

Q&A: Rajiv Malhotra's arguments against sameness

Question: The belief in sameness of religions is a wonderful concept to reduce religious conflicts. Why does sameness of religions not appeal to you?

Response: I seek genuine understanding and mutual respect between religions. That is the only solution for lasting peace. Unfortunately, sameness doctrine has a disingenuous undertone to it. What does "two things X and Y are the same" mean? Sameness is symmetrical. If X is the same as Y, then Y must also be the same as X. This gives us a reliable method to empirically test the sameness hypothesis in the real world. Unfortunately, such symmetry is lacking in the sameness arguments that we hear. While sameness arguments are frequently used to convince Hindus to believe that all religions are the same, the same requirement is not placed on other religions in the sameness equation.

Question: You cannot deny the usefulness of seeing sameness in religions. It brings peace to the society by taking us above petty differences by identifying that common goal. Do you not agree?

Response: Does it make sense to say that two things are the same even when they are not just because it is useful to say so? Is usefulness a criterion for truth? Should we lie in matters of faith just because it is useful? Besides, I am not sure whether sameness arguments are useful at all and if they are useful to whom such arguments are useful. Wishing away true differences in ideological positions with "useful" sameness arguments is not a recipe for true and lasting peace.

There is an interesting metaphor of an ostrich hiding its head in sand to escape its problems. Ostriches can do one of two things when threatened: They can stand their ground and fight or escape. An Ostrich, the metaphor reminds us, cannot escape the threats that it is facing by simply hiding its heads in sand. Best option for an Ostrich is to face up to reality than wishful thinking. Sameness arguments are fake façades to hide from the threat of essential differences. Sameness arguments do not address the differences but gloss over them as if they are insignificant. Conflicts caused by differences that "useful" sameness arguments are trying to overcome are still there unaddressed.

When is there true and lasting peace? Lasting peace is possible only by seeing essential differences for what they are and respecting positions of each other. True and lasting peace cannot be accomplished by wishing away essential differences. The whole point of my book *Being Different* is to cultivate this sense of comfort in recognizing and accepting essential differences for what they are instead of wishing them away in the name of "usefulness".

Question: It feels as if religious differences are in minutiae of details. Do you not agree that if we can find a level of abstraction high enough where sameness applies? Surely all religions are seeking a path to God.

Response: At a high enough abstraction, apples and oranges are just fruits. Meat and vegetables are just food. Good and bad are just qualities. Can we operate at those high levels of abstraction and say that those categories are essentially the same?

One could argue that two things are same at some high level of abstraction. However, one could also easily extend this logic to where one can speak of sameness between ANY two things by finding a sufficiently high level of abstraction.

Question: You are suggesting that sameness arguments should be done at an appropriate level of abstraction. What level of abstraction is proper for comparing two belief systems for sameness?

Response: Appropriate level of abstraction is one which does not abstract away essential differences.

Let us consider two animals: tiger and deer. Now, is it sensible for deer to sense sameness between tigers and deer because they are both animals of the jungle? Is that level of abstraction appropriate for the deer to consider?

Of course, the deer cannot save itself from becoming food for the tiger with such an idea of sameness.

Deer needs to compare and contrast at a level where their essential characteristics are visible. Tiger is the predator and deer is the prey. There is an inherent asymmetry in the predator-prey relationship. Roles cannot be reversed. Deer cannot abstract away those essential facts. What can deer abstract away from the tiger? Whether the tiger is striped, albino, or has only three legs are not essential properties and can be abstracted away.

Saying that all religions are seeking a path to God is similar to saying that tiger and deer are animals. We need to get down to the level of abstraction, of detail, when the essential aspects of religions are described. That is the level at which we should compare religions for sameness ... or for that matter, differences.

The whole point of my book *Being Different* is to cultivate a sense of comfort in recognizing and accepting essential differences for what they are. With a sense of comfort and proper understanding of differences, religions actually have a chance to coexist with lasting peace.

Question: Is there not a Hindu belief that there are multiple paths to reach an understanding of Ultimate Reality? Is not such inherent plurality welcoming sameness?

Response: In Dharmic context, this means that there are multiple sampradayas through which one can experience the Ultimate Reality.

Think of the Ultimate Reality as a hill resort. The Hindu belief says that multiple paths could exist to reach the hill resort. However, it does not say that all roads anywhere in the world will lead to the hill resort. It is the latter misinterpretation that is used to justify sameness doctrine.

Question: Are not sameness arguments equally targeting all religions? Why do see it as an issue important to Dharmic traditions and not to others?

Response: Sameness arguments are a concern to all religions. However, history-centric dogma plays the role of a protective layer for Abrahamic faiths.

Unfortunately, Hinduism has no such dogma and the *Myth of Hindu Sameness* is leading to the dissolution of Hinduism. Hindus are encouraged towards sameness with the strategic goal to (i) confuse them about identity, (ii) dilute their interest in seriously studying their own traditions, and (ii) bring Christian ideas into their lives in a Hindu-friendly manner, and gradually move them deeper into Christian fundamentalism.

Let us reconsider the symmetry required for sameness arguments. If X is the same as Y, then Y must also be the same as X. This gives us a reliable method to empirically test the sameness hypothesis in the real world.

How many Christian denominations would be willing to hold Vishnu worship ceremonies in their church? Besides a few relatively very small denominations such as the Unitarians (who in combination have less than 10% share of the US Christian population), almost all mainstream denominations reject such proposals outright. Try launching a sameness program with leaders of Mormons, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Pentecostals, etc. To be genuinely the same, Hinduism would have to be given equal and explicit treatment inside their congregation, and not in special meetings for PR purposes.

Would the US government print currency in which 'In God we trust' is replaced by 'In Shiva we trust' or 'In Allah we trust'?

Only after one tests the hypothesis in the real world (which is different than the academic cocoons and staged interfaith dialogues) could one begin to understand the sameness hoax that Hindus have been sold.

Question: Can you prove that all religions do not lead to the same goal?

Response: The burden of proof is on the one claiming sameness. You should ask them to prove their sameness claim instead of rhetoric.

However, to respond to your question, in my book *Being Different*, I do offer essential irreconcilable differences between Dharmic traditions and Abrahamic faiths. Reading the book should clarify why sameness is a hoax.

Finally, just walk to one of the Christian Churches of large denominations in your area and ask them what they think of sameness doctrine. Specifically, ask them if there can be salvation without Jesus? What do you think that they will say? What sameness can you infer from it?

Question: OK. Can you give me one essential difference to convince me that Christianity and Hinduism do not lead to the same goal?

Response: Sure. If you cannot disagree with what I offer, you have to agree to denounce the sameness doctrine.

I will compare (a) the Christian narrative of Original Sin and the sacrifice of the perfect person of Jesus Christ to bring salvation to all humanity from Original Sin, with (b) the Hindu doctrine of Karma and show that they are essentially incompatible.

The Biblical historical narrative is the *essence* of mainstream Christian denominations. When examined through the Indic lens, the core historical narrative of the Bible is incompatible with *karma* theory:

- Karma is not transmitted via biological reproduction: Adam and Eve committed Original Sin when they violated God's commands. As a result of their act, God cursed the entirety of mankind forever, i.e., Adam and Eve's children, grandchildren, and so forth, ad infinitum, were forever condemned by God. This is known to Christians as Eternal Damnation. However, the *karma* of Adam and Eve cannot be transmitted to their *biological* offspring, and Adam and Eve must pay for their karma in their own rebirths. A given person carries his/her own personal *karma* into his/her own next life, and one's *karma* does not get transmitted to one's biological children. I do not suffer from the *karma* of my parents nor do my children suffer from my *karma*.
- Karma is always finite and its *phala* (consequence or fruit) cannot be infinite: Regardless of how bad Adam and Eve's misdeed was it could not cause eternal *phala*, which is what

Eternal Damnation is. Every *karma* is finite and its *phala* is finite, even if it lasts a million years.

- My Karma phala has to be borne by me: Karma theory is about accountability. One has to face the consequences of one's own karma. One person cannot take the consequences of another's karma. I brought my past life's *karma phala* into this world and will take this life's *karma phala* into my next birth. There is no escape. Christianity, on the other hand, says that it is not possible to overcome original sin through one's own actions. Jesus alone could bring salvation to humanity. How exactly did Jesus bring salvation to humanity? By the sacrifice of his perfect self to God by dying through crucifixion. Vicarious redemption (redeeming one's sins by another) is not allowed in Karma theory. Sacrificing Jesus cannot bring salvation to others.
- Phala cannot precede the karma: Karma theory states that first the *karma* has to occur and only then can its consequences occur. Effect (*phala*) never precedes cause (karma). But Jesus is said to have suffered (the *phala*) 2,000 years in advance of our birth today, and his suffering was to redeem our *karma* of today. This implies that Jesus suffered in advance of our *karma*, but *phala* in advance of the karma is impossible. The claim seems to be that Jesus established a sort of '*phala* bank' and deposited infinite amount of *phala* in advance, and all those who accept his offer may neutralize all their *karmas* by drawing against this '*phala* bank' account. This is simply impossible in *karma* theory.

Question: What is the key thesis used to state that Hinduism subscribes to sameness doctrine?

Response: A notion has become widespread that non-duality is escapism from the mundane world. This has become the handle with which Vedanta is dismissed. It is accused of not encouraging advancements in human living conditions because it sees the human condition as a false construction with no reason to improve it. This causes complicity with poverty, social abuse and such a philosophy is therefore socially irresponsible. Such a people are naturally dependent upon the "progressive" West for help.

Many colonial era writers developed this thesis using Hindu source materials as interpreted by the colonialists, and many Hindus ended up supplying them the fodder. Sometimes I call this notion as pop Vedanta; it is also called Neo-Vedanta. This thesis has become robust and well established in many segments of the academy, public policy, media and popular culture, both Western and Indian. I shall refer to this misinterpretation of dharma as the *world-negating thesis*.

Question: Advaita interpreted in this world-negating fashion looks ridiculous, even dangerous. Do people offer such interpretations of advaita?

Response: Since the 1990s, I have been compiling such moronic statements and critiques into a book that I hope to publish one day. It is to be titled, *Moron Smriti*. It discusses what morons frequently say and my responses, as well the history of how this syndrome emerged some centuries back and ended up in the mainstream of Indian society.

According to the logic of morons, medicine could be substituted with poison because both are Brahman only; prasad can be replaced with excreta because they are only mithya, you need not obey any laws because these are man-made in the world of illusions, and so forth. In other words, the misunderstanding I refer to is very dangerous because when taken to its logical conclusion it results in a large population of morons who are simply dysfunctional. Morons are the product of slavery under Islamic rule and subsequent glorification of the moron mindset under colonialism. It is easy to rule over morons by convincing them that their own glorious heritage encourages them to adopt the world negating thesis, and to therefore let others take control over this-worldly affairs.

Question: Why do you say that world-negating thesis is a misinterpretation?

Response: As BEING DIFFERENT elaborates, Sri Ramanuja and subsequently Sri Jiva Goswami were very clear and explicit that non-dualism does not mean that multiplicity is false. It means that multiplicity is dependent upon Oneness, and in the case of Sri Jiva all multiplicity is a form of the One, just as a smile is a form of the face and cannot exist independent of it. If the face is real then its smile and all other forms are real as well, even though they exist only in dependence on the face. ***The blueness of the blue lotus cannot exist separately from the lotus*** – another common example given in the tradition. This is the nature of the relationship between One and Many. Another metaphor to understand the multiplicity is as lila, divine play. ***Multiplicity is not false, be it seen as form of Brahman (Saguna Brahman) or as lila.***

I have asked Swami Dayananda Saraswati, arguably the most prominent authority on Vedanta philosophy in the public square today: If the world is unreal then what is the reason for performing our dharma and karma, for concern over what evangelists do, for wanting to cure diseases and helping those in need, for raising our kids well, etc.? I have had this discussion many times. He gives very clear explanations to the effect that: we must deal with the differences in the world we live in as part of dharma, karma, etc.

The Gita's message is also this. Arjuna gave the escapist argument at first, to justify his inaction, and it takes Sri Krishna 18 chapters to explain why action in the world is necessary – without attachment to the results and without even the sense of being the doer.

The problem is that the Sanskrit word “mithya” has been mistranslated as false, when it is closer to “relative” or “contingent” existence. Even though your tasks today in the office are not permanent, you must still perform them as best as you can today. They are transitory and relative, but not false. Similarly, maya has been translated incorrectly that the world is illusory when the correct meaning is that *our mental construction of the world is illusory until such time as we attain enlightenment.*

Question: Do people ever criticize your work emphasizing differences when Dharmic cosmological viewpoint is calling one to realize Oneness? Are Oneness and Difference mutually contradictory?

Response: Previously mentioned misinterpretation of the nature of multiplicity has led many dharma scholars to criticize my notion of difference. They think that emphasizing difference is a bad idea because it takes us away from unity.

Shouldn't we be discussing only Oneness, they ask? My response is that asserting differences is not a negation of Oneness. *It is the right insight into the richness of Oneness that Oneness includes all differences as aspects within itself.* Therefore, the dharma/Christian difference is as real for our lives as the dharma/adharma or deva/asura or the tamas/sattva differences.

One's experience of difference depends upon where one stands in terms of state of consciousness. If you are the rishi rooted in unity consciousness as your state (not mere shlokas one can parrot), then by all means you should act in the world in spontaneity – the One leads your actions amidst all the diversity. But if you are not there yet, you must make a conscious effort to understand right from wrong, what is what in the world – while at the same time reminding yourself that this relative level of multiplicity is a manifestation of the unity.

A related argument often given is the slogan “vasudhaiva kutumbakam” which means “the world is one family”. This is used to claim that therefore there are no differences. But members of a family differ. The kauravas and pandavs in Mahabharata are one family and yet at war. Devas and asuras are one family and yet they were in mutual tension. Not only humans but all life including animals, plants, bacteria, etc. comprises the family; yet we apply viveka (discrimination) to differentiate and do not treat them interchangeably.