Providence In The Context Of Hinduism: Its Use In Everyday Life

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Abstract

Providence in Christianity has been a well-debated theological idea. Numerous empirical studies have been conducted to understand this aspect of Christianity. However, interest for understanding the role of providence in other religious communities has been small. This study concentrates on understanding providence in the Hindu and the Christian community. Hindu community members in Kansas City, Kansas, were given surveys relating to experiential accounts of divine intervention and Christian community members from a Mennonite affiliated church were also given surveys. The questionnaires were coded and analyzed. The results alluded to different understandings of the deity in both communities. Hindu participants used the metaphor of the deity as a sustainer rather than the deity as an intervener. The Hindu community did not qualify their use of providence as much as the Christian sample. The Christian sample qualifed their responses to their use of providence rather then using any other metaphor of the deity. The differences were attributed to Modern Hinduism emphasis on the deity, Brahman, as a sustainer of the world rather than an action-oriented deity. In the Christian sample, the high level of education was related to high usage of qualifications.

Keywords: Providence, Hinduism

1. Introduction

From the milk drinking Ganesh miracles to prime time television drama like Touched by an Angel, divine intervention, providence or care, is an important philosophy in any culture or religion (Pridy, 1999, p.1). The importance of these two events, in their respective religions or cultures highlights the wide usage of divine intervention as an explanation process. Divine intervention as an explanation system has been extensively researched and reported on in Western/Christian communities (Helm, 1993; Lewis and Berndt, 1999; Pollner, 1989; Ritzema, 1979; Sanders, 1999). However, research on the usage of divine intervention as an explanation system in non-Western/non-Christian communities has been sparse. Ethnographic data exists for the possibility of divine intervention or a comparable idea referring to a superior power or law being used to explain events. However, there have not been empirical data collected to support these ethnographic data. Hence, this exploratory study was initiated to understand the role of Divine intervention in a non-western community.

The Hindu community was chosen as the sample group to work with. Diaspora of Indians to the rest of the world has meant that ideas, rituals and practices of Hinduism and Indian culture have been transplanted into different contexts. In some areas, ideas and rituals have been jealously guarded and preserved yielding a convenient non-western sample with which to work.

The purpose of this study was to understand people’s explanation for the use of providence in a Hindu context and in a Christian context. This meant understanding the effects of Hindu and Christian philosophy and theology on the empirical data collected. This study was based on a previous study conducted by Lewis and Berndt (1999) on a Christian sample in the early 90’s. An integral part of the paper is to compare the results of the Christian data to the Hindu data. This comparison will shed light on similarities and differences between these culturally and religiously distinct samples.
As background for these comparisons the paper will cover several theological and scholarly views on providence. This discussion will not be comprehensive, but will hopefully introduce the reader to some of the nuances in scholarly thinking in these religions.

In Christianity there is a great deal of tension between scholars about the doctrine of divine intervention. Many interpretations have been given on God’s role in providence: this paper will briefly deal with a few. “Risk-free” providence is the belief that God’s providence is not limited by nature or human kind and that it penetrate into every aspect of a person’s life, i.e. intervention does not affect or limit God. The assumption is that God is an omniscient and omnipotent entity whose will supercedes human will and whose goodness transcends evil. Therefore God can preordain the lives of his people. For Paul Helm, God is in control of everything: “Not only is every atom and molecule, every thought and desire, kept in being by God, but every twist and turn of each of these is under the direct control of God” (Helm, 1993, p. 22).

Another model that has been gaining support is termed “relational theism” or “risky providence”. Relatively new “risky providence” believes in “a personal god who enters into a genuine give-and-take relationship with his creatures” (Sanders, 1999, p.12). This “risky” God can change his mind, be rejected by his creation, and permit evil. God does not control his creatures; they have complete freedom. However, God’s love and grace is a vital aspect of this theory. An important aspect of this theology is to understand that God steps down to human level and limits himself when trying to have a relationship with humankind. As God is incomprehensible, he has to limit himself in our world for humans to have a tangible relationship with Him. This idea is supported by the various anthropomorphic accounts in the Bible.

Maurice Wiles (1994), a critic of divine intervention, fears that human responsibility and freedom is not accounted for when events are attributed to a divinity. Evil cannot be explained by using either of the above stated theories. Hence, Wiles pushes for a free-will theodicy, which takes into account the will of humans.

Robert Adams addresses the problem of evil and morality. The moral objections Wiles raises can be explained through the idea of “soul making”; Adams states:

‘Soul-making’ here signifies a development of human lives that is much more complex in its dimensions of value than the moral merit on which the unadorned free-will theodicy turns. To that extent it is more plausible to suppose that soul making is worth the evils supposed to have been permitted for its sake than that mere moral merit is (Adam, 1994, p. 35-36).

This God is a personal God; a God that is in constant relationship with humanity: hence “it makes most sense to think of sins as forgiven, of hardships as occasions for trust in God, and of sufferings as shared with God” (Adam, 1994, p. 38).

These same tensions exist in Hinduism. As there are many levels in Hinduism and space does not allow for a complete coverage of all levels, this paper will only deal with modern Hinduism. Modern Hinduism can be dated to the Hindu Renaissance in the 18th century. The Hindu renaissance was “a religious and political movement” which tried to update Hinduism and bring it into the modern age (Flood, 1996).

A distinctive aspect of Hinduism is its philosophy of Karma, which can be seen as a philosophy comparable to divine intervention. Karma has been given different definitions: “every action has a reaction” (Viswanathan, 1992, p.139) or “the effect of former deeds, performed either in this life or in a previous one, on one’s present and future condition” (Basham, 1954, p.553). In classical Hinduism everyone falls under the law of Karma, even the gods themselves (Viswanathan, 1992, p.142). It is extremely difficult to change or modify one’s Karma. Hence, Karma was viewed by Western Indologists to be a very fatalistic and deterministic philosophy.

In modern Hinduism, Indian thinkers and philosophers have been able to rectify this misunderstanding. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, famous twentieth century Indian philosopher, defined Karma as conditions rather than rigid limits and rules (Creel 1986, p. 5). This understanding of Karma is significant for a Hindu, Karma, as Rahdakrishnan would say, “is not so much a principle of retribution as one of continuity” (4). This idea can be carried further to reveal that “Karma is what man has achieved in the past; and he is answerable to it. He has acquired also certain tendencies and disposition, which make him act in one-way rather than another. But he can change them in the present and shape his future according to his will” (quoted in Creel 4); This modern understanding of Karma gives the agent enormous freedom to shape and change his/her future. So, a Hindu does not find him/herself determined by the law of Karma, but is rather directed by it.

Modern Hinduism emphasizes the philosophical aspects of the Hindu religion rather than the rituals. The concept of Brahman is emphasized over all the gods and goddesses. Brahman is “All pervading, self-existent power”, it is the absolute and it is the eternal spirit that has no form and structure that exists in the universe (Stutley, 1977, p.49).
The Chandogya Upanishads, a classical Hindu text, states, “He enfolds the whole universe and in silence is loving to all. This is the Spirit that is in my heart, this is Brahman” (translation by Juan Mascaro). The Brahman exists in everyone’s soul, as atman, and it is this part of the soul that needs to be nurtured so it can unify with the Brahman.

Sri Aurobindo and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan interpreted the philosophies of Karma and Brahman to come up with the evolutionary understanding of both these philosophies. To paraphrase, the world is considered to be in an evolutionary process. This process will lead to an end where there is a revelation of the Absolute and human beings are a significant part of the process by pursuing the evolutionary process to the end. (Minor 1986 p.16). The combination of both Brahman and Karma produces a philosophy that places a human in a context of freedom, enabling humans to participate in the evolution of the world. The world then is governed by one God or Spirit, Brahman, Atman or the Absolute, which sustains the Universe and takes part in the evolution of it.

Empirical studies to understand the Christian perception and usage of divine intervention as an explanation process have found varying understandings and interpretations. Ritzena (1979) found in his study that God was more involved with producing events or situations that were good rather than evil. In a study conducted by Lewis and Brendt, respondents frequently used the metaphor of God as action-facilitator over other metaphors such as God as protector, and as sharing one’s suffering. This result may be related to the fact that the participants came from a comfortable, educated, middle class background and were interested in changing and making a difference in the world. There is also a bias towards understanding God in relation to the culture’s concept of a person. Western culture emphasizes individuality and autonomous action; hence “God in Western culture is one who acts, intervenes (cf.,Tracy, 1994), and in such acts of special providence most principally assists its creatures in their actions” (Lewis and Brendt, 1999,p.13). Pollner (1989) found that belief in divine intervention has a strong correlation to well-being which was already suppressed by level of education; “the less educated gain more from the divine interaction than the better educated” (p.100).

There have been very few studies done to understand divine intervention in Indian communities. Ethnographic data have been gathered to understand the importance of Karma and the popular understanding of Karma specifically in Indian village life. However, no empirical studies have been conducted to specifically understand the relationship between divine intervention, Karma and the everyday life of a Hindu person.

The author ran a preliminary study on a Hindu community in a large Midwestern city (Muthuraj 2001). The sample was compared to data collected previously for Lewis and Brendt’s study, from a Christian sample. The Hindu sample in contrast to the Christian sample had a very multifaceted understanding of providence. The Hindu sample used numerous metaphors of the deity: helping them find a job, sustaining and providing for the cosmos, as well as reserving responsibility and free will for human beings and their actions. The emphasis on human responsibility and free will was identified as the use of Karma in understanding and explaining an event. This multifaceted understanding of the deity was related to the highly educated Hindu immigrants who have a better opportunity of familiarizing themselves with Hindu philosophy than Hindus from rural India. Hinduism as a religious system does not subscribe to a set of dogmas but rather allows for varying interpretations hence, it is not a surprise that the Hindu sample is diverse in its belief system compared to Christianity. The Christian sample as previously stated emphasized God as an action facilitator over other metaphors. Human responsibility and freedom were used only to emphasize freedom and autonomous action of a person.

Christian theological understanding of God views God as an intervening deity who has the world in the palm of His hand. Hinduism views the deity, Brahman as the sustainer who sustains the universe. With the empirical data present for both these religions, Christianity leans towards the metaphor of God as action facilitator and Hinduism uses multifaceted concepts of the deity while reserving room for human involvement. Hence, it is hypothesized that the Hindu sample will have numerous metaphors for relating to the deity while the Christian sample will use the metaphor of God as action facilitator over other metaphors.

2. Methods

Hindu participants were members of the Hindu religion; they were of Indian origin and from the Kansas City area. The sample consisted of 38 persons out of which 27 turned in usable surveys. The mean age of the respondents was 34.7, age ranging from 22 to 65. All participants identified themselves as Hindus. Five participants identified themselves as American citizens, the rest identified themselves as Indian citizens. Christian participants were members of a Mennonite affiliated church. The sample consisted of 25 participants; 23 returned usable surveys. All members except one were Mennonites, and all were of European origin. The mean age was 54.7 and the range was 26 to 82.
2.1 procedure

Contacts were made with the Hindu community in Kansas City through the Kansas City Temple and Culture center. The temple was contacted two weeks prior to the study and given information to display on their bulletin board explaining the study and its intentions. Three researchers were present when the surveys were given. One researcher tried to solicit participants by explaining the study to temple goers. Interested participants were led to the basement where the survey was administered to them by the other two researchers. All participants read and signed a Statement of Consent before taking the survey. The local church affiliated with the Mennonite denomination was contacted to take part in the study. A cover letter was sent to all Sunday school classes, and interested classes contacted the author. The survey was administered by the leader of the Sunday school class during the Sunday school period. The leaders were instructed to read the Statement of Consent to the class, and all participants were required to sign it before taking the survey.

2.2 instrument

The survey consisted of a definition of providence as “divine guidance or care.” There were three questions, one of which rated the participants belief in providence and two open-ended questions. The first question asked the participants to rate the extent to which they use providence as an explanation; the second question was an open ended question that asked an explanation for the rating; and the last question, another open-ended question, asked for a recent incident where the participant had experienced providence. The second page had the Duke Religion Inventory and the third page contained a debriefing section, as well as a socio-demographic section. Small changes were made in the survey to make it appropriate for the Hindu community. The socio-demographic section was changed to include questions such as: “Are you a Hindu?” “How many times do you visit India?” “Are you a first generation Indian immigrant?”

2.3 coding scheme

The coding scheme used by Lewis and Berndt was used for both the Christian and Hindu sample. There were five major categories - General, Specific, Prayer, and Qualification? plus an Other category. The General Category took into account any answers that referred to general actions of God: “guides and influences our lives”, “takes care of us.” The Specific category answers referred to particular incidents where people felt providence had occurred. Specific was sub-divided into various categories: Decisions - helping with significant turns in one’s life, Avoids problems, Copes with problems, Transforms Negative into positive - happenings that appear bad in the long term become positive, etc. Answers in the third category, Prayer, made references to prayer requests being granted for oneself or someone else. Qualifications were answers that used other explanations, for example human responsibility, even after quoting a belief in providence. This was sub-divided into seven sub-categories: using providence in retrospect, to explain unfortunate circumstances, as an escape clause, only after invoking rational thought and caring for oneself; doubts about applying providence, reserving for human responsibility, and finally an other category.

2.4 preparation for data analysis

The answers to the two open-ended questions were typed in a computer file. The author and a second person coded the data independently. The codings were compared, and decisions for each coding was discussed between the two coders; after which a master coding sheet was produced by the author. Proportions of major and sub categories were entered into a Microsoft Excel file. The codings then were entered into SYSTAT for analysis.

3. Results

The present study hypothesized was that the Hindu sample would use multifaceted metaphors to describe the deity working in their life. The Christian sample was expected to emphasize the metaphor of the deity as an action facilitator. Means and standard deviations of proportion for all major categories were found: the Hindu sample used explanations involving General and Special providence, more than appealing to Qualification. The Christian sample, unlike the Hindu sample, used Qualification more than General or Special providence (Refer to Table 1).
Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviations in the Major categories for both the Hindu and Christian sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Categories</th>
<th>Mean Christian (N=23)</th>
<th>SD Christian (N=23)</th>
<th>Mean Hindu (N=27)</th>
<th>SD Hindu (N=27)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>0.192</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>0.423</td>
<td>0.394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>0.246</td>
<td>0.317</td>
<td>0.348</td>
<td>0.384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>0.200</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>0.369</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>0.305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.229</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Hindu sample there is not an equal distribution of the use of categories. There is, however, an emphasis on using the category of General providence, followed by Specific, then Qualification and Prayer in the Hindu sample. The Christian sample emphasized the use of Qualification over all other categories. These results do not support our hypothesis that there will be a multifaceted use of providence in the Hindu sample and that the Christian sample would lean towards the use of Specific providence, i.e. action-facilitator. Instead it is reversed, with the Christian sample using Qualification more than any other category. The Hindu sample was not multifaceted in their use of categories, rather they emphasized the General category over all other categories.

A two-group t test was run to verify the significance of the difference between the two groups and an ANCOVA was run to control for age. For the general providence the t test proved significant, \( t(50)= 2.41, p=0.018 \), after controlling for age, by running an ANCOVA, the difference was still significant, \( F(1,50)=0.25 2, p=0.064 \). For Specific providence the difference was not significant, \( t (50)=1.026, p=0.310 \). For prayer, the difference again was not significant, \( t(50)=1.100, p=0.279 \). A two-group t-test was run to verify the significance of the difference between the samples use of the major category, Qualification. The difference proved to be significant, \( t (50) = 2.08, p =0.043 \). However, the difference was not significant after age was controlled for \( F (1, 50) =0.922, p=0.343 \).

4. Discussion

It is instructive to group the categories and sub-categories of providential explanations under certain metaphors, which describe the kind of divinity used by participants (Lewis and Brendt, 1999). Considering the Christian sample it is noteworthy that they qualified their experiences but also used to a large extent the metaphor of God as action-facilitator. Metaphors of God as continual creation sustainer and God as prayer-answerer were not as frequently used. Results showed that the Hindu sample preferred the metaphor of the deity as sustainer over intervening metaphors or qualifying their use of providence. Hence the Hindu sample was far less multifaceted in their use of metaphors. The Christian sample reserved qualifications for explanations they gave of providence over other metaphors. Data also shows that the second significant metaphor used in the Christian sample, was the deity as intervening. The Christian sample did use the action facilitator metaphor however, this was not the overriding understanding.

The reason for the high usage of qualifications could be due to the level of education present in the sample. This Christian sample was a highly educated sample with 23 participants holding college degrees. As Pollner (1989) found belief in providence was suppressed by level of education, “the less educated gain more from the divine interaction than the better educated” (p.100). This could explain the high usage of qualification. This could be identified as an emphasis in the Christian sample for pushing for human agency and autonomy: American culture is famous for underlining individuality and independence.

Similarly Lewis and Brendt point out, “a culture’s preferred conception of its deity may mirror its concept of the person” (13). This is reflected in the heavy use of God as action facilitator metaphor. This metaphor also aligns itself with a large part of Christian theology. Paul Helm, John Sanders and Robert Adams advocate for one form of intervening deity or another, i.e., in the form of a relational God, or a soul making God or a “risk-free” God.

In the Hindu sample there was usage of the metaphor of God as facilitator and God as prayer-answerer and explanations were also qualified. However, the metaphor of God as continual creational sustainer over-shadowed any other usage. This understanding of God relates back to the concept of Brahman in Modern Hinduism. Brahman is defined as the almighty, but Brahman also exists within everyone and the desire of a Hindu is to nurture this inner manifestation of Brahman. Brahman does not physically intervene, rather through the use of human freedom, sustains and maintains the cosmos (Minor 1989 p.16). This modern interpretation could explain the high usage of this metaphor. This Hindu sample was also highly educated, with all participants holding college degrees, hence
there is high a possibility of them coming across modern and philosophical understandings of Hinduism and relating their experiences to these understandings.

The t-test verified the significance of General providence between the two samples, the difference was still significant after controlling for age. Lewis and Brendt found that the use of general providence increased with age in the Christian sample (1999, p.14). The Christian sample was older (M=54.7) then the Hindu sample which could explain the significance of this result.

Both samples were highly selective, participants were not randomly chosen but volunteered to fill out the survey. Hence, one needs to be cautious about generalizing about the samples representing their communities. The Hindu sample is also an immigrant sample that is trying to understand its religion in a new environment. As the researcher Badsah Mukhopadhyaya states “Most immigrant Hindus living in the Bay Area are constantly forced to explain their religion to people totally unfamiliar with the subjects. In doing so, they consciously or subconsciously rework definitions to make them both comprehensible to the Western mind and as inclusive as possible of various kinds of Hindu beliefs and practices” (as quoted in Eck, 2000,p.234). This is important factor that can affect the result of the study. The Hindu participants could have felt the need to explain their beliefs to the researchers, who they identified with the West, and hence formulated their ideas in Western terms rather than within their own belief system. A number of participants in the Hindu sample would begin their answers with “According to Hindu religion” or “. We believe that whatever happens”, signifying they were responding to someone that was not familiar with their religion. This study has merely scratched the surface on what can be learned about people’s religious explanation systems within both the Hindu and Christian community.

5. References