

1



Does One Religious Tradition Help Us Understand Another?

A Wide Lens Approach

This chapter makes the claim that one religious tradition helps in understanding another, that a knowledge of tradition A helps us understand tradition B better, and that the resulting phenomenon of enhanced understanding may be described as one of “reciprocal illumination.” One is tempted to wonder whether this approach by itself can constitute a vector of “dominant theorizing” in the field of the study of religion, but it is rather early in the day to raise such a question.¹ In the rest of the chapter I shall proceed, more modestly, to substantiate the claim regarding the possibility of reciprocal illumination, with examples drawn from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Hinduism

An understanding of the doctrine of karma is central to an understanding of the Hindu religious tradition.² This doctrine is variously formulated in the Hindu tradition; it reflects virtually all the intervening shades of opinion between the two polar extremes of complete free will, on the one hand,³ and complete predeterminism on the other.⁴ The standard presentation of the doctrine steers a course almost midway between these two extremes and classifies karma as consisting of

three types: *āgāmi* (forthcoming karma); *sañcita* (accumulated karma); and *prārabdha* (fate). A correct grasp of the interrelationships among this cluster of concepts may hold the key to the proper understanding of the standard version of the doctrine. The following general statement about it must suffice for the time being:

Hindu thinkers distinguish three kinds of karma: *sañcita*, *prārabdha* and *āgāmi*. *Sañcita* is all the accumulated karma of the past. Part of it is seen in the inclinations and desires, etc. *Prārabdha* is that portion of the past karma, which is responsible for the present body. *Āgāmi* is the coming karma, which includes also the karma that is being gathered at present. An apt analogy is usually given to bring home to our minds the element of freedom that karma involves. Imagine a bowman, with a quiver of arrows, taking aim at a target. He has already sent a shaft; and another arrow he is about to shoot. The bundle of arrows in the quiver on his back is the *sañcita*; the arrow he has shot is *prārabdha*; and the one, which he is about to send forth from his bow, is *āgāmi*. Of these, he has perfect control over the *sañcita* and *āgāmi*; it is only the *prārabdha* that cannot but take effect. Man has the freedom to reform his character and alter his ways. Only the past, which has begun to take effect, he has to suffer.⁵

A student of the Hindu religious tradition is likely to be familiar with this trichotomy of karma. It could be suggested, however, that these three categories seem to become clear as never before, and their experiential content explicit as never before, when one considers them in the light of the following Serenity Prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."⁶ The serenity to accept the things one cannot change is obviously the proper mental attitude toward *prārabdha* karma; the courage to change the things one can seems to reflect the proper attitude toward *sañcita* karma, which is in the process of becoming but has not yet become *prārabdha*; and the wisdom to know the difference between the two is the domain of *āgāmi*, or forthcoming karma.

Buddhism

One of the distinguishing features of the Mahāyāna Buddhist religious tradition is the bodhisattva ideal.⁷ This ideal is typically contrasted

with the Hīnayāna ideal of the arhat, who seeks nirvana only for himself, while the bodhisattva, by contrast, seeks and even postpones his own salvation for the sake of others.⁸ This explanation of the difference, though popular, doesn't quite click. For the greatest gift conceived of in Buddhism is that of dharma; but how could one who had himself not realized nirvana presume to guide others to it? Such doubts about the above-mentioned description of the bodhisattva are only aggravated by the answer given by Milarepa, the eleventh/twelfth-century Tibetan mystic, to the question: could the disciples "engage in worldly duties, in a small way, for the benefit of others." Milarepa said:

If there be not the least self-interest attached to such duties, it is permissible. But such detachment is indeed rare; and works performed for the good of others seldom succeed, if not wholly freed from self-interest. Even without seeking to benefit others, it is with difficulty that works done even in one's own interest are successful. It is as if a man helplessly drowning were to try to save another man in the same predicament. One should not be over-anxious and hasty in setting out to serve others before one has oneself realized the Truth in its fullness; to do so, would be like the blind leading the blind. As long as the sky endures, so long will there be no end of sentient beings for one to serve; and to every one comes the opportunity for such service. Till the opportunity comes, I exhort each of you to have but the one resolve, namely to attain Buddhahood for the good of all living beings.⁹

Yet both the aspects of the situation—that of the bodhisattva seeking salvation for himself and seeking it for the sake of others—seem to fall into place when the situation is viewed in the light of the following statement by Hillel:

He used to say: If I am not for myself who is for me? And being for mine own self what am I? and if not now, when? (M. Aboth, 1.14)

Confucianism

The example from Confucianism requires some initial textual and conceptual explanation. The text involved is the 36th verse of the fourteenth book of Lun Yü, a verse that is translated by Arthur Waley as follows:

Someone said, What about the saying “Meet resentment with inner power (*te*)”? The Master said, In that case, how is one to meet inner power? Rather, meet resentment with upright dealing and meet inner power with inner power.¹⁰

This translation is literal to the point of being opaque, so one may turn to another, which runs as follows:

Someone inquired: “What do you think of ‘requiting injury with kindness?’ ” Confucius said: “How will you then requite kindness? Requite injury with justice, and kindness with kindness.” [14:36]¹¹

This brings the verse more within one’s reach but not quite within one’s grasp. The full force of the statement, however, seems to hit home when the verse is placed in the context of the Christian ethic of returning evil with good. It is when Confucius’s statement is paraphrased in these terms, one may venture to suggest, that its full impact is felt, for then it would read thus: Confucius is asked, “What would you say concerning the principle that one should return evil with good?” Confucius replies, “If you return evil with good, what will you return good with? Therefore return evil with justice and good with good.”

A lofty pragmatism thus replaces the unilateral altruism of the Christian teaching. One may now proceed to explore further the pragmatism generally regarded as characteristic of Confucius’s teaching. The statement and its logic are clear—but its intentionality may still prove elusive. Another verse from the *Analects*, which possesses a similar flavor, might help:

Tzu-kung asked, saying, what would you feel about a man who was loved by all his fellow-villagers? The Master said, that is not enough.

What would you feel about a man who was hated by all his fellow-villagers? The Master said, that is not enough. Best of all would be that the good people in his village loved him and the bad hated him.¹²

These statements are not made as directly applying to the “true gentleman” but the context leaves little doubt that they are meant to.

These contours of the character of the true gentleman might appear only like outlines waiting to be filled in. Perhaps the *Bhagavadgītā* could help make their full import clear. The *Mahābhārata*

war itself represents a case of returning evil with justice. The Pāṇḍavas are portrayed therein as suffering the evils perpetrated on them by the Kauravas, until they finally decide to fight back in the interest of justice. The case of the true gentleman being loved by the good and being hated by the wicked is also instructive here. I think the key point to note is that although the wicked hate the true gentleman, the true gentleman does not hate the wicked. He chastises them. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Arjuna is rarely shown as hating the Kauravas; in the early chapters he is shown as pitying them, and himself, but not hating them. In the portrayal of the realized man in the *Bhagavadgītā*, whether as the *stīthaprajña* (2.55–72), or as one who has attained *brahmanirvāṇa* (5.17–28), or as the devotee or *bhakta* (12.13–20), or as the *guṇātīta* (14), equanimity and absence of enmity are emphasized. Actually, absence of enmity is emphasized repeatedly (11.55, 18, 54), which on the face of it seems rather strange for a text in which Arjuna is exhorted to engage in combat.

This suggests the perspective that the frame of mind with which an act is performed is as important an aspect of the situation as the act itself. It may be said that Kṛṣṇa and Confucius care as much for the adverb as for the verb.

Taoism

The profoundly enigmatic Tao Te Ching sometimes leaves the reader in a state of sublime stupefaction. One senses that something profound has been said, but one is not quite sure as to what it is. Consider, for instance, the following selection from the twenty-seventh chapter:

27. 1. The skilful traveller leaves no traces of his wheels or footsteps; the skilful speaker says nothing that can be found fault with or blamed; the skilful reckoner uses no tallies; the skilful closer needs no bolts or bars, while to open what he has shut will be impossible; the skilful binder uses no string or knots, while to unloose what he has bound will be impossible. In the same way the sage is always skilful at saving men, and so he does not cast away any man; he is always skilful at saving things, and so he does not cast away anything. This is called "Hiding the light of his procedure."¹³

The passage is formidable; let us consider only the first line, which may be paraphrased as "One may move so well that a footprint never shows."

Lines such as these could linger on the horizon of noncomprehension for years. A few flashes of understanding may be produced by such Upanishadic statements as those that claim that the realized being moves in the world like a bird through the air or the fish through water—without leaving a trace. But moving on terra firma is a different matter. How could one move without leaving a footprint?

A parable, encountered in the context of Kāśmīra Śaivism,¹⁴ may help provide some illumination here, although the parable itself may have found its way into Kāśmīra Śaivism from elsewhere. It goes as follows. God and devotee are walking on the seashore engaged in conversation. The devotee says to God: “As I look back upon my life I can see two sets of footprints on the shore stretching out into the past. One of them is mine and the other yours—walking beside me. But what baffles me is that there are spots where I see only one set of footprints.” And God responds by saying: “That was when *I* was carrying *you*.”

There could, of course, be Taoist explanations of what it means to move without leaving a footprint behind—one way of doing so would perhaps be to step into the footprints left by the previous traveler! But that an illustration from theism should seem to shed light on Taoism is not without its element of serendipitous synchronicity.

Judaism

The destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD 70 is widely acknowledged as a turning point in the history of Judaism. For one trying to understand its significance, it is perhaps useful to distinguish between what may be called the Masada syndrome and the Jamnia syndrome.¹⁵ As the tragic events surrounding the fall of Masada amply illustrate, military resistance to the Romans was doomed to failure. It was the rise of Rabbinic Judaism, with its beginnings in the school set up by Johanan ben Zakkai at Jamnia, which ultimately “saved” Judaism.

There is something perplexing in this course of events when, for a defeated people, peace, or rather submission, produces a victory greater than that of war. Then one day, while scouting Ḥadīth literature in preparation for a class on Islam, the following saying of the Prophet Muḥammad arrested attention—actually a well-known saying, as I soon discovered. It runs: “The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.”¹⁶ As one reads it, the events of the history of Judaism in the first century AD can be seen in a flash with all the intensity and clarity of the proverbial drowning man.

Christianity

Christianity can be puzzling to the non-Christian. Although, of course, “no concept in Christendom has enjoyed greater reputation for obscurity”¹⁷ than the doctrine of the Trinity, for the moment the doctrine of virgin birth may be examined (Luke 1.26–31; Matthew 1.18–21). The traditional explanation that the original sin of Adam is transmitted through carnal conception and that virgin birth ensured Jesus’s freedom therefrom may still seem too ingrown, that is, until insights from Islam come into play. One may begin with the recognition that the virgin birth of Jesus is accepted in the Qur’ān (3.47; 4.171). This is an interesting bit of information but by itself contributes little further to an understanding of virgin birth. It does, however, orient the mind toward Islam, wherein the doctrine of the illiteracy of the Prophet¹⁸ had been somewhat of a puzzle, given the celebration of learning in the Qur’ān itself, which is enshrined in the very first verse revealed to the Prophet according to tradition.¹⁹ Could the resolution of this point finally lead one back to virgin birth?

Once the fact that the Qur’ān is literally the word of God according to Islam is accepted, then the insistence by tradition on the illiteracy of the Prophet begins to make sense in the following way: the Prophet did not contaminate God’s words with his own. He had need only of being a true mouthpiece. The purity of the verbal revelation of the Qur’ān is thereby ensured. The point has often been made that the proper comparison in the context of Christianity and Islam is not so much between Muḥammad and Jesus, as between the Qur’ān and Jesus. Just as the Qur’ān represents revelation in Islam, Jesus represents the revelation in Christianity—the word becoming flesh.²⁰ If such indeed were the case, then it is easy to see how conception by a virgin in the case of Jesus would correspond to the reception of the Qur’ān by an illiterate Prophet. In both cases the stake seems to be the same—that of safeguarding the purity of the revelation by ensuring that it was not contaminated by the channel through which it was received.

Islam

The issue of the relationship between God’s will and man’s will, or the issue of *qadar*, has been acknowledged as one of the subtler ones in *kalām* or Islamic theology.²¹ Various points have been made in this connection: that the Qur’ān leaves the question of divine omnipotence and individual moral responsibility unreconciled, asserting both; or

that in Islam, while the general supremacy of God's will is asserted theoretically, in practice men are regarded as morally responsible for their own actions. For those to whom none of these reconciliations seem quite satisfactory,²² the study of Buddhist philosophy may provide a turning point.

Mahāyāna Buddhism developed the doctrine of the two levels of truth—the conventional and the ultimate.²³ One need not delve into the philosophical subtleties of the Mahāyāna schools to recognize the wider applicability of this distinction. We encounter it in the course of daily life all the time. In daily life we know that a currency note is really paper, but we treat it as if it were money! We know that the surface of the earth is spherical, but we move about on it as if it is flat. We do not worry about rolling off it, nor do we take its curvature into account as we go around Chicago. The idea of two levels of truth is not a mere philosophical construct; it is a given of daily existence.

If we now approach the question of God's will and man's will in Islam—equipped with this insight—the dilemma seems more amenable to resolution. Thus, ontologically everything could depend on God—could be God's will—but morally human beings could still be responsible for their own actions. The fact of gravity makes both falling and walking possible. If we trip by walking too fast, the responsibility is ours and not gravity's—though the activity of walking or falling itself remains dependent on the force of gravity.

Conclusion

We have now considered seven instances of reciprocal illumination, cases in which our understanding of a Hindu doctrine was arguably furthered by a Christian prayer; of a Buddhist ideal by a rabbinic saying; of a statement of Confucius by a Hindu text; of a line from the Tao Te Ching by Hindu theism; of a turning point in the history of Judaism by a Ḥadīth; of virgin birth by an Islamic parallel and of a theological issue in Islam by a distinction drawn from Buddhist philosophy. It does not, therefore, seem too far-fetched to maintain that one religious tradition may indeed at times help understand another, that one tradition may shed light on another, and that the horizon of the comparative study of religion may, at least occasionally, be lit up by a phenomenon we may choose to describe as reciprocal illumination.