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Faith, Religion, Merit, Sin and Spirituality

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Abstract

Spirituality is a condition and quality of the mind. It depends on man's upbringing, environment, education and thinking capacity. Religion, belief, ideas of good and bad, merit and sin vary from person to person. Each religion has its own ideas about merit and sin and cause in consequence differences in the individual's character and behaviour. Concepts of Hell vary from faith to faith and religion to religion. These are matters of belief. This article deals with faith, belief, religion and spirituality and also the concepts of Hell in three major religions in the world: Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

Keywords: Spirituality, Faith, Belief, Concept, Hell.

Faith, religion and spirituality are cognates. All human beings have an innate tendency to believe in some power, a good or bad way of life and some fear/carelessness about punishment for evil deeds. Into the very nature of human life and existence itself duality is built in. There is a point and counterpoint, light and shade, good and bad, obverse and reverse to a coin. According to Hindu faith, the entire creation is the will and grace of the Supreme Being. The human being is the crown of creation, being invested with power, skill, knowledge, wisdom and *manas* the heart-mind-intellect unity. In Christian faith everything came into existence with God commanding "Let there be Light".

The Hindu belief has it that Man is born with *vasanas*, acquired and inborn tendencies, and also *gunas*, qualities, *Satva, Rajas,* and *Tamo gunas*. Is Man ruled by an unknown fate or by his own FREE WIILL? No one knows the right answer. Is there evil? What is evil? Are there *paap* and *punya*? Are there Sin and Merit? Yes and No. The discussion whether it is all Predestination or Freewill, goes on and on. Life continues. An answer will not be found. People grow more and more rationalistic, secular, fundamentalist or dogmatic. Life does not stop; nor does the debate. Is Religion essential? Is there God? There are people, millions of them, who deny the existence of God. But not all deny the existence of Good and Bad.

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Varying depths of depravity lead to sins of varying degrees of heinousness, and thus call for different intensities of retribution. Abstaining from sin would be possible by the sense of righteousness, which is another name for the moral sense given by faith in the Supreme Being. The righteous one practises restraint in word, deed and action. For those who have no faith either in god or righteousness, at least there should be fear of retribution to act as a deterrent. Organized religion is a mighty construct, mostly drawn from high intellect and intuitive inferences. These give rise to scriptures, epics and several other genres of edifying literature.

Good, a pristine absolute, is older than the hills, and evil came into being only much later. This is what both Hinduism and Christianity make us believe. Satyayug is the aeon of pristine virtue and Evil was the cause of Adam's transgression, in the till then glorious Garden of Eden. In the Hindu perspective, sin is punishable by being thrown into hell for the soul to suffer torment. The *Srimad Bhagavatam,* a scripture by Vyasabhagavan has been translated into many *bhashas* and of course into English too. Of the eleven hundred pages only four or five have been devoted to the description of the twenty-eight hells. In the Italian epic by Dante *The Divine Comedy*, widely considered a Christian epic, Inferno, a whole Cantiche in thirty four cantos, is devoted to the description of various hells, its inhabitants and the tortures sinners are made to undergo. One wonders whether Man's fear of hell was made a greater force attracting him to goodness and God. As civilization advanced the fear seems to be growing more and more.

The Buddhist conceptualization of hell closely followed the Hindu perspective. There are said to be eight hells, though some did say there were ten and even more up to a thousand. Some Buddhists seem to have revealed at a later stage that the tortures and hells are figments of imagination, mainly of the sinners themselves. Khenpo Konthar, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharma Chakra, had said, "From the Buddhist perspective, such a thing as hell does not exist." Though this is reassuring, Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva described hells extensively. Earlier, in Buddhism, we come across the description of eight hells.

God is envisioned as one above all duality and the Supreme Being is all pervading. This Supreme one transcends all, all dualities, and all qualities and all distinctions. A saint's eye view is that

Sin is behovely.
All is well
All shall be well.

This Being has infinite mercy and infinite understanding. Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, the major religions, believed that there are wages of Sin. Those who kill for fun and pleasure inhabit this place. The second is the Black Rope Hell for those who kill someone while committing some other crime. It is important to note that in the group of killers each has to suffer, though it is a sin committed by a group. In this hell big black birds would be plucking out the eyes, pulling out the tongues and pulling out the innards of the sinners. The tormented here are forced to drink molten copper, would be stabbed again and again. Crowded Hell is for those who kill and steal

and for those who are concupiscent libertines. Satyrs and nymphomaniacs suffer here for their transgressions. Fire Jar Hell is for those with sexual perversions and sins associated with sexual abuse. The organs of such are singed here. Those who indulge in sexual fantasies with others' women will have their eyes scorched here. Those who are attached to the voices and laughter of others' women will have their ears burnt here. The fifth is the Screaming Hell where there is a section called Great Screaming Hell too. Those who abuse intoxicants are thrown into this. The sixth hell is for those who make use of voice and make sound to show dissension. For those who cause divisions and cause disharmony there is a special torment. Snakes and vipers would be gnawing at them continuously. People who hold false views are tormented in hell of burning heat. False views include the negating of the karmic law and God. Diamond Beak Hornet Hell causes extreme pain to the sinner for he is made to drink the spurting blood after the beaks stab them. The seventh hell would be the lot of those who defile religion. This hell is called the Burning Hell of Stinging Worms. The worms thrust by force into the anus would travel up eating everything on the way to emerge out of the scalp. Hell of No Interval is the eighth for five types of premeditated killers of father, mother, holy man, the *sangha* and Bodhisattva.

Most important of these is the naming of the hells by Earth Store Bodhisattava, also known as Manjushri and Khsitigarbaha Bodhisattva. In a reply to Universal Worthy Bodhisattva, mahasattva, Manjushri replied that there is the Hell of Ultimately Relentless and another hell called Avichi, *un-spaced*, with no interval. Along with these he listed forty-four various other hells. He concluded saying: "Each of these hells contains lesser hells numbering from one, two, or three, or four, to hundreds of thousands. Each of these lesser hells has its own name." The Bodhisattva tells the queen Mahamaya, "To quote the names of hells, the types of punishment and instruments used would take a period of one *kalpa* (aeon)."

Modern mind does not believe in unproven things. Yet, one is reminded often of Dr Faustus who murmurs to himself "Why this hell, nor am I out of it." Hell may be real or unreal but more often than not it is one's own making, irrespective of faith or reason. In Sanskrit we have a wise simplification: *paropakaaraaya punyaaya paapaaya para peedanam.* It means helping others is merit-acquiring; inflicting pain is sin, *paap.* If this truly secular, rationalistic guideline to our conduct is accepted and followed, one can harmlessly say: "Hell! Go to Hell" and get done with it.

Great sages and seers, '*drashtas*', as they are called in our *Devabhasha*, wrote out long and inspired visionary experiences to reveal to us what they envisioned in an inspired effort to illumine what is dark in the likes of us. They invariably believed in a Supreme Being and showed time and again in their envisioned narratives what should be viewed as Good and what its dangerous opposite is.

Theism is the dynamics of thinking which believes in these intriguing concepts, intriguing because of lack of basic understanding. This cannot be served on a platter and this is where the concept of intimate one to one relationship with God through a mental state and contributory way of living called *Bhakti* emerged. While asking people to cultivate belief and have faith in God, the sages and seers went further to explain

the consequences of bad deeds, also called evil-doings. This is what we now call a two-pronged approach to instill Faith. While detailing the fruits of right action and good deeds they also told us with deep concern how evil would be 'punished'. In our languages we have '*punya*' and '*paap*'. The western world has near equivalents like "merit' and 'sin'.

While the conceptualization of hell is towards the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of Renaissance in the occident, the oriental visualization ages ago reflected in the *Srimad Bhagavatam* appears to be more electrifying. It is inclined to more severe punishment for wrong doings. Shukamuni's Tale Divine in Seven Days to Parikshit, whose days were strictly numbered, would act as a more powerful deterrent to evil doing. We have descriptions of twenty-one frightful hells *taamisra* (thick dark) *andha taamisra* (blinding dark), *raurava* (frightful and loathsome), and *mahaaraaurava* (extremely frightful, loathsome), *kumbhipaaka* (potter's kiln) and several others. In *taamisra*, those sinners who make fun of or ridicule others' wives and children would be thrown into the pitch darkness. *Andha taamisra* would be the lot of those sinners who take a woman who already has a man of her own. *Rauravas* are for those who cheat others or are traitors for the sake of maintaining families. *Mahaaraurava* is the place for those who want to be on their own without paying heed to the suffering and travails of birds, beasts and other beings. Those who kill rats and creatures by ensnaring them would be thrown into the hell where they would be baked in potters' kilns. The one who is treacherous to his parents or the pious brahmins would be thrown into the most dreadful hell called *Kaalasootra*. Here there would be sun overhead and underneath flames. The one who leaves the path of righteousness and the Veda would be punished with sword blades on both sides making any movement impossible. This is called *asipattra* forests. *Kaalasootra naraka* is the place for those who punish the unpunishable. The servitors of Yama inflict these punishments. They break the sinners as simple sugar canes while they howl miserably. For teasing and joyously inflicting pain on animals and birds, the sinner would be thrown into *andhakoopa* where he would be treated as with contempt. He who enjoys all his wealth eating and spending only for himself without sharing it with kith and kin would be thrown into this. There is another severe punishment in the hell where a sinner is made to eat worms. This is called *krimi bhojan narak.* In *Sandasa* hell, those who commit theft of the property of the righteous are pierced with spears heated in heated orbs. For the madly lustful the *narak* is designed in such a way that the couple would stand intertwined, burnt endlessly and made to embrace melting hot statues of iron. This hell is called *vajra kantaka shalmali*. *Vaitaraninaraka* is for the lawless and who turn *pashandas* not following the Veda. Here crocodiles would chew the souls of sinners while they are made to list his sins. Here the sinner would have to be under blood, marrow, semen and the excreta eating and drinking them in that horrible and loath some heat. Those who train dogs and the like and by killing makes a living in pride would be punished there. There are other hells in this category called, *praanarodham* where life-beath is intermittently stopped as punishment. *Vishasanamu, laalaabhakshanamu, saarameyaadanamu, naveechirayambu* are other hells where unthinkable and unimaginable punishments are meted out. *Retah paanaamu* is the most detestable hell where sinners are made to

drink semen for making their wives do that in lasciviousness. There are seven other hells the names of which themselves are bloodcurdling: *kshaarakardama, rakshogana bhojana, shoolasootra, dandashooka, navata nirodhana, saparya vartana* and *shoochee mukha.* Those interested to know further can go to the second *aashwaasa* of the fifth *skandha* in *Sree Mahaa Bhaagavatham* in Telugu.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the Italian poet was born in Florence. Between 1308 ad 1321 he wrote what is now known as the *Divina Commedia*, translated into English as *The Divine Comedy.* This is considered the greatest epic in Italian produced at the junction of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dante's epic is primarily a Christian epic, central to Christian Theology and a must-study in classical scholarship. It is an elaborately extended allegory as Puranjanopaakhyaanam in *Bhagavathapuraanam*. Dante sets out to visit the after-life worlds or the worlds of the dead with the ancient poet Virgil accompanying him. In the first circle, before entering hell, the visitors see the opportunists who do neither good nor evil.

There are nine circles of hell. The first is Limbo for the virtuous Pagans (non-believers) who did not accept Christ. The second circle is for those lustful. They are trapped in a torpedo, staying together forever. The third circle is for gluttons where Cereberus forces them to lie under mud under lashing wind and rain. In the fourth circle sinners are divided into two mobs, hoarders who keep things for themselves and rarely use them and wasters who squander all. The fifth circle is for the wrathful. The sixth circle is for heretics. Here they are trapped in flaming tombs. The seventh circle is for the violent, which is further divided into six rings. The eighth ditch is where fraudulent advisors are trapped in flames. The ninth is the part of hell where those who sow discord are cloven and joined only to be attacked again. The last hell is where falsifiers like alchemists, counterfeits and cheats are punished with different kinds of afflictions and diseases. In the ninth, heinous traitors are frozen in the ice-lake Cocytus. This is the most terrible and harsh section containing Satan, waist deep in ice, his wings flapping and beating in vain.

Note

- St. Juliana of Norwich, English anchoress, canonized 14th Century Saint Buddhism Inputs: Courtesy Internet sources, khandro.net and siddham.

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