

# Implications of Karma and Rebirth for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue in India<sup>1</sup>

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The current Indian theological scene is characterized by innovative efforts at finding its authenticity with respect to the radical Christian message and the Indian religio-cultural heritage. This requires a deep understanding of the relationship between religion and culture in the actual living situations of the people. Hence, this article examines the important Hindu religious notions of *karma* and rebirth in the lives of Indian people and points out the positive and negative implications for a renewed humanity all over the world.

## **Karma and Rebirth as Causal Factors in Ultimate Destinies of Life**

The notion of transmigration and reincarnation is a pivotal aspect of the general socio-religious belief system in India. In the Hindu religious tradition, the concept of transmigration is a vital aspect of the cultural milieu and has played a dominant role in shaping the actions, ethics, and ideologies of the people. Thus, the Indian subcontinent and the culture influenced by it are dominated by the notion of *samsara*, "what turns around forever," the wheel of birth and death. In India rebirth is an accepted presupposition of life and it functions at various levels of understanding and interpretation both in ordinary life and in theory, in popular mythology as well as in philosophical thought.

In its various contexts and applications, the notion of karma has at least three basically different functions and dimensions: karma is (1) a principle of causal explanation (of factual occurrences); (2) a guideline of ethical orientations; (3) the counterpart and steppingstone of final liberation. These three functions are balanced, reconciled, and integrated in various manners; they do not form a simple and unquestioned unity (cf. O'Flaherty 1973; 1976; 1977; 1983).

Indian sages and mythographers recognize a number of different causal factors at work in arranging both immediate results and ultimate destinies of life. Among them the most important ones are *karma*, *kala*, and *vidhi*. All the above factors work under the direction of the Supreme Being – Brahma, the totality of reality.

*Karma*: The classical formulation of the principle of karma is expressed as follows: "Even as one acts, even as he behaves, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good, the doer of evil becomes evil ... whatever deed he performs, that he becomes (or attains)." In great many myths, legends, and didactic passages in the

*Mahabharatha*, the idea is profounded that a person reaps the results of his acts performed in previous lifetimes and comes to good – or ill-fortune as a result of his acts alone. According to one account provided by Vyasa himself: “The acts done in former births never abandon any creature ... (And) since man lives under the control of karma, he must always be alert to ways of maintaining his equilibrium and of avoiding evil consequences.”

*Kala*: Death has been decreed for all created beings. When their hour (*vidhi*) comes around, all beings are removed by law (*dharmena*). Time is inevitable. The fruits of karma, whether good or evil, are said to be nullified by the iron rule of time (*kala*).

*Vidhi*: Fate can be divine providence, human acts in past time, circumstantial conditions, time, and so forth. Whatever the specific meaning attributed to the idea in any given context, the term *vidhi* consistently indicates certain external forces over which the individual exercises no control, either in actualizing or deactualizing any particular state of affairs. Fate is irresistible.

*Lila: God as the Arranger*: It is god alone who establishes everything for the creatures, both happiness (*sukha*) and unhappiness (*dukha*), pleasure (*priya*) as well as pain (*apriya*). God's creation, destruction and causing of other events are his different pleasurable plays to which man has very little to say. (Compare *Bhagavad Gita* 2.18-61)

Most of the Hindus believe that karma is transferred from one life to the next. The sages asked Vyasa (the originator of *Mahabharatha*): “Who is the companion of a dying man, his father or mother or son or teacher, his crowd of friends and relations? When he leaves the body that has been his house as if it were a house of wood or mud, and goes into the world beyond, who follows him?” The sage Vyasa replied: “Alone he is born, and alone he dies; alone he crosses the dangerous thresholds, without the companionship of father, mother, brother, son or teacher, without his crowd of friends and relations. When he leaves the body, *dharma* alone follows him. The body is burnt by fire, but the karma he has done goes with him” (Garuda Purana, Uttara Khanda 2.22-25 as quoted by O’Flaherty 1983:16). Skin, bone, flesh, semen and blood leave the body when it is lifeless; but the *jiva* that has *dharma* prospers happily in this world and the world beyond (Brahma Purana 217.1-16 as quoted by O’Flaherty 1983:16). The *jiva* is the carrier of the karmic deposit.

The early thinkers and sages were preoccupied with the question: “Every dead person consumes both his good and bad deeds; then how do they bear fruit for him?” This is by being born. Hence birth is a reward or a punishment of one's own karma. Unless one is particularly talented yogi, he forgets his former lives. At birth the *jiva* is deluded by the force of *maya*.

Although the newborn child is thus unaware of his accumulated karma, it is there nevertheless, together with other predetermined factors: "A creature in the mortal world is born because of his own karmas; his life-span, karma, wealth, learning, and death are born with the embodied creature in the womb. Head down and feet up, the embryo gives forth a breath, and from the birth the illusion of Visnu deludes the creature" (Garuda Purana, Uttara Kanda 22.70-72). Another ancient text adds: "By his own karmas a creature becomes a god, man, animal, bird, or immovable thing" (Padma Purana 2.94.12.). The categories into which one can be born may be determined by a number of influences more complex than the mere preponderance of good or bad karma: "By good deeds one becomes a god; by bad deeds a creature is born among animals; and by mixed deeds, a mortal. The Veda (*śruti*) is the authority for the distinction between *dharma* and *adharma*" (Bhavisya Purana 4.4.6-8). Here the place of *kala* and *vidhi* and *lila* are also very important for the nature of one's birth.

Thus it is said: "By karma impelled by fate a creature is born in the body." Yet karma and fate are often said to work together, or even to be the same (Matsya Purana 3.31.1-2 as quoted by O'Flaherty 1983:23). Certain things are bound to happen because of one's *vidhi* fate; but the *vidhi* itself is influenced by one's own karma. Karma is the things that a man does; in contrast fate are the things that are done to him.

Prajapathi is the creator of happiness and sorrow for his creatures. All the same, since Prajapathi wishes for the welfare of his creatures, he could have burdened them with miseries as if he were a bad person. To this "time" *kala* is the solution. Time (*kala*) is the source of a person and of his diseases. Thus time combines with fate and karma. Thus fate *vidhi* and karma work together with the third factor, i.e. the power of time as the causalities of an individual's present position in life.

### **Karma and Rebirth in the Lives of the People**

Karma is a key concept in ordering the events of life. Karma plays an important role in the numerous myths that form the heart of popular village Hinduism. These stories are reenacted in temple rituals, celebrated in village festivals, dramatized in street dramas, sung by bards in the street performances and by mothers to their children, and retold in the summer evenings. Here the meaning of karma is learned, not by philosophical discourse, but by illustration from the lives of gods and demons, saints and sinners. Karma is deeply rooted in the world-view of people.

Karma is also a common theme in the village myths that are the cosmic charter for popular Hinduism in the village. Here the central question is not how karma is accrued and transmitted, but how it works itself out in the lives of people. The answers are given in the form of stories drawn from Puranic sources and from local histories.

Villagers in Tamil Nadu believe that in the beginning Siva (*Katavul*) created the vast array of living beings out of his own bodily substance. He molded each creature and determined its nature, be it good or evil, strong or weak. He then wrote upon the forehead of each entity its “headwriting” (*talai euzthu- vidhî*), which was an exact and very detailed specification of every act it would perform, of all the thoughts it would have in its life, and of every event, good or bad, that would befall it. After creation the activities of the world began with each order of creation impelled to act in accordance with its own headwriting (*vidhî*) as specified by *Katavul* (Shiva). As each entity began to act it began to generate good and bad karma according to the nature of its actions (*karmans*). At the end of each entity's life, *Katavul* reviewed that entity's karma, and on this record, caused it to be reincarnated in a new form with a new headwriting (*vidhî*)<sup>2</sup>. The entity then acted according to its new headwriting, generated more karma upon which its headwriting in the next birth was determined, and so on through the cycle of births and rebirths.<sup>3</sup>

While it is believed that the headwriting in all except the “first” Incarnation is based on a person's past deeds (*karma*), it is also believed that the headwriting is based as well on the past deeds of relatives or even chance acquaintances from whom the person acquired karmic substance. Almost any Tamil villager will tell you that karma is inevitably transmitted from one generation to the next in the blood (*rattam*). (for examples look Daniel 1983:27-62).

The individual does not have complete control over the karma that he accumulates and for which he must reap the benefits and punishments. Although it is believed that he has no voluntary control over his acts, a person will be punished and rewarded for the acts of his ancestors, living kinsmen, and chance acquaintances.

The headwriting functions to determine all the events, thoughts, desires, and actions of a person with a particular life-span. It does this by coordinating the life circumstances and events of a person with the desires and willed actions on his part that fulfill what is foreordained in the headwriting. To make a hypothetical example, if it is in Rangaswamy's headwriting that on such and such a day he is destined to murder his Kavunta (a goat-herding *jati*) neighbor, his headwriting will coordinate his inner nature (*kunams*, psycho-biological qualities) and the particular emotions and decisions of that day with the appropriate environmental setting which provokes and accommodates the act. Thus, Rangaswamy will be filled with a murderous rage that overrides his reason and results in his passionate decision to murder Kandan, the goat-herd, who on this occasion is caught in bed with Rangaswamy's wife. Kandan's headwriting in turn will orchestrate the events of his life and his inner nature and desires so that he commits adultery and is caught by Rangaswamy and killed.

The headwriting is said to determine when, where, and how a certain strand of karmic substance is activated. “As to how, when and where a certain *karman* will come to fruition is written in one's headwriting ... the peculiarities of the *kunams*

(human qualities), and the dependent whims of the *manam* (mind), the maladies of the brain, and all such things are none other than the products and results of this *karman*" (Daniel 1983:35). It is the karmic substance then, under the control of the headwriting, that determines the nature of a person's *kunams* (human qualities) and hence of the general functioning of the *manam* (mind) and *mulai* (brain). In addition, *karman* acts simultaneously both upon the external environment and upon the desires of the *manam* (mind) and the decisions of the *mulai* (*putti*) (brain) to coordinate a sequence of motivations and actions with the appropriate environmental setting.

An act (*karman*) performed under normal circumstances – that is, with purposive intent and passion – creates (*kr*) a karmic residue (*karmasaya*) either meritorious (*dharma*) or unmeritorious (*adharma*) depending on the quality of the act. This karmic residue has or is accompanied by dispositional tendencies (*samskara*) of more than one sort, including at least two kinds of traces (*vasana*), one kind which, if and when it is activated, produces a memory of the originating act, the other which, if and when it is activated, produces certain afflictions (*klesas*). These *klesas* are erroneous conceptions which characterize the thinking of those engaged in purposive activity, and it is they which are primarily responsible for the agent being in bondage, that is, continually creating karmic residues.

### Unique Contribution to Human Civilization

Among the presuppositions of this doctrine is the notion that space and time are endless. The identity of the self depends on (moral) karmic determinants. Life is an unending, eternal, weary round of suffering, governed by an automatic causality of reward and punishment (*karman*) that takes the soul from one existence to another through all six spheres of being, from that of the gods to that of "hungry spirits" and demons.

In Hindu religious sensibility the emphasis is not on the duality "life and death" as on "birth and dying." The problem about rebirth is that of necessity, it also implies "re-dying," that is, death recurring *ad infinitum*, unless man succeeds in escaping from the vicious circle of *samsara* into ultimate liberation *moksha* or *nirvana*. It should be emphasized that the ultimate goal (*artha*) is release and escape; the heavens (*svarga*) are still part of the *samsaric* (rebirth) world. Doctrinal differences of opinion relate to the method of liberation as well as to the precise definition of the liberated state (cf. O'Flaherty 1983; Panikkar 1983:361-385).

Max Weber in his study *The Religion in India* says that "Hinduism is usually tolerant of doctrine (*matta*) while placing greatest emphasis on ritual duties (*dharma*). Nevertheless, Hinduism has certain dogmas ... if by dogma one means creedal truths whose denial is considered heretical and places the group if not the individual outside the Hindu community" (1958: 117-118). He then goes on to specify the dogmas of Hinduism: "the *samsara* belief in the transmigration of

souls and the related *karman* doctrine of compensation" (Weber 1958:118). Commenting on these principles Weber says: "*Karma* doctrine transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically-determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history" (1958:121).

### **The Conquest of Karma and Rebirth**

Hinduism offers three ways (*margas*) by which an individual may be able to surpass the results of karma. They are *Jnana-marga*, *karma-marga*, and *Bhakti-marga*.

Yoga is one of the means by which an individual can attain deliverance from his karma. Practice of yoga releases people from karma (Markandeya Purana 1.86.15-21). Ignorance (*avidya*) is the root-cause of our karmic involvement. Hence *jnana* "knowledge" is a means by which an individual may be able to overcome the evils of karmic causalities. Hence, *Jnana-marga* is one of the valid ways for salvation.<sup>4</sup>

To be in the world, to accept its reality as well as one's own worldly reality, means to *act* in the world, to accept it as a network of causal relations, of desires and results, as a context of practical, pragmatic truth and confirmation. Causality is in its very essence karmic causality; it constitutes the "reality" of the world, a reality which can be defined only in terms of means and ends, of practical consequences, of "reward" and "punishment," and which becomes transparent as soon as the practical involvement in the network of means and ends is transmitted. Hence *Karma-marga* emphasizes the importance of "good action" (*dharmic-action*). It provides a person with the courage to make a firm and enduring commitment to a life of action (*karma-yoga*) and to behave in the manner commensurate with the injunctions of the sacred texts. By doing so, one may expect to have maximized his chance of coming to a good death and a good rebirth (or to a final suspension of rebirth). Meditation and renunciation are equally effective as karmic antidotes. Pilgrimage and bathing at the pilgrim centres guarantee to wipe out all one's past bad karma. Thus when Parvati asks Shiva how evil that has been accumulated in a thousand former births can be worn away, Shiva replies that this evil is worn away when one enters the avimukta shrine at Benares (Matsya Purana 181.10, -17-18 as quoted by O'Flaherty 1983:23).

Another way of overcoming the evil fruits of karma is by *bhakti*, i.e. devotion to the Lord. When *bhakti* is in full flower, devotion to the god is a safe-conduct through the ranks of the soldiers of Yama, the Lord of death. The Puranas abound in stories in which the rependent sinner, about to be dragged away by the minions of Yama, is saved at the last minute by the arrival of the chariot of the servants of the sectarian god, landing like the marines at the eleventh hour. By the worship of Vishnu, one can "dispense" with karma; karma is conquered by those whom Krshna loves (Devibhagavata Purana 9.29-30; Varaha Purana 5; Brahmavaivarta Purana 2.29-33; 4.74 as quoted by O'Flaherty 1983:24-25). Thus, rebirth or *samsara* is a limiting phenomenon in man. The ultimate goal of man is to attain *nirvana*.

Nirvana is a state of statelessness. It is an attainment of full realization of the totality of reality. This can be achieved either by *jnana* (True Knowledge) or *karma* (Good Actions) or *bhakti* (Devotion).

### **The Impact of Karma and Rebirth on Indian Culture**

To a great extent, the concept of karma and rebirth breeds fatalistic tendencies among the Indian population.<sup>5</sup> The present conditions of life have been accepted passively as the result of one's past (*karma*) actions. The caste system of inequality is justified by these principles of karma and rebirth. The Brahmins are said to be born as high caste because of their past karma (meritorious acts) and the Untouchables (Harijans/Dalits) are said to be born as low caste due to their past karma. To attain emancipation from this low status of life, the duty (*dharma*) of the low caste man is to accept his caste position without revolt and act according to the prescribed rules of the caste (*jati*). Then the low caste men may be born as a high caste or attain his liberation. Thus caste inequality is justified by the principles of *karma*, *dharma*, and *moksha*.

In this position poverty and richness of different *jatis* are accepted as natural, i.e. the *vaisya jati* (traders) are born to be rich and the Untouchable *jatis* are born to be poor. This is clearly seen in India. While the first five richest people in the world are from Hindu background and most of the wealth in India is in the hands of the Vaisyas, thousands and millions of people mainly from the lower and untouchable castes live in poverty. While people are generally kind and feel with one another (*karuna*), a disciplined way of life, apart from nepotistic motives, is very much lacking in the lives of the people. Caste degradation and injustice become part of the life-style of the people without much questioning. Thousands and millions of people in India do not have even the minimum resources for their survival. At the same time there are people who enjoy all the privileges and comforts of life.

According to Weber the world image and concept of salvation provided by a religious system has casual effect throughout history. The religious view of life and the resultant economic behavior in the West have been one of the causes in the economic, scientific development of the people. In contrast, Weber argues that the Hindu ethic reflected in such concepts as *karma*, *dharma*, *varna*, *ashrama* and *samsara* had become an obstacle to material development especially of the lower and *dalit* (untouchable) castes. For he found that the Hindu ethic adhered to the idea of an immutable world order consisting of eternal cycles of rebirths. Further as Hinduism considers the present world as transitory and illusory, Weber feels that it depreciated the mundane (Weber 1958).

As Weber examined in minute details the consequences of developments in the major religions of the world, he noted the importance of prophets in transforming society. He distinguishes between two types of prophets: the ethical and the

exemplary prophets. The ethical prophets feel themselves as the instrument of the transcendent God. It is in the nature of the ethical prophet, that the divine will for which he speaks is displeased with some aspects of the world, and wants to change the world through him. "A part of his mission is to give men ethical norms with which they are expected to conform. And by definition these norms are different from the existing traditional state of affairs" (Parsons 1937:568). The prophets of the Judeo-Christian tradition challenged the existing social order and worked for change. But the exemplary prophets of India persuaded the people to turn away from the mundane world rather than to change the given order determined by *dharma*.

The central governing ethical principle of Christianity is the belief that every human being is created in the "image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1:27; Luke 4:18-21; Mathew 25: 32-46). All social teachings of the Church springs from this doctrine that since human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, no one on earth can take away this God given dignity. It is the moral duty of every human being to live and give this dignity in love. In Hinduism, on the other hand, preservation of "*Dharma*" is the central concern. Hence, the worldview of Hinduism (at least the Advaitic) and the world view of Christianity are very different leading to two different ways of understanding the world, man and the Supreme Reality leading to two different civilizations.

There had been various attempts to reexamine Weberian conclusions about Hinduism and economic development. An Indian economist, Vikas Mishra, supports the Weberian approach with the following comment: "Hinduism influences economic growth (1) in its attitudinal aspect mainly through the interrelated beliefs in the doctrine of transmigration, the law of *karma*, and the objective of release from rebirth, the stress on other-worldliness and mysticism and certain religious prejudices such as the attitudes towards the cow and inhibitions regarding certain items of diet; and (2) in its institutional aspect, mainly through caste system and joint family ... The institutional aspect is partly related to the attitudinal aspect" (1962:201). Similarly, Kapp also agreeing with Weber argued that "...non-secular and pre-technological institutions and values of (Hinduism) ... act as brakes on economic growth" (1963:64). Gunnar Myrdal's (1986) ideas about Asian cultures too seem to support those of Weber.

Weber's thesis is not without drawbacks or severe critics (cf. Green 1973). Timberg's analysis of the Marwaris of North India (1978), and Narayanaswami's study of the Nattukottai Chettiars of South India (1981), however, remain a standing challenge to the Weberian theory of Hindu unsuitability of entrepreneurship. For as Narayanaswamy observes: "The supposed 'other-worldliness' of the Hindus has not stood in the way of these communities (i.e., the Marwaris and the Nattukottai Chettiars), who are deeply religious, and who

all pursue wealth vigorously" (1981:2). Studies of Loomis and Loomis (1964), Balwant Nevaskar (1971), Bipan Chandra (1968) and others too run counter to the Weberian observation that the cultural values reflected in Indian religions are barriers to economic development in India (cf. Rao 1969).

In my studies about the Tamil and Kerala cultures I find that even though there are variations in the economic achievement of different caste groups in India the general cultural norms enshrined in the Indian way of life curtails individualism, rationality and social mobility. This tendency is particularly strong among the villagers who heavily depend on rain for all social and economic activities. In many parts of India people depend on the monsoon rain even for their domestic needs. Very often the drought is so severe that even water for drinking is scarce in towns and villages. From time immemorial the farmers have to live with the vagaries of the monsoons, which fail at times, causing drought and other times are so heavy as to cause ravaging floods. In both instances the net result is famine and death. Such helpless dependence upon nature for generations has deepened and reinforced their belief in fatalistic attitudes of *karma* and these have been reinforced in religion and values (Michael 1989).

Today, however, Hinduism has been very much pressurized by the new stirring of revolutionary humanism. Political movements and religious reform organizations give a new interpretation to the traditional understanding of *karma* and rebirth (cf. Smith 1966; Naicker 1959). Much of the neo-Hindu renaissance has occupied itself with attempts at assimilating humanistic values and finding in traditional Hinduism a religious basis for social change (Thomas 1975: 63-80). In this it has not proved altogether unsuccessful. Hinduism as other-worldly makes little sense today. The reflection of Radhakrishnan on the significance of the 'goals' of Hindu life (*artha, kama, moksha, dharma*), the reading of the Bhagavad Gita as a call to disinterested action (*niskama karma*) in this world by Vivekananda and Tilak, and the enormous political momentum generated by a movement like Gandhi's *satyagraha*, show that Hinduism is adapting itself to the changing situations in India.

All the same, poverty is a reality in India most specially among the lower and untouchable castes. The philosophical ideas of karma and rebirth are still very strong. Poverty and inequality enshrined in religion and values continue to strengthen the attitude of resignation to fate.

### **Dialogue between Christian and Hindu Traditions**

Christian tradition makes man the supreme of God's creation. Man is the master and steward of the universe. He gives names to things and bring order and understanding of the universe through science and technology. He controls to profit from it and to subdue it. History is considered linear – there is a beginning and an end to the world. There is definite destiny for man. All men and women are children of God. Hence equality of persons is an important Christian value.

All the same, the Western tradition which is very much influenced by Christianity today turned man into God. Human beings think that they can control and exploit nature according to their whims and fancies. Rationality is considered important in comparison to feelings, emotions and sentiments. Western cultural assumptions, especially the Protestant ethic enshrined in the capitalistic system tend to view emotions as immature, primitive, or even pathological. The role of culture in the experience of emotion is seen as secondary, even minimal (cf. Lutz 1988:4). The Darwinian proposition of Natural Selection and Survival of the Fittest has given rise to materialistic interpretation of the universe by some scientists. Influenced by this thought the Western experiments with life and nature and the social Darwinism towards superman by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud and others undermines the dignity of human person. As a consequence, man becomes an impostor and a machine. A number of observers (e.g., Heller 1979; Ollman 1976) have linked the alienation of people from the products of their labor under modern industrial capitalism to the separation of the person into a public, rational, market self and a private, expressive, intimate self. Thus, while the Western tradition "thinks", the Indian tradition "feels". It is so obvious that there is no need of elaborating the evils of materialistic understanding of the universe on the breakdown of families, communities and social relationships.

For the Hindus in India, West implies Christian. Thus, all the evils in the West is attributed to Christianity. The credibility of Christianity as developed by the West is under suspicion by Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists and others (e.g., Radhakrishnan 1939; 1933; Gandhi 1941; 1964). The West has lost the sense of mystery in its preoccupation with science.

Hinduism and its related religions, in their quest to understand the mystery of man, have developed various techniques of understanding the mind. The East, in Jung's estimation, had long been aware of the reality of the unconscious and the necessity of penetrating its depths (1933). On the other hand, this interiority of the East seems to be the important factor for its poverty and its underdevelopment of certain sections of people. The West with its preoccupation with science has developed wonderful ways to control nature and make use of this knowledge for the good of man. All the same, today there is more and more awareness that the very systems and strategies that have created vast technological power, have set off a spiral they cannot control. Throughout the world, peoples emerging from tribalism to development are seeking and demanding the material fruits of Western technology. Is it possible for our global system to provide all these demands? In this context, both the West and the East must rediscover their true religious meaning in their lives. The values of renunciation and self-responsibility embodied in religions can be the common ground for the future of man. Here, both Hinduism and Christianity could play a major role in the betterment of man. In this process

we may understand the uniqueness of Christ as well the real contribution of Hinduism to mankind.

In this context the Encyclical Letter ***Caritas in Veritate*** by Pope Benedict XVI's invitation for a dialogue between Faith and Reason is very relevant (Pope Benedict, 2009). Today's development in science and technology especially bio-technology is taking the world towards one direction. True development is an integral development. This requires both Faith and Reason. The Pope points out that the mysteries of human life unfold through reason. All the same, the mystery is so deep that reason alone will not be able to give a direction to human life. We also require Faith. Both Faith and Reason are required to seek the Truth. One without the other will lead to partial development. The Pope insists that for an Integral Human Development we require both Faith and Reason. In the words of the Pope "It is no coincidence that closing the door to transcendence brings one up short against a difficulty: how could being emerge from nothing, how could intelligence be born from chance? Faced with these dramatic questions, reason and faith can come to each other's assistance. Only together will they save man. ... reason without faith is doomed to flounder in an illusion of its own omnipotence. Faith without reason risks being cut off from everyday life" (Caritas in Veritate, 2009: No.74).

Hence both Indian and Western traditions need to understand the Truth both with faith and reason. Then, there is a possibility of mutual search towards the Divine.

### **Conclusion**

The cultural tradition of India goes back over four thousand years. It is true that the impact of Western civilization has in the last few decades almost shattered this culture, yet its roots remain and in India there has been a conscious revival of the ancient tradition. Modern Hinduism is conscious of being the inheritor of one of the great spiritual traditions of mankind and even as having a mission to spread its teaching in the West. In this context, an understanding of both these religious traditions is very important.

Both Hinduism and Christianity state that man is endowed with a craving – literally a thirst – to understand the causes of his unhappiness (*dukha*). The two religions will elaborate this as an ignorance or a fall, so that enlightenment or redemption is required to overcome the human predicament (Panikkar 1978). The Hindu sages say that to transcend his present condition, i.e. disentangled from the wheel of *samsara* – rebirth one must perform responsible actions – *karma* directed by *dharma*. Christ also stresses the importance of love in action for the redemption of man. Thus both Hinduism and Christianity stand for human liberation. Both are convinced that man is a being not yet finished, a reality unachieved, growing, becoming, on the way, a pilgrim. In this dehumanizing technocratic world it is important for people to understand the deeper dimensions of both Christian principles of creation and human destiny; and the Hindu view

of eternity and man's responsibility towards his karma and rebirth. The aspect of *nirvana*, a state beyond rebirth, and the Christian aspect of salvation as the destiny of man still have to be explored for the better understanding of both Christianity and Hinduism. The religious traditions of Hinduism on the mystery of God's presence in the world and the Christian emphasis on the personal aspect of God in Jesus Christ could help the present materialistic world to rediscover the religious roots of mankind.

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Radhakris

### (Endnotes)

- 1 This is a modified and updated version of my previous article published in Verbum SVD, No.1, Vol.31, 1990, pp.27-42.
- 2 The term samsara is derived from the Sanskrit root meaning "to flow together," "wander about," or "pass through."
- 3 This way of thinking originates from the fact that an individual, in spite of all his efforts, is not able to control his destiny. From the impossibility of choosing or directing his own life, people begin to get the notion that there is something beyond his present life's control. That means, he must have done something wrong in his past life – karma and rebirth. In Christianity, the feeling of helplessness is explained in terms of original sin. In believing in the Paschal mystery of Christ and repenting for his wrong doings, an individual attains salvation. If he does not repent and believe in God's mercy he is damned to hell. Hence, in Christianity fatalism is overcome by God's mercy and love. But in Hinduism, an individual has to repay his deed by another birth till the full compensation to his acts are met.
- 4 In this kind of concept, the salvation consists in coming to awareness that my salvation is by performing my dharma or duty. Knowledge is very important for salvation – *Jnana Jnana* is the realization of the truth that you are part of God.
- 5 This statement is truer in the past when the Hindu culture was in isolation from other differing cultures and religions. Today, due to various influences, people are becoming aware of other religious ideas and they redefine and modify the concept to suite the new situation of cultural and religious influences from non Indic sources.