

**Defying the Norm: Explorations of Living Liberation**

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## DEFYING THE NORM: EXPLORATIONS OF LIVING LIBERATION

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**Abstract:** Using the works of Ivone Gebara and Anantanand Rambachan, this paper explores the concept of finding liberation on Earth. The ideals of Christianity and Hinduism make clear that a liberated life is possible and can even help play a role in denouncing systems of oppression. Anantanand Rambachan writes *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not-One* to emphasize how the *Advaita* truth that the *atma* is united with *brahman* proves the interconnectedness of humanity. Rambachan utilizes the fact of human relatedness to stress the necessity of advocating for others. These authors suggest that working towards social solidarity helps to free not only those oppressed, but indeed all people, as all are equally associated with the infinite *brahman*. Ivone Gebara and her work *Out of the Depths* examines human nature, aiming to highlight the voices and stories of women. Gebara connects daily suffering with moments of salvation while utilizing the interrelatedness of humans to free all from a limited view of God. The works of Ivone Gebara and Anantanand Rambachan encourage a more inclusive theology through the ideals of different religions. This paper uses these works to connect Earthly salvation with the need to promote justice and set the stage for further dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity.

The question of life after death permeates the human mind. In adhering to different religious traditions, individuals are led to various beliefs about heaven, the destination of souls, reincarnation, and unity with an infinite being. However, viewing salvation as occurring only *after* death can dismiss the reality of this world and its human-created societies, thus contributing to great human suffering. Interestingly, theologians Anantanand Rambachan and Ivone Gebara both address salvation as an attainable earthly goal, attempting to outline the path to salvation, specifically to those who have been traditionally oppressed. In her book *Out of the Depths*, Gebara re-examines what it means to be human and how our own human nature is inherently both good and evil. While Gebara derives her beliefs about God, salvation, and humanity from a Christian feminist perspective, she does not denounce older Christian teachings. She instead chooses to highlight the voices of

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historically silenced women. Written from a Hindu perspective, Rambachan's *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two Is Not-One* argues that the truth of *Advaita* and the unity of *atma* with *brahman*, as expressions of the religious life, can be used to imply a more liberative perspective and to promote justice. When read together, Rambachan's and Gebara's works provide a compelling account of the relatedness of human beings and the liberation of the oppressed.

In *Not-Two is Not-One*, Rambachan points to the *Advaita* truth of non-dualism as a means through which to overcome human suffering and ignorance. As self-conscious beings, humans continue to remain perplexed by the inevitability of death, which leads to an intense internal search for self-worth. However, blinded by emotional sufferings, we "seek to overcome suffering through the multiplication of desires, hoping by finite gains to enhance our self-worth."<sup>2</sup> This very human error is the root of *advaya* (ignorance) because we desire superiority over other beings and material gain to relieve anxiety about our mortality. Rambachan explains, however, that ignorance and suffering also result from a search for the infinite in the wrong place: "we search to become that which we are."<sup>3</sup> For Rambachan, the truth instead lies in *Advaita*, which explains that the "human self (*atma*) is identical with the real and infinite (*brahman*)."<sup>4</sup> Since the human self (*atma*) is identical with the real and infinite *brahman*, the answer to the question of human self-worth lies in the idea of the self as the embodiment of the infinite. Realizing that our very nature lies within the real and infinite *brahman* liberates us from our own mental sufferings. The realization of "one's own self as the self of all beings" allows the individual to view the world with a new awareness.<sup>5</sup> Since everyone is equally identical with the real and infinite *brahman*, each is also identical with all other humans.

Through the *Advaita* tradition, Rambachan uses both cause and effect and a model of gaining what is already gained to explain the unity of the human self (*atma*) with the infinite (*brahman*) as living liberation (*jīvanmuktī*). First, Rambachan explains unity with the infinite as gaining what is already gained because humans must come to understand a

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<sup>2</sup> Anantanand Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not-One* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 187.

<sup>3</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 190.

<sup>4</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 192.

<sup>5</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 190.

truth that permanently lies within their nature. An *Advaita* teacher explains that this realization is similar to “the tenth person discovering herself to be the tenth person through instruction, and gaining freedom from the sorrow and fear of thinking that the tenth person is lost, the knowledge of one’s identity with the limitless (*brahman*) frees from the suffering of self-lack.”<sup>6</sup> Humans free themselves from the suffering of self-lack when they come to find that the answer is their own identity. To deepen this understanding, *Advaita* teachers often use cause and effect to “explain the non-duality between subject and object and to clarify that awareness is not one object in a world of many objects.”<sup>7</sup> The analogy of the clay and clay pot illustrates that all humans are related to each other in that they originate from and return to the real and infinite (*brahman*).<sup>8</sup> From the truth that each person identifies with the limitless, all people can arrive at “the understanding that liberation is a particular state of being in this life and world and not a place to be reached after the death.”<sup>9</sup> Achieving living liberation aids in finding bliss on Earth and alleviates the mental stress of thinking about death, disease, and aging.<sup>10</sup>

Rambachan emphasizes the individual soul as infinite with *brahman* to provide the basis for finding living liberation for women and subsequently addressing systemic oppression. According to Rambachan, the human value of women does not depend on their relationships with men because “they equally and identically embody *brahman*.”<sup>11</sup> Rambachan points out that *ahimsa* (non-violence), an integral principle of *Advaita*, condemns not only violence but also the societal limitations imposed on women. For example, women have traditionally been advised to bear beatings by their husbands and to accept degradation if their dowries were not paid in full. Using *ahimsa* (non-violence), Rambachan argues that physical violence towards women is inherently wrong because women embody the transcendent. The principle of *ahimsa* can also be applied from a mental standpoint: “justice for women ... requires that we ensure they have the same educational opportunities and liberties as men so that they can realize the fullness of their human

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<sup>6</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 11.

potential.”<sup>12</sup> Homogenous with the infinite (*brahman*), humans possess identical worth. Thus, limitations imposed on women actually limit all human beings. Living liberation for women requires the essential truth that “*brahman* is free from gender specificity, although embodied both in males and females.”<sup>13</sup> For *brahman* to be present in everyone, humans must necessarily find living liberation for women, even amidst suffering caused by patriarchal values and *avidya*.

Gebara takes a slightly different approach than Rambachan in her search for living liberation. In order to redefine what it means to be human, Gebara’s *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* first addresses the existence of original sin after the Fall and the way that women are regarded as more evil than men. Gebara’s interpretation points out that “for men, evil is an act one can undo. But for women, evil is in their very being.”<sup>14</sup> People often construe the Genesis account in which Eve eats the apple from the forbidden tree as the beginning of the fall of humanity—a woman’s doing. Gebara proposes that all humans are inherently both good and evil, meaning that good did not precede evil. This idea allows for the interpretation that a woman was not responsible for the fall of humanity because evil existed before Eve. Gebara’s argument stems from her understanding that the “transcendence and immanence of evil calls [one] to be converted to the reality [one observes], this mingled reality where no word can be complete, no God can be all-powerful, no good can be completely victorious, and no evil can have the last word over life.”<sup>15</sup> Through this reworking of what it means to be human, humans can find solidarity and unveil the similarities in their common existence. Although Gebara proposes a somewhat controversial idea that the “very imperfection of the human person is what constitutes [their humanity],” her idea becomes necessary to overcome a gendered view of humanity.<sup>16</sup>

In considering women’s experiences of evil, Gebara arrives at the conclusion that evil pervades all and hence constitutes part of people’s very being. While she notes that defining evil is difficult, Gebara mentions that evil cannot solely remain a personal issue since “it permeates a larger social structure.”<sup>17</sup> In a woman’s daily life, an example of

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<sup>12</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 2.

suffering includes struggling to find food for her family. In one excerpt from Gebara's work, *Beti*, a woman living in Rio de Janeiro, describes an everyday routine wrought with problems that all the village women face: having to wash clothes without soap, taking care of children, arguing with a husband who returns home in a bad mood, and waking up in the middle of the night to remove rats from the kitchen.<sup>18</sup> In women's experience, a "daily domestic reality of evil" becomes apparent.<sup>19</sup> Despite geographical and cultural differences, daily suffering emerges as a common theme for women across the globe. Moreover, these shared experiences expose the evil embedded in larger social structures. Women's everyday lives reveal the transcendence of evil and raise questions about what it means to find living salvation.

If evil exists in real and various forms in this life, *good* and therefore salvation must also be attainable in the here and now. Gebara's examples of women's suffering are usually balanced by moments of bliss. Even if these moments are fleeting, they give women the drive to continue to face the challenges of the day to day. An active relief from suffering, "salvation seems to be a movement toward redemption in the midst of the trials of existence."<sup>20</sup> Gebara suggests that salvation is not limited to an after-death liberation but can be actualized in the present to navigate everyday life. This living liberation further illuminates the similarities and relation between all humans. Humans must realize that salvation "will not be something outside the fabric of life but will take place within the heart of it ... intermingled with the confusion of life. Salvation is what helps us live in the present moment even when it feeds a dream of greater happiness."<sup>21</sup> Whether it's the feeling of getting a good grade after a stressful week or someone simply holding the door for you on a bad day, all humans can relate to these trivial moments of living salvation. Gebara calls humans to not only understand the good and evil inherent within themselves, but also to recognize the liberation of others. She does not claim that all humans have the same experiences, but rather asks for respect in admitting and denouncing the evils that pervade societal systems and daily routines.

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<sup>18</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 121.

Although Gebara and Rambachan belong to different religious traditions, both of their theses emphasize the interrelatedness of humans. While humans are unique, Rambachan highlights that they are also extremely interdependent since “human beings are part of a complex matrix that includes ancestors, teachers, other than human living beings and the elements. Our dependence on this matrix for our well-being requires, as the *Bhagavadgītā* explains so eloquently, that we contribute to its sustenance through our generosity to others.”<sup>22</sup> Through generosity, individuals can also contribute to the infinite (*brahman*), which is identical in all beings and the world. Since humans are interdependent, Rambachan emphasizes that all people have mutual obligations, arguing that humans too often focus on women’s obligations to men, neglecting men’s obligations to women.<sup>23</sup> In Hinduism, human responsibility derives from mutual obligations rather than from individualism. Therefore, maintaining balance requires both men and women to contribute to the world and to each other. Similarly, Gebara describes relatedness as “the connection, the correlation, the interdependence that exists between and among all things.”<sup>24</sup> By adhering to this relational dimension, humans cast off society’s gendered hierarchy. With Gebara’s new definition of human in mind, people must consider “personal and community suffering, everyday resurrection and relatedness as conditions for life.”<sup>25</sup> Since all humans are related, it becomes more possible to advocate for justice. Both Gebara and Rambachan stress humanity’s interconnectedness to set the stage for addressing societal issues.

The interdependence of individuals evident in both traditions renders patriarchy limiting to all persons and to religion itself. Through *Advaita*, it appears obvious that “men seek self-gratification by treating women as objects of possession and by exercising power and control over them.”<sup>26</sup> This search for self-worth through controlling women is a form of *advīya*, but may be overcome through the non-dualistic truth of uniting the *atma* with *brahman*. Essentially, Rambachan suggests using *Advaita* itself to challenge patriarchal values as restricting to humans’ proximity to the infinite. Gebara, however, takes a different approach in emphasizing that “patriarchal theology has limited the concept of God to a male

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<sup>22</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 133.

<sup>25</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 110.

<sup>26</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 113.

point of view.”<sup>27</sup> Instead of stating that patriarchal norms limit all persons like Rambachan, she argues that patriarchal norms may cause humans to limit their own perception of God. In trying to understand human existence, humans create the evil of “making people believe that one knows the will of God, that one can teach it or even impose it.”<sup>28</sup> Gebara suggests to better understand each other, humans must accept the mystery of God, viewing the cross and the historical Jesus’s actions as vehicles to provide meaning to women’s liberation. Gebara and Rambachan suggest that humans should look to the highest reality within their respective religions to find peace and challenge patriarchal values as forms of evil or *avidya*. Through either the truth of non-dualism or accepting the mystery of God, Rambachan and Gebara provide a means to find liberation for women while identifying patriarchal norms as limiting to all people or to the perception of God.

While both religious ideals encourage just actions, Gebara emphasizes the centrality of the cross whereas Rambachan proposes turning inward toward the infinite. For Gebara, the cross of womanhood should be used as a form of liberation for women. Traditionally, the cross portrays male suffering as the only means to salvation. However, Gebara proposes the cross as a unifying symbol that “loses its exclusive centrality in order to appear as an ordinary element of life carried by everyone.”<sup>29</sup> Living liberation requires turning to the cross as a route to salvation experienced by all in daily evils. Thus, finding living salvation is realizing that “the suffering of the crucified, of a man upon the cross, even if it has become the Christian paradigm of suffering, is certainly no greater than that of prostitutes stoned to death, of a mother whose child is wrenched from her,” or “of revolutionaries struggling for liberty.”<sup>30</sup> Looking at the cross with a new perspective shifts the focus from the cross itself to Jesus’s saving acts. Humans strive to “give more importance to his acts of redemption, mercy, justice, and friendship than to the cross imposed by an imperial power as the symbol of his life.”<sup>31</sup> This definition of the cross extends liberation to women by including those who had previously been included only inherently, not explicitly. Jesus’s acts, rather than

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<sup>27</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 140.

<sup>29</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 115.

<sup>30</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 175.



the cross, allow humans to understand the relational dimension of humanity and to pursue justice amidst the crosses of the here and now.

Rambachan describes acting justly as the core of individual identity and the ultimate expression of religious practice. Acknowledging the presence of *brahman* in everything, humans can conclude that “liberation is the seeing of one’s own self as the self of all beings, a vision that frees from hate. It is the deepest identity that one can have with another, expressing itself as love.”<sup>32</sup> Achieving the knowledge of *Advaita* and gaining the gained, humans reach *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth) by realizing the interrelatedness of the world, and thus moving towards love and compassion for one another. Because all people are united and identical through *brahman*, humans see the pain and joy of others as parts of themselves. Eventually, through *moksha*, “ignorance can be overcome, and when it is and when we are awakened to the true nature of reality, there will be a corresponding transformation in the quality of our relationships and greater social harmony.”<sup>33</sup> Conquering *advaya* and suffering, humans can find balance and eternal bliss in the infinite. At the same time, they are called to address problematic systems that bar us from solidarity.

The most difficult question to answer now becomes: How can this understanding inform tangible action? According to Gebara, “knowledge is certainly important in the process of transformation but it is not enough to bring about actual change;” therefore theology fills the gap in a way knowledge cannot for redefining our social atmosphere.<sup>34</sup> We must come to a mutual understanding of the realities of beauty and evil to rebuild a more inclusive theology. Reading the stories of those marginalized makes evident the necessity of listening and acting against exploitation. Through the cross, we search for both the beauty and the evil in the mundane details of our lives. Within this search, the “silent oppression endured by women” comes to the surface, centering the voices of the oppressed that have power to dismantle patriarchal theology.<sup>35</sup> While analyzing the concept of gender cannot explain all the suffering women experience, it remains a clear step toward inclusive theology.

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<sup>32</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 190.

<sup>33</sup> Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, 112.

<sup>34</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 69.

<sup>35</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 175.

We often associate religion with searching for the best way to find salvation after life on Earth. In their works, Gebara and Rambachan emphasize the importance of living liberation, rather than accepting systems of oppression by only seeking salvation after death. In her work *Out of the Depths*, Gebara redefines what it means to be human, using women's experiences of evil and salvation as a guide. She calls for a less patriarchal perspective on theology, which historically can only provide explicit salvation to males. In viewing humans as inherently both good and evil, Gebara stresses the interrelatedness of humans to remove the limitations on their view of God and provide a path to living liberation through the centrality of the cross. In his work *Not-Two Is Not-One*, Rambachan also reveals the interdependence of humans through the *Advaita* truth of the *atma* united with *brahman* present in all humans. When humans search for self-worth through the ignorant belief that finite gains will lead them to the limitless, they suffer greatly. In gaining what is already gained, humans realize all beings equally embody *brahman*, which frees all from mental suffering over mortality. Achieving *moksha* allows humans to take on others' experiences of pain and bliss as their own and challenge the systems that beget human suffering. The voices of these authors are clear in intention. Through comparing the religious ideals of Hinduism and Christianity and using the example of patriarchal values as an oppressive system, Rambachan and Gebara provide profound insights about earthly salvation to build inclusivity and bring about actual societal change.

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