

M. Krzysztof BYRSKI

Collegium Civitas, Warsaw, Poland

krzysztof.byrski@collegium.edu.pl

SANĀTANA DHARMA AND CHRISTIANITY – PERSPECTIVES OF THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE¹

ABSTRACT

The ancient Indian concept of “the eternal nature of things” (*sanātana dharma*) is a convenient meeting ground for all religions. It is a mistake to describe it as tantamount to Hinduism. Christianity and Hinduism may enter into a meaningful dialogue within its framework. Since for both of them the self-sacrifice of God is a pivotal idea around which they build their theology. Basic difference between them lays in the fact that the Vedic sacrifice is a creative one, out of which time and space emerged and the Christian sacrifice is a redemptive one that took place within created time and space. Thus the basic question is whether these two concepts of sacrifice are homologous. In the present essay, we try to outline this extremely tantalizing problem.

Keywords: *sanātana dharma*, *yajña*, *kāma*, *tapas*, Vedic sacrifice, redemptive sacrifice

¹ This is a free rendering of my original presentation in the Hindi language on the occasion of the National Seminar on Abhinavagupta held at the Department of Philosophy and Religion, Banaras Hindu University, on 5 January 2013. I am beholden to the then Head of the Department, Professor Devendra Nath Tiwari, for inviting me to participate in that Seminar and for preparing the first draft of the English translation of my text, which I modified and elaborated substantially.

As a guideline for the topic I wish to present, let me quote a Vedic *mantra*, which reads: *the Truth/Being is one the wise name it differently*² and a verse from the *Gītā* which reads: *one's own dharma, though devoid of merit is preferable to the dharma of another well performed. Even death in the performance of one's own dharma is better; another's dharma is fraught with fear*.³

Half a century has passed since I returned back from Varanasi after completing my PhD studies there. Today, the memories of those days vividly come back to me and the question arises in my mind – what impression those almost six years which I spent in the Holy City of ancient Kashi left upon my mental frame. It is not difficult to respond to this question.

Among my late teachers I still remember two names – Professor Vasudev Sharan Agrawala⁴ and Mahamahopadhyaya Rameshwar Jha.⁵ Regular seminars on the meaning of the Veda were organized at the residence of Professor Agrawala and I used to attend those meetings. As a result, the Vedic mystery gradually began to unfold to me and started to affect deeply my perception of reality especially that I had many occasions to engage myself into the debate. At one time, the deep meaning of *yajña* was the main topic of discussion. Professor Agrawala, as I remember, was commenting on the meaning of the *Puruṣa-sūkta* hymn. In this regard I asked him if the crucifixion of Jesus Christ could also be considered a *yajña*? Without any hesitation he replied “yes.” At that moment, I was not aware of the profound importance and long lasting consequences of that statement for my understanding of Christianity, but ever since it has been coming back to my mind repeatedly like a *mantra*, along with the Vedic formula *sarvam etadyajñah* (*all that [reality] is sacrifice*) substantiated, among others, in the hymn addressed to *Viśvakarman*.⁶ This has become the first foundation stone of my world-view.

² *Rgveda* I.164.46.

³ *Bhagavadgītā* III.35.

⁴ V.S. Agrawala (1904-1972) was a scholar of ancient and mediaeval literature, history, culture and art. He served as Head of the Archeological Museum, Mathura; Superintendent, Central Asian Antiquities Museum and Head of the Indian Archeological Department from 1946 to 1951. In 1951 he was appointed professor in the College of Indology, Banaras Hindu University of which he became Principal and also he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts. In the 1960s he conducted the Summer School of Vedic Studies at BHU and authored many books, among others, on the interpretation of the Vedic texts. See also: *Prof. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala: A Bibliographic Survey of his Published Works*, comp. J. Chandra, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1994, at <http://ignca.nic.in/PDF_data/vasudeva_saran_agrawala.pdf>, 16 June 2015.

⁵ *Acharya Rameshwar Jha (20th century) was a traditional Sanskrit scholar considered an authority on Nyaya, Vyakarana and Vedanta. He later became an exponent of non-dualistic Shaivism and is often credited with establishing and propagating Kashmir Shaivism in Varanasi. His spiritual experiences and deep understanding of ancient texts were spontaneously expressed in numerous Sanskrit verses. These were published among others in the book entitled Pūrṇatā Pratyabhijñā... Rameshwar Jha is a rarity among scholars as he did not let his traditional learning become impediment to spiritual realization. He helped propagate and systematize learning of non-dualistic Shaivism... – Acharya Rameshwar Jha*, Wikipedia, at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acharya_Rameshwar_Jha>, 16 June 2015.

⁶ *Rgveda* X.81.

The second one in the form of the *aham mantra* was given to me by another teacher of mine, Mahamahopadhyaya Pandit Rameshwar Jha. In the beginning, the depth of this teaching was also not clear to me. I can say with full responsibility that had I not met these two extraordinary personalities, the way I understand the sense of existence would probably have become quite different.

Considerable time had passed before I grasped the true nature of *dharma* without which it would be impossible to fully comprehend the implications of both *yajña* and *aham*. During my mission as the Polish ambassador to India, I received a letter from a person unknown to me, who wrote that the political slogan according to which the politics have to be kept apart from *dharma* is arbitrary because there cannot exist anything devoid of its proper *dharma*.⁷ Consequently, politics also will have to have its own *dharma*. This thought appeared to me very meaningful, especially because at that time I came across a certain Jaina text. There I found a definition of *dharma* which I believe to be the most accurate. *Vastusvabhāva iti dharmah*⁸ – meaning thereby that *dharma* is the nature of things. Thus each and every aspect of reality has to have its *dharma*, i.e. its proper nature. Consequently, to take *dharma* just for a religion is a serious mistake. Yes, religion comprises the nature of God and the nature of our relation with Him, and only to that extent it may also be called *dharma*. After getting liberated from this delusion, I wanted to know what the nature of reality is, i.e. according to Indian thinking, what is the *dharma* of the universe? The meetings devoted to the proper comprehension of the meaning of the Vedas that I attended at the house of Professor Vasudev Sharan Agrawala proved to be very helpful regarding this problem because thanks to them I understood what *yajña* is and what is its place in the Vedic thought.

The *Nāsadiya-sūkta* and the *Puruṣa-sūkta* shed light upon this problem. According to the former *tadekam* – “That One” about which nothing can be said (*neti neti*) generated fire or heat (*tapas*) out of Itself and thus manifested Itself. The heat cannot exist without fire and therefore “That One” first became Fire (*Agni*), which therefore is called *purohita* – that which is always ahead. But Fire cannot exist without fuel. So “That One” also became its own fuel. Down to this moment, Vedic seers, like physicists of today, had been limiting themselves to the area of pure physics and cosmology. For the picture which comes before us is a blast reminiscent of the so-called Big Bang. But in the following line of the same hymn: *Kāmastadagre samavaratatādhi mansoretaḥ prathamam yadāsīt*⁹ the same *ṛiṣi*-s assumed the garb of philosophers and spiritual teachers. The reason is that as long as there is no love (*kāma*) the seed of consciousness cannot sprout. Unless love prompts it the mind cannot be awakened. As long as love does not envelop and awaken the seed of the mind, i.e. the very essence of con-

⁷ ...jab samvidhān aur vicārdhārāen dharm nirapekṣ hone lagti hain to prakṛti bhī apne dharm se nirapekṣ ho karvikarāl rūpdhārān karne lagti hain. From a letter of Mukesh Suman of Nazibabad dated 17 October 1995.

⁸ Svāmi-Kumāra, *Kārtikeyānuprekṣā*, Agās 1997, p. 364 (XII.478).

⁹ *Rgveda* X.129.

sciousness, so long the logic of the emergence of Being and Non-Being will not become clear and so long the frightening physical power of Fire (*Agni*) will not turn into the benevolent love-like, life-giving warmth, and so long *Agni* responding to the prayer of devotees *sa naḥ piteva sūnavēgne supāyano bhava*¹⁰ will not be able to assume the garb of the Man-Lord of Creatures (*Puruṣa-Prajāpati*) made of love (*kāma* *maya Puruṣa*),¹¹ who can experience the physical heat (*tapas*) of *Agni* as the pain accompanying his self-sacrifice out of which the universe is created. This is what apparently appears from the Vedic texts. The *kāma* of the *Nāsadiya-sūkta* is most often mistakenly taken for mere passion or lust, while it is something without which the “I” cannot be embodied and without which the Man-Lord of Creatures by self-offering himself in sacrifice cannot become the root-cause of the universe.¹²

Lord Krishna says: *I am kāma non-contradictory to dharma*.¹³ It is precisely that same *kāma*, which also prompted *Prajāpati* to love creatures so as to bring them into existence by multiplying his “I” into innumerable forms of living beings. As it has been indicated already, in what is reminiscent of the Big Bang he emitted fire.¹⁴ But there was no fuel for this fire except himself. Thus he became himself the fuel. But as long as this fire would not assume the form of *vaiśvānara Agni* in all those creatures who live on food and as long as *Prajāpati* would not transform himself into food, so long self-consciousness (*caitanya*) could not be awakened. It is consistent here to quote a prayer of Rāmdās in Marathi¹⁵ according to which food is *Brahman*’s plenitude and to take meal is a sacrificial act, not mere stomach filling or simple satisfaction of hunger. Although *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* and his creativity form the basic structure of *sanātana dharma*, and the vision of Him heating himself up in order to create cosmos – as I already mentioned it – to a large extent evokes the concept of Big Bang developed by modern science, still ordinary people prefer to worship the deities about whom the *Nāsadiya-sūkta* says they are posterior (*arvagdevā asya visarjanena*)¹⁶ in existence to the creative sacrifice of *Prajāpati*.

¹⁰ *Rgveda* I.1.7.

¹¹ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.9.11; M.K. Byrski, ‘Man Made of Love,’ *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 75, No. 11 (2011), pp. 818-826.

¹² See the *Puruṣa-sūkta* hymn (*Rgveda* X.90).

¹³ The *Bhagavadgītā* VII.11: *Dharmāviruddho bhūteṣu kāmōsmibharatarābha*.

¹⁴ *Taittirīya brāhmaṇa* [2.2.9.1-10]. See also: S. Lévi, *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brāhmanas*, Paris 1898, p. 14 (*Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Sciences Religieuses*, 11).

¹⁵ वदनि कवल घेताम नाम ध्य श्रीहरीचे /सहज हवन होते नाम घेता फुकाचे /जीवन करी जिवित्वा अन्न हे पूर्ण ब्रह्मा /उदरभरण नोहे जानिजे यज्ञ कर्म *Vadani kavala ghetām nāma ghya śrīharice / sahaja havana hote nāma ghetā phukāce / jivana kari jivitvā anna he pūrṇa brahmā / udarabharāṇa nohe jāniṇje yajña karma*. The free translation of this couplet runs as follows: *When you take the first morsel of food, remember the name of Shri Hari (Vishnu). When you put it into your mouth as oblation, remember the name of holy Fuki. This makes life – life, since food is the plenitude of the Absolute and it is not filling up stomach but it is known as the sacrifice.* This way of thinking is not totally alien to Christian theology. I would recommend in this connection the text entitled ‘Trawienie Boga’ [Digesting God] by Piotr Sikora (*Tygodnik Powszechny*, 7 June 2015, p. 36).

¹⁶ *Rgveda* X.129: अर्वाग्देवा । अस्य विसर्जनेन.

I have already mentioned above the term “I” (*aham*). Now the time has come to give it more thought. As I confessed, M.M. Rameshwar Jha was my guide in this connection. One day, *Guru ji* asked me what term is used in my language for *aham*. I replied that in the Polish language this first person pronoun is “ja” pronounced as “ya.” Then he said: *I give you this as your mantra, upon which you should always meditate.* Several years passed as I attempted to fathom the depth of this *mantra*. It seems that the destination of this journey of knowledge is still far away. However, one idea appeared clear to me, namely that there is no other more significant and true principle of the living creatures, capable of using highly sophisticated speech and able to ignite fire as well as to feed it with fuel except this *aham*. Let us imagine a huge hall crowded with people and a question: how many persons are present in that hall? Two answers will be equally proper; countless persons as well as only one! For if we ask each one of these persons in what terms they think about themselves, they will surely answer: in terms of “I” (*aham*). For in fact there are only “I”-s assembled there. So when the *mantra aham brahma’smi* is invoked it obviously means that despite of being innumerable, the “I” is at the same time singular. In addition to this, we should understand that if we do not know “I,” we know nothing. When in deep slumber our “I” becomes unconscious nothing – the sun, the moon, the ocean, the mountains etc. do not have any meaning for us.

What has been mentioned earlier is the Vedic essence of *sanātana dharma* according to my understanding, although presented in an extremely abbreviated form. Doubtlessly, this current, though not always directly perceptible, flows also within the present-day Hindu denominations. Its best indication is the Birla Temple in Delhi. The high tops of the main temple are clearly visible even from afar. Inside, there are splendid wide halls. Devotees experience an overwhelming feeling of grandeur; I doubt if many of them except a few traditional Vedic scholars realize that the great sacrifice of *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* is the foundation of all this splendour, even if they go behind the main temple structure and see a small edifice, with *yajñaśālā* carved on its rim and may bow their heads there.

The same position applies to the Christian denominations of *sanātana dharma*. One may wonder how I can consider Christianity as one of the denominations of *sanātana dharma*. In order to clarify this point I again would like to invoke Professor Vasudev Sharan Agrawala. I have already pointed out that he agreed with the suggestion that the crucifixion of Christ should be treated as *yajña*. Since that moment I have treated this as an important point of reference in my research.

As far as I understand, the main reason for the crucifixion of Christ was the fact that he used to say openly: *I and the Father are one (Pitrāiko’ham)*. To my understanding, the meaning of this statement is twofold. First of all, the “I” in the statement should not be referred to Jesus Christ alone but we should construe it as referring to every “I.” After all, Christ calls all humans his brothers and sisters and the children of the same God, whom He considers His Father. Besides, all humans are said to strive for the unity in Him and with Him (*in ipso et cum ipso*). In addition, this statement means that the unique self-awareness of Jesus Christ was like that of a *jīvanmukta*; he realized

his complete identity with *Puruṣa-Prajāpati*, whom the Jews call Yahweh, and he publicly declared it. Even now such declarations are not acceptable in the Western world. However, today the risk is at the most to be confined in an asylum for lunatics (except the Saudi Arabian capital Riyadh). But two thousand years back it meant a death sentence by crucifixion. From the Indian perspective it would be difficult to understand, because if any person there claims that same identity while seriously and responsibly declaring *I am Brahman* (*aham brahmā'smi*) or *I am Shiva* (*śivo'ham*) then the people would touch his feet and truly accept him as *jīvanmukta*. This is the reason why the possibility of *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* repeating his creative sacrifice in time and space in India would be less probable. Because of that, the death of a sacrificial victim offered as oblation is necessary. Death is the twin sister of life; death is the price that has to be paid for the sake of life. Even *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* was not exempted from this predicament. Thus, if we would accept Isa Masih (Jesus) as the incarnation (Christians would say: the Son) of *Puruṣa-Prajāpati*, then he would have to become incarnated outside India, where there is a deep chasm between man and the Creator and where acknowledging the identity of man and the Creator is considered a blasphemous heresy. It is precisely in such circumstances that the act of *Puruṣa-Prajāpati*, offering himself again in time and space for the humanity to recognize that it is through his sacrifice that the world comes into being, would become fulfilled. Moreover, in order to become food *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* had to die, for it is through death of living beings (plants of course included in this term) that food is produced. So as *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* enters as their Self (*ātman*) bestowing consciousness upon them, similarly, he offers himself as food that gives vitality to *prāṇa* of the individual *jīva*-s. The very same thing Jesus said to his pupils (*śiṣya*-s) when he was offering bread to them at the Last Supper: "Take and eat it" he said "this is my body." Then he took a cup [...] and gave it to them. "Drink it all of you," he said; "this is my blood, which seals God's covenant, my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."¹⁷ This should be done in the memory of Him, and taking the inspiration from the formerly quoted Marathi prayer, I believe, at every meal, not only at the Holy Mass!

So far as I understand, only a great soul, who has completely identified himself with the *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* can make such a declaration. On another occasion he said: *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread he will live forever. The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I give so that the world may live.*¹⁸ It seems quite obvious that the nature of food is considered divine in both the Vedic Hinduism and in Christianity. This idea is quite consistent because without food the faculty of consciousness cannot be activated. The great Hindi poet Ugra¹⁹ in his play titled *Mahātmā Isā* spoke about the importance attached to food in Christianity in a rather slighting way. There is no doubt that he was unaware of the Marathi *mantra*

¹⁷ Matt. 26. 26-28. *Good News Bible*, Society of Saint Paul, Bangalore 1979, p. 39.

¹⁸ John 6. 48-51. *Good News Bible*, op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁹ P.B. Sharma [Ugra], "Ugra" *Sanchayan*, ed. R. Vyasa, New Delhi 2013.

quoted above. Had he been aware of that *mantra*, he might have never ridiculed the “Brahman’s plenitude.”

It is time now to draw toward the final conclusion. Though Christianity was nurtured in the womb of the ancient Jewish tradition, it appears to me, theologically speaking, much more close to *sanātana dharma* of the Veda. Actually, one is tempted to say that Christianity makes an impression of being a manifestation of the Vedic denomination of *sanātana dharma* in modern times, since both these denominations perceive the ultimate spiritual truth in the form of the death of God through self-sacrifice. Yes, in the Vedic tradition it is a creative sacrifice at the beginning of time but it is perennial in the form of existence – *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* continuously dies, continuously lives and continuously offers heaven, earth and all beings in the perennial sacrifice that makes reality.²⁰ Although in Christianity the sacrifice of God is first and foremost redemptive, yet His subsequent resurrection and perennial presence in the sacrifice of the Holy Mass is strongly reminiscent of the Vedic character of sacrifice. In addition, it should be pointed out that most probably it is a result of independently formulated vision of ultimate reality and it might have happened without any direct historical connection or influence. If it be so, it adds additional weight to this striking similarity of the two visions. Consequently, in order to understand fully all the implications of this fact, an in-depth comparative study of both these denominations of “the eternal nature of things” (*sanātana dharma*) is necessary.

As far as India is concerned, it can be beneficial in reinstating *Puruṣa-Prajāpati* in His role of the father-figure of the entire universe including the limitless pantheon of Hindu gods. Now, Christianity in turn may enrich its understanding of Christ’s sacrifice with its creative dimension and with the awareness of the sacrificial character of the entire existence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acharya Rameshwar Jha*, Wikipedia, at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acharya_Rameshwar_Jha>.
- Byrski M.K., ‘Man Made of Love,’ *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 75, No. 11 (2011).
- Good News Bible*, Society of Saint Paul, Bangalore 1979.
- Lévi S., *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brāhmanas*, Paris 1898 (*Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Sciences Religieuses*, 11).
- Prof. Vasudeva Saran Agrawala: *A Bibliographic Survey of his Published Works*, comp. J. Chandra, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1994, at <http://ignca.nic.in/PDF_data/vasudeva_saran_agrawala.pdf>.
- Sharma P.B. [Ugra], “Ugra” *Sanchayan*, ed. R. Vyasa, New Delhi 2013.

²⁰ *Rgveda* X.81.

Sikora P., 'Trawienie Boga,' *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 7 June 2015.
Svāmi-Kumāra, *Kārtikeyānuprekṣā*, Agās 1997.

M. Krzysztof BYRSKI (1937) – in 1955 he took up Indian studies. In 1960 he enrolled into Banaras Hindu University. In 1966 he was awarded Ph.D. and joined the Institute of Oriental Studies, Warsaw University. In 1978 he got a degree of Doctor Habilitatus (D. Litt.). In 1993 he was awarded titular professorship and appointed the Polish ambassador to India. In 1996 he was elected director of the Institute of Oriental Studies (Warsaw University). In 2002 he retired. Currently he is a Professor at Collegium Civitas (Warsaw).