *Gods on Earth: The Management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Viṣṇu-purāṇa*. 1989. Two volumes. Edited and translated by H. H. Wilson. Delhi: Nag Publishers.
- Weber, Max. 1964. *The Sociology of Religion*. Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff. Boston: Beacon Press. Original German edition published in 1922.
- Weber, Max. 1967. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. This translation first published in 1946.
- Zupanov, Ines G. 1999. *Disputed Mission: Jesuit Experiments and Brahmanical Knowledge in Seventeenth-century India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

David N. Lorenzen is an emeritus professor in El Colegio de México, a government sponsored research institute and college in Mexico City. Most of his published research has been mainly on the history of religious movements in India. Some of his publications are listed in the bibliography here. A full curriculum and publication list are available on the internet site academia.edu. He can be reached at: lorenzen@colmex.mx