

Can Christian Theology be *Āstika*?

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I

It is well known that "the systems of Indian philosophy are classified into ... *āstika* (orthodox) and *nāstika* (heterodox)... To the *āstika* group belong the six *darśanas*... They are Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. The *nāstika* systems are Cāravāka, Bauddha and Jaina."¹

It is obvious that when non-Indian systems of thought are subjected to this classification then they will come out at the heterodox end of the spectrum. Even the Bauddha and the Jaina *darsanas*, which share certain presuppositions of the Hindu worldview, come out in this classification on the heterodox side then what chance could say Christian or Islamic theologies have of making the grade. Their place in this scheme appears to be a foregone conclusion. Or is it? Is there any way in which, say, Christian theology, could be considered *āstika*? This chapter is an attempt to answer the question.

II

There are at least three meanings which have been given to the word *āstika*² which are significant from the point of view of this chapter:

(1) One who believes in the life after death, (2) one who believes in God, and (3) one who believes in the authority of the Vedas.³

It is quite clear that Christian theology believes in life after death,⁴ though perhaps not in exactly the same sense as it is understood in Hinduism.⁵ Similarly, Christian theology also believes in "the existence of God as an objective reality" along with Judaism and Islam.⁶

It is clear therefore that Christian theology qualifies as *astika* in these two senses. This is fine as far as it goes—but it does not go very far for "as applied to the schools of Indian philosophy '*āstika*' is to be understood in the third of the above sense"⁷ and not the first two senses which we have discussed so far. So the acid test of the *astika* of Christian theology comes now: can it be seen as believing in the authority of the Vedas?

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Phrased in this manner the issue of the *āstika* of Christian theology becomes a *Christian issue*: do the Christian believe in the authority of the Vedas. The answer must be no, they don't.⁸ And the issue could come to rest here.

III

Let the issue, however, not be rephrased⁹ in such a manner that it becomes a *Hindu issue*: can Christian theology be regarded as authoritative from the point of view of any of the orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy? It is obvious that if Christian theology could be regarded as orthodox by an orthodox school of Hindu philosophy then it can very well stake out a claim for being regarded as orthodox in Hindu philosophical circles.

It will now be argued that it is possible to establish a *prima facie* case for the Hindu orthodoxy of Christian theology by looking at it from the vantage point of the Nyāya conception of the Veda and of scripture as developed by the Jayanta, a Nyāya scholar of the tenth century.¹⁰

Jayanta argues that "the scriptures of all faiths — Buddhist, Jaina, Samkhya, etc. are true and authoritative either because God is directly the author of each in his several incarnations, or because they are ultimately based on the Vedic revelation". Moreover, he sets up a set of criteria for judging whether any scripture can be considered genuine or not.¹¹

Now Christian theology is based on the Bible.¹² Thus if it could be established that (1) God is the author of the Bible; or that (2) the Bible is ultimately based on the one Vedic revelation or (3) that it fulfils the several criteria of an authentic scripture laid down by Jayanta, then Christian theology could be regarded as consistent with Hindu orthodoxy.

That Jesus Christ is an incarnation of God is acceptable to most Hindus. And as Jesus Christ himself is "the Word of God", there is no problem in accepting him or his gospel as Scripture.

There is, however, one limitation. Hinduism believes in numerous incarnations, Christianity in only one.¹³ This, however, may create a problem in the Christian assessment of the Veda but it does not create a problem for the Jayanta's assessment of the Bible and of Jesus Christ.

Alternatively, one could establish that the Bible is based on Vedic authority. "There is an accepted principle in Mīmāṃsā that if something found in the *smṛti* is not found in the Veda, we must infer it to be based on some Vedic text not at present known to us; for the extent of the Veda is infinite. Similarly we may regard the

scriptures of the different religions as different *smṛtis* and maintain that their contents will be found in the unknown portion of the Veda if not in the known portion.¹⁴

It is clear that the Bible could be regarded as a *smṛti* based on the unknown portion of the Veda. This creates no problem for the Jayanta, it may for the Christian who may either not relish this contrived dependence on Vedic authority or the enforced *smṛti* status of his or her scripture!

Finally, does the Bible fulfil the set of criteria laid down by Jayanta? These are that a genuine scripture "(1) must have become well-established in the societies of good people; (2) must be acceptable to a large number of good people; (3) its doctrines and practice must not appear to be altogether new, even while being propagated now; (4) its aim should not be to serve the self-interest of imposters; and (5) its teachings should not be such as to frighten people".¹⁵

Obviously the Bible makes it on these counts. There is, however, one catch – and this time it is a problem from the point of view not of the Christian but Jayanta. Thus "in the principles he laid down for judging whether a religion is based on a true scripture or not, he says that it must be acceptable and established among many 'good men'. By 'good men' (*Mahājanāḥ*) he means only those who belong to *Āryāvarta* and are bound by the institution of caste. So, in his opinion any scripture is true and valid if it does not subvert the *Varnāśrama Dharmā*, and if its followers practice it."¹⁶

This means that so long as Christianity is a missionary enterprise within the *Āryāvarta* attacking the *Varnāśrama Dharma*, its scripture cannot qualify as an authentic scripture. However, this also creates a problem, for unless there is conversion how would the religion become accepted among a sufficiently large number of 'good men' to become authentic? Obviously then the religion may spread but *not* by attacking *Varnāśrama Dharma*.

In other words, for Jayanta the acceptance of Christian theology as a Hindu orthodoxy seems to presuppose the abandonment of active proselytization by attacking *Varnāśrama Dharma* by the Christians. This condition being fulfilled, Jayanta would regard the Bible as orthodox and thus Christian theology based on it too as orthodox.

IV

One is thus led to a curious conclusion by this line of inquiry: Christian theology can be regarded as *Āstika* when looked at from the point of view of Jayanta of the Nyāya school if it abandons

proselytization by attacking *Varnāśrama Dharma* in the Āryāvarta region of India!

References:

1. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1960), p. 99.
2. See Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 161.
3. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op.cit.*, p. 99.
4. Geddes MacGregor, "Soul: Christian Concept" in Mircea Eliade, Editor in Chief, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), Vol. 13, pp. 455-460.
5. R.C. Zaehner, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 415.
6. *Ibid.*
7. T.M.P. Mahadevan, *op.cit.*, p. 99.
8. See William A. Graham, "Scripture" in Mircea Eliade, Editor in Chief, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), Vol. 13, pp. 142-143.
9. A very significant shift is involved here in converting the issue from a Christian to a Hindu one. To begin with, the decision on whether something is within or without the pale of Hindu orthodoxy is made not by the Hindu but by the opposite party — by defining its position vis-à-vis Vedic authority. The issue originally was not whether Christianity is acceptable to Vedic authority but whether Vedic authority is acceptable to Christianity. This makes Hinduism philosophically inclusive in a very interesting way, in that the other party must exclude itself from it.
10. See K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation of Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 232.
11. For another opinion of regarding at least some Biblical sections as Vedas see Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, trans., *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (New York: New American Library, 1948), p. ix-xii. The description of the Upanishads sounds like Jesus' dialogue with his Apostles!
12. See John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 57-62.
13. Aldous Huxley, Introduction, Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, trans., *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita* (Holywood: Vedanta Press, 1944), p. 13.
14. K. Satchidananda Murty, *op.cit.*, p. 234.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 237, emphasis added.