

Human Suffering: An Exploration of Hindu and Christian Liberation

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Abstract: This article seeks to articulate an intelligible comparison between the Hindu Advaita Vedanta school of thought and the Christian religion to find a better theological understanding of the suffering and the liberation of the oppressed. By utilizing theological resources such as the Hindu Vedas and the Bible, modern sources of oppression of marginalized societies are examined in relation to religious references, so as to address concepts of liberation. This approach defines liberation as both/dually a freedom from suffering after the death of the individual and a freedom from suffering for the oppressed in/during their earthly life. Defining justice in this twofold manner provides an interesting basis for understanding the path to justice for the oppressed in the religious context.

The climate of today's interpersonal society offers little reprieve from oppression and suffering, yet it is for this very reason that an examination of diverse theologies can give us insight and direction in supporting the marginalized. An exploration of the major teachings and traditions of the Christian and Hindu religions makes clear that liberation of the oppressed exists not only in freedom from suffering after death, but also in freedom from suffering in the present life. Texts such as the Christian Bible and the Hindu Vedas (as taught in the Advaita school of thought) reveal how these religious traditions explain suffering and liberation, and how living with emphasis on liberation can lead to earthly equality. In this vein, James Cone's discussion of racial inequality in his *Black Theology of Liberation* can be compared to Anantanad Rambachan's description of inequality in his *Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One*. Such a comparison can help us articulate a theological response to each tradition's explanation of the earthly suffering of the marginalized and the freedom offered by liberation through God.

Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One by Anantanad Rambachan serves as a theological resource from the Hindu Advaita tradition which critiques Hindu society's lack of attention to injustice, which stems from the distortion of the word *Advaita*, "not-

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two,” (referring to the relationship between the self and the infinite) to mean “one.” Rambachan considers the understanding of one’s self as separate from others inadequate, as this view restricts human beings’ ability to see themselves in other people, producing a negative self-world relationship that yields social injustices.² Viewing the self as separate from the other diminishes the multifaceted nature of the person, thereby negating the limitless quality of the infinite, or *brahman*.³ Therefore, liberation in Advaita Vedanta can not only be understood as an emancipation from earthly life into the afterlife, but also as a freedom from injustice in the present life.⁴ Rambachan engages a variety of societal inequalities including gender, sexuality, and age to clarify how the tragedies of social injustice and earthly suffering are connected. Through his research on the suffering of the marginalized, Rambachan’s thesis lays a philosophical foundation or serves as a philosophical resource for understanding evil in the Advaita tradition by describing Advaita as the key to overcoming oppression. This evil of oppression is understood as a societal phenomenon in which systemic misunderstandings of the relationship between *atman*, the self, and *brahman* poison the social world with injustice. Using this understanding, in which religiosity and justice are deemed inseparable, Rambachan’s work aims to provide a religious basis for the proposed solutions to suffering.⁵

A Black Theology of Liberation by James Cone seeks to shift from an exclusively white understanding of Christian theology to one that reveals the perspective of Black society and the Black struggle in America. Cone insists that the Gospel cannot be separated from the earthly suffering of Black Americans, as the basic theology of the Gospels is rooted in the oppression of the Christian community.⁶ Cone effortlessly communicates this thesis by connecting the Black experience in the Christian community with historical events recounted in the Biblical narrative. Throughout his work Cone reinforces the idea that the Christian God is a god of the oppressed community who liberates the downtrodden from bondage. Specifically, Cone holds that God identifies with the Black community and

² Anantanand Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two Is Not One*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 11.

³ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 7.

⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 5.

⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 5.

⁶ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2010), xi.

liberates them through Scripture from the bondage of whiteness.⁷ Cone's writing reinforces the task of Christian theology: to interpret what it means to have hope in God in the face of oppression.⁸ Cone aims to expose the fallacies of White Christian theology that equate Blackness with evil, refocusing theology on a concept of liberation where Black suffering is clearly relevant and connected to the Gospel. In this way, individuals can reclaim and love the Black identity.⁹

Reading Rambachan and Cone in conversation can help us understand why such a duality exists between liberation from earthly inequalities and liberation in the afterlife. However, we must first compare the root of earthly suffering according to both the Hindu and Christian traditions. Rambachan describes suffering as *dukkha*, defined as the unliberated human condition which can be overcome through liberation, or *moksha*, in which the individual comes to understand their identity within the limitless *brahman*, or the infinite. Put simply, *dukkha* is overcome through realizing the self as *brahman*.¹⁰ In the Advaita tradition, Rambachan explains that the root of mortal suffering is self-inadequacy; human desires bring about knowledge of the self as incomplete, creating inner turmoil.¹¹ However, Advaita tradition teaches that in order to meet/achieve our true desire of the infinite, this earthly *dukkha* must be liberated in this life through the concept of *jivanmukti*, rather than at the end of existence.¹² On the other hand, Cone describes Christian suffering not as the turmoil of self-inadequacy, but more as a state of oppression at the hand of other human individuals. Cone equates suffering with Blackness, arguing that Black people's experience of oppression is rooted in the realization/feeling that their humanity depends on liberation from whiteness.¹³ Rambachan and Cone take vastly differing approaches to present similarly organized accounts of the characterizations of suffering in Hinduism and Christianity respectively. Cone describes suffering as clearly action-driven in that it is brought about through enslavement by the mortal, external oppressor. However, Rambachan presents a

⁷ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, xiii.

⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* xix.

⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, xx.

¹⁰ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 18.

¹¹ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 23.

¹² Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 21.

¹³ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.

more philosophical image of in which the foundation of suffering lies in the soul, and in the individual's misunderstanding of the *atman*'s relationship and connectedness with *brahman*. Nonetheless, both Rambachan and Cone go beyond the common understanding of liberation from suffering in the afterlife to purport that salvation through God liberates an individual from these different pictures of mortal suffering in this life.

Rambachan and Cone then draw on their respective scriptural sources to describe the manner in which liberation from oppression is achieved. Rambachan describes the Hindu liberated life as one characterized by a knowledge of the human self as limitless and identical to all external selves. The *atman* turns away from the assumption that the self is finite and isolated, towards a notion that it is more similar to the *infinite* brahman.¹⁴ This wisdom is gained through an inquiry into a valid Hindu source, such as the Upanishads, under the guidance of a guru.¹⁵ In untying the knots of suffering in one's heart, a person becomes able to recognize all other beings within the self, leaving no room for hatred toward any individual or marginalized group.¹⁶ Rambachan affirms that the Advaita tradition urges Hindus to see themselves within each other with a sense of compassion, as this is the essence and the outcome of the liberated life.¹⁷

Cone describes Christian emancipation quite similarly in that it is also achieved through turning inward to reorient the understanding of the Christian's relationship with God and with the oppressor. Cone asserts that the individual begins to achieve liberation by identifying themselves as oppressed, and then redefining their existence in the context of their relationship with oppression. Here lies a paradox: although freedom is the direct opposite of oppression, only oppressed individuals can be truly free.¹⁸ This truth is due to the fact that, for Cone, freedom is not reached merely when the oppressed is released from persecution, but rather when the individual advocates for the freedom of all others. Therefore, even if an individual is not oppressed, he or she must identify with the oppressed community in order to participate in their liberation. Cone illustrates this point by

¹⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 72.

¹⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 74.

¹⁶ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 79.

¹⁷ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 80.

¹⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

referencing the story of Israel's liberation in Holy Scripture. To identify as God's people, individuals must be willing to challenge any obstacle to liberation through God.¹⁹ Therefore, in Christianity, all people must be oppressed in order to participate in liberation, while in Hinduism, all people must recognize their unity as the infinite *brahman* to be freed. In both the Christian and Hindu traditions, liberation is achieved when the individual identifies with others, as no one can be free until all are free. This illustrates the true communal nature of each religion in that liberation from mortal suffering.

Cone also emphasizes the principle of the image of God (*imago Dei*) as described in the book of Genesis, suggesting that if our image of God includes freedom, this image must also include liberation.²⁰ Cone argues that since we are made in the image of God, we are required to challenge everything that oppresses humanity; this is the way in which God intends humans to live in Creation.²¹ Whether we ascribe to the Hindu notion that the self is identical to God or to the Christian belief that the individual is created in the image and likeness of God, we must ask how we can assert any type of love or desire for the infinite and simultaneously profess hatred of any of the diverse human beings created by the infinite.²² Both authors recognize the connection between the self and God, and acknowledge a fundamental equality between the self and the other in consequence; therefore they find no room for inequality. The intrinsic interrelation between the self and God in each tradition again reveals that liberation through God in an afterlife requires liberation from inequality and suffering on Earth.

Cone's discussion of the *imago Dei* also complements Rambachan's discussion of liberation and childism in Hindu culture, which recounts the grave suffering caused by the sexual and physical abuse crisis in India.²³ The reality of the oppression of children in Hindu cultures is also a subject of feminist theology, as an examination of marriage customs reveals evidence of discrimination against female children especially.²⁴ Indeed, the religious value of the child within the Advaita school of thought is discussed by Rambachan as being rooted

¹⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 100.

²⁰ The concept of *imago Dei* states that humans were created in the likeness and image of God; see Genesis 1:27

²¹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 94.

²² Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 122.

²³ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 149.

²⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 156.

in *brahman*, the ultimate reality and the source of all earthly creation.²⁵ Rambachan goes on to draw an interesting analogy between childbirth and the cosmic creation as written in the Upanishads. In this account, everything created possesses intrinsic religious value by virtue of being created by and in the constant presence of *brahman*.²⁶ From this premise of inherent value, Rambachan presents an argument for equality between members of all ages, even children, and demands justice for maltreatment of children. He grounds his argument in the definition of *brahman* that he goes on to formulate. *Brahman* is equally present in all beings of creation, regardless of age, with no inconsistency in degree.²⁷ In addition, Advaita does not distinguish between level of wisdom or between male or female. Children of both genders require the Advaita belief of *ahimsa*, or non-injury, which requires all Hindu believers to empathize with and to protect all beings of creation, no matter how young.²⁸

Though childism is much less prevalent predominantly Christian societies, Rambachan's argument against childism is complemented by the Christian understanding of *imago Dei* in regard to Blackness. This concept reinforces the necessity of liberation from oppression on Earth through liberation under God. Just as *brahman* enters every created individual, each Christian individual is created by God in His very image. Cone's understanding of humanity in *imago Dei* parallels Rambachan's explanation of the Advaita truth that every human is identical to *brahman*.²⁹ In the context of this oneness with God, believers in both religious traditions are called to turn away from anything that threatens the humanity of individuals, including discrimination against the younger members of our societies.³⁰ As soon as this task is accomplished, Christian and Hindu believers alike will attain liberation from earthly injustices so that liberation with God in the afterlife can be reached.

In the context of today's political climate surrounding social injustice, Rambachan's accounts of liberation from homophobia in Hindu society were particularly compelling,

²⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 150.

²⁶ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 151.

²⁷ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 152.

²⁸ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 154.

²⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 93.

³⁰ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 93.

especially when placed in dialogue with Cone's work on racial inequality. In the Hindu Advaita tradition, human beings are valued not based on their sexuality, but on their ability to discern the truth regarding their unity with *brahman*; thus, Hindus are open to religious pluralism and homosexuality.³¹ Nevertheless, due to homosexual individuals' inability to biologically procreate, homosexuality is stigmatized in Hindu culture, which views the family with children as one of the highest cultural ideals.³² Though Blackness in Christian society is not necessarily stigmatized in this manner, a parallel can be drawn here with respect to the racial gender normativity that exists in both cultures. Indeed, in both Christianity and in Hinduism, liberation is achieved in an afterlife through the emancipation from injustices on Earth, requiring the recognition of the self, rather than any kind of physical victory. Oppressors in both cultures may believe that their eternality is based on social and political supremacy over the marginalized, but this superiority actually makes them unable to realize the self and liberate the marginalized in order to take part in a free afterlife. In both traditions, justice is necessary to reach liberation and reunion with the Creator.

In addition to the evils of childism and homophobia, the problem of sexism in both Hindu and Christian cultures calls for theological inquiry. In the same way that Hindu-dominated societies foster a diversity of theological so too are there a diversity of opinions on the role of women, though many are negative.³³ For example, there is evidence that women face economic and cultural discrimination in Hindu cultures: women must stay inside the home to fulfill their "purpose" of being good wives and mothers.³⁴ Further, Hindu texts, such as the Ayodhya Kanda, normalize female stereotypes, such as the archetype that women are difficult to understand and corrupt men's good nature. These norms are often used to justify abuse, as they present women's value as dependent on their relation to men.³⁵

Though not discussed explicitly by Cone, sexism is also evident in Christianity. Rambachan states that the oppression of women is rooted in a perversion of the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, which states that the actions of human individuals warrant consequences.

³¹ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 130.

³² Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 126.

³³ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 91.

³⁴ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 92.

³⁵ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 94.

However, use of this teaching as justification for sexism is a perversion in that *karma* does not state that every life experience is due to a consequence of action in past lives.³⁶ Therefore, according to Rambachan, the intrinsic value of women is due not to their significance to men, but rather to their very being, which is identical to *brahman*.³⁷ Though Cone does not cite the doctrine of *karma* in defining Christian oppression, he does draw a parallel through his articulation of the way that suffering is wrought by the action of other human beings.³⁸ Liberation from said Christian suffering involves a re-understanding of the oppressed identity, similar to that discussed by Rambachan. As Hindu women are liberated when their value is found in their being rather than in their relation to men, Christian sufferers are freed when their identity is redefined as being oppressed so that they can fully participate in their own liberation.³⁹

In both Christianity and Hinduism, the path to liberation in an afterlife is through the emancipation from injustices on Earth. This process requires the recognition of the self, rather than any kind of physicality. In both cultures, oppressors act under the false impression that they can secure salvation through power over the weak; in reality, this supremacy bars them from attaining true freedom in the afterlife by realizing the self and liberating the marginalized. Additionally, in both traditions, justice is a prerequisite for reaching liberation and reunion with the Creator. The Vedas and the Gospel alike work to reinforce the true inclusivity of God's love, and the necessity of liberation from those who oppose God to achieve reunion after death.

³⁶ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 101.

³⁷ Rambachan, *Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 101.

³⁸ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.

³⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

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