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Indian Versus European Religious Traditions and Transformational Socio-Economic Leadership

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My contribution will explore the relevance of Indian philosophical and religious traditions for modern socio-economic leadership wisdom from a European perspective. Traditions like Sikhism, Sufi Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism (Vedic traditions and Vedanta) contain concepts and rituals which can be relevant not only for medicine or psychology, but also for contemporary business and leadership wisdom. All these traditions refer to a basic oneness of existence whereby the inner and outer worlds merge into one reality. The success of new religious movements (NRMs) and the New Age Movement (NAM), both frequently inspired by Indian traditions, in Europe and elsewhere since the 1960s reflects the need for the 'unchurched but spiritual'. However, the 'integration of the whole person' has been interpreted either as 'intensified concentration' and eventually as 'greater job efficiency', or as a way for extreme alienation from society. My methodology is to go to the origins of concepts, principles, and rituals, and thereby uncovering their spiritual meanings and their relevance for mainstream socio-economic ethics, and observe if there is any difference with mainstream West-European Christian inspired humanism.

Parallels between Socio-Economic Interpretations of Religious-Philosophical Traditions

It has been demonstrated that the same paradigms, e.g. the Hindu-Buddhist heritage framework, can lead to different, sometimes conflicting, socio-economic interpretations. Also, these interpretations correspond to other interpretations in other civilisations. It seems that the same socio-economic interpretations occur regardless the original heritage framework. The different socio-economic interpretations of Vedanta and their comparisons to Occidental schools of socio-economic thinking form a convenient case-study to illustrate this. Utilitarian and socialist Vedantic thinking clearly corresponds to traditional socialist and even early-Christian thinking. Likewise nationalistic Vedantic thinking was close to German and Italian nationalist thinking. Utopian Vedantic and Gandhian thinking was similar to 18th century physiocrats and the twentieth century 'Green movement'. Finally the purely holistic, global or transcending interpretation of Vedantic thinking are almost identical to the Gnostic, Christian tradition and medieval masterpieces of contemplative Christianity. Likewise, there are different possible socio-economic interpretations of ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophies.

The similarities between European and Indian economic thinking certainly illustrate that economics as we know it today is the result of a long multicultural process. Madan already wrote in 1981:

'…it is often believed that the evolution of … economic doctrine is exclusively of European origin. It is perhaps for this reason that a majority of the books on economic thought generally deal with western economic thought. But it is hoped that the study of ancient economic theories of India will help in dispelling such baneful illusions.'

Relevance of Indian Traditions for Transformational Leadership in Europe

If the same socio-economic interpretations occur from different tradition frameworks, than what can be the relevance of e.g. the Hindu-Buddhist tradition for economics and management on an international and European level? This may have to do with yet another similar characteristic of all cultures: if the traditional paradigms are faced with a crisis then foreign alternatives are identified for resourcing. This may not lead to the destruction of the original paradigms (like in the case of Latin America where due to military and physical factors the original native American culture was largely destroyed) but rather to a rediscovery of the original paradigms.

Europe has perceived Indian traditions from an economic point of view in past and present. From the seventeenth century onwards the 'East' had become a 'utopia' – a place to find wisdom and critique for Europe's growing mercantilist and capitalist system. Though nineteenth century utilitarianism initially invited paternalistic behavior, it nonetheless paved the way for a genuine intellectual interaction between Europe and Asia. Amartya Sen may be right that India was as materialistic as the 'West' but was forced into spiritual thinking because this field was 'still open to non-Westerners'. But in doing so India (and Asia) provided a strong critique against mainstream European economic thinking. It offered Europe again an alternative to the excesses of imperialism and capitalism. During and after the World Wars, the spread of totalitarian regimes, and the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, some intellectuals reacted against economic chaos, violence and fascism by referring to 'Asian (especially Indian) wisdom'. Later on, in the 1960s, there was yet another revival of Asia in Europe: many religious movements came over, and while yoga seemed to offer a solution to many physical problems, Buddhism and Vedanta fascinated environmentalist and utopian economists. Of late post-modernism provided the framework for yet another renaissance of Asian thinking in Europe. This time 'Asian wisdom' was introduced to business ethics. The foundations of the new role Asian thinking is playing within the framework of post-modernism certainly go back a long time. The psychology of the European economic and intellectual mind, with the exception of the 'Said-types' during the nineteenth century, resulted into 'an East' which has criticized European economic models for centuries.

Another question is, however, whether Indian traditions and their ethics for management are applicable to Western society. First, as already stated, the concepts of 'East' and 'West' are essentially false. Second, Swami Vivekananda knew that practical Vedanta would not only explain to foreigners the essence of Indian spiritual culture but also solve the problems of future Western society. From a certain perspective he described Americans as 'living Vedantins': 'When you have an idea you put it in practice and not just think of it.' However, in Europe of the 1890s Vivekananda predicted war and said that the continent would explode soon if it was not aware of its spiritual base. The progress in the West was very quickly identified as a mere 'successful accomplishment of the desired object by making the end justify the means.' It was the rediscovery of its original spiritual base that would save Europe and practical Vedanta would be a means to reach that goal. Here again it is confirmed that the introduction of paradigms from outside can fulfill psychologically the role of engine for rediscovery of the original and correct interpretations of paradigms originating from the local belief systems.

According to conservative environments of Indian traditions the present lack of ethical and spiritual considerations in Western management is caused by the wrong original paradigms. In that sense the Judeo-Christian and materialistic-biological visions of man are equated to each other. Modern management culture is described using Peter Drucker's terms as 'moral horrors' and 'spiritual agonies.' Likewise, Christian environments, defending their presence in basically non-Christian countries like India, use the same language to condemn non-Christian cultures. Christian missionaries refer to discriminating interpretations like the caste system and the concept of impurity, to describe Hinduism. It is clear that both approaches are identical and merely express a narrow-minded attitude which only focuses on certain socio-economic interpretations. What matters is that the other tradition is used as an eye-opener for the discovery of the original interpretations of the local tradition. Even Christian missionary presence may have played that role. While emphasizing the injustices of Hindu society Christians may have contributed to a reinterpretation of Hindu paradigms from the 1890s onwards based on the success of the Ramakrishna and other missions and views. In a similar way a Christian-oriented transformational leadership in Europe may occur based on interaction with Indian traditions.

Simultaneously with the rediscovery of authentic and genuine socio-economic ethics based on Religious sources, comes the realization of similarities. This again results in a feeling of oneness and trust, again resulting in an increasing number of international 'fair' interactions, which a synonymous for a genuine, fair and sustainable globalization of business.

Comparative Approach of Characteristics of Indian Traditions
The Key-Concept: Remembrance

The conventional way is to refer to IEM (Indian Ethos in Management) guided by three basic principles: unleashing infinite potential, a holistic approach and subjectivity. I suggest a more ethically oriented approach focusing 'remembrance'. Remembrance is the key-term to understand the relevance of Indian socio-economic traditions. Despite a seeming ignorance of a linear kind of historical awareness Indian traditions refer very strongly to an original state of mind. This historically-oriented awareness is specifically lacking in mainstream management studies. Historians usually do not get involved in management studies and vice-versa. Remembrance basically involves the concept of "self-help through remembering God" as the original state corresponds to complete unity and balance. Constant remembrance and respect for origin and historical perspective helps to put things into perspective and stimulates long-term planning. Religion is basically about 'remembering'. The Indian traditions, because of their very intense experience of rituals and religious concepts, can provide guidelines and act as an inspiration for remembrance-oriented socio-economic interpretations of religious paradigms, also for management and leadership decision-making.

Of all Indian traditions the concept of remembrance may be most explicitly referred to in Sufism. Basically, remembrance of God is the essence of Islam. The whole reason the Islamic religion exists is to bring human beings back to a remembrance of God. God sends prophets and revelations to bring human beings back to a remembrance of Him. From this point of view forgetfulness is the bedrock of sin and the matrix of darkness. It is forgetfulness that creates man's separation from God when, in reality - if we were but aware of it - God is ever-present, immanent and in-dwelling. We dwell in the past and worry about the future while God is here

now, immediate, real, not remote and abstract as we imagine. Here is an interesting contradiction: in order to remember we have to live in the now and the immediate. In the Koran God promises that if we remember Him he will remember us on the Day of Judgement: 'Therefore remember Me, I will remember you.'

The Koranic word for remembrance is 'Zikr' (or 'Dhikr'). Zikr, Remembrance of God, may be considered the Koran's central theme. Indeed, the Koran refers to itself as Zikr, a reminder from God. In the Koran Muslims are enjoined to remember God by invoking His Name - Allah. The essential, simplest prayer of Islam is the utterance of God's Name - Allah. Some Sufi orders engage in ritualized Zikr ceremonies, or 'sema'. Sema includes various forms of worship like recitation, singing (like the Qawwali music of the Indian sub-continent), instrumental music, dance (like the Sufi whirling of the Mevlevi order), incense, meditation, ecstasy, and trance.

Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita (VIII-14) emphasizes to 'remember' as a yogi. Remembrance of the Lord, in an unbroken memory of the name and form of the Lord, is known as 'Smarana'. Remembrance in Hinduism also includes listening to the stories pertaining to the Lord, talking of Him, teaching others about Him and meditating on His attributes constantly.
The sound of 'Om' or 'Aum' is a way to remember. The Aum-symbol is a sacred syllable representing Brahman, the impersonal Absolute of Hinduism, omnipotent, omnipresent, and the source of all manifest existence. Brahman, in itself, is incomprehensible; so a symbol becomes mandatory to help realize the Unknowable. Om is not a word but rather an intonation, which, like music, transcends the barriers of age, race, culture and even species. It is made up of three Sanskrit letters, aa, au and ma which, when combined together, make the sound Aum or Om. It is believed to be the basic sound of the world and to contain all other sounds. It is a mantra or prayer in itself. If repeated with the correct intonation, it can resonate throughout the body so that the sound penetrates to the centre of one's being, the atman or soul. Some scholars believe that the Christian 'amen' shares roots with the Sanskrit word, aum. There is, however, no academic support for this view. The Hebrew word Amen (or Āmīn in Arabic) means 'So be it' or 'truly' and is a declaration of affirmation found in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Reference to these Indian methods to remember may help Catholics to rediscover Gregorian chant which is the central tradition of Western plainchant, a form of monophonic liturgical music within Western Christianity that accompanied the celebration of Mass and other ritual services. The Orthodox liturgical use of chants for meditation has similar objectives. Also the Holy Communion should be repeated by Catholics and Orthodox in order to 'remember'. Essentially all rituals are for the sake of remembrance.

In management 'remembrance' invites long-term approaches and strategies. Remembering both negative and positive experiences is the precondition for wise leadership. Experiences, phases or incarnations lead both humans and corporate entities to an improved performance. It is the experience, whether good or bad, that is necessary for 'enlightenment'. If the experience is forgotten then it has to repeat itself. Economic crises keep occurring because of 'forgetfulness'.

The reactions to the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 and to the 2008 financial crisis illustrate the lack of long-term visions in general. Christopher Andrew (2002), professor of Contemporary History at Cambridge, identifies a 'Historical Attention Span Deficit Disorder' as one of the main shortcomings at the beginning of the 21st century. A strange world where everything is considered from a short term perspective leads to "instant opinion", without any reasonable argumentation or balanced judgment. There is a price to be paid for this tendency to consider everything from a short term perspective. To argue that a long-term vision would allow perfect predictions about the future would be exaggerated. But it would certainly help to both understand the present and to live in it. It would be a first step to objectively assess future possibilities and to react in a responsible way to events. According to Winston Churchill "The further backwards you look, the further forward you can see."

Some Selected Related Concepts

Linked to this remembrance I have selected a few other concepts from Indian traditions, which also refer to Catholic traditions, and are relevant for management.

The Hindu and Buddhist concepts of reincarnation also refer to the need of remembrance and a long term perspective. It is the loss of memory that keeps mankind trapped in reincarnations as the experiences of the previous reincarnation are never remembered. The concept of reincarnation should certainly be taken as symbolic. Unfortunately the caste system and impurity have become the result of misinterpretations of original paradigms. The basis of the age-old veneration of Brahmins is the belief that they are inherently of greater ritual purity than members of other castes and that they alone are capable of performing certain vital religious tasks. This concept of reincarnation is based on karma, the law of "cause and consequence". Basically everything in economics is a result from karma. The foundation of the science of economics itself is the study of the relations between a cause and a consequence. And ultimately in all traditions mankind itself is responsible for its destiny. Karma will liberate atman, the human soul, by moksha, liberation. As long as an individual atman remains separate from a universal soul (brahman), suffering by reincarnations and maya (illusion) continues. Consequently, as long as economic relationships are not "balanced", the economic problem, or "suffering", will not be resolved. According to J.K. Mehta (1901-1980), a philosopher, economist and follower of Mahatma Gandhi., human behavior is the subject matter of the science of economics. Economic problems derive from a state of a disequilibrium of the human mind. Disequilibrium is due to more pain than pleasure. Want and pain are co-existing phenomena. The real relief from pain consists not only in removing present wants but also in not creating new wants in the future. 'Wantlessness' does not consist either in not eating and drinking, or in not earning income. All that is required is to do all these things with a selfless motive. In this way we would contribute not only to our own happiness, but also to social welfare. Also the Bible mentions "As you sow, so shall you reap" (Galatians 6:7), reflecting that the world is a mirror of the self. The same is meant by the experiences of this world determining the entrance to Heaven.

Second there is the concept of Karma Yoga. Traditionally this concept as attendance to the duty (dharma) while remaining detached from the reward, is put forward as Hinduism's main contributor to political and management leadership today. The concept of 'Dharma' emphasizes the 'path', e.g. the way of doing business , rather than the 'outcome', e.g. the profits.

There may also be a common reference point in the concept of the duality of action (Karma) and structure (Dharma). It is argued that this duality is a particularly fertile 'bridgehead' for cultural translation and comparison between Hinduism and capitalism. Linked to the concept of Karma Yoga is the perspective to 'success' as nonmaterial achievement of conquering the ego. If success is obtained while remaining detached from the reward then the person is also increasingly detached from its own ego. Likewise in Thomas Aquinas' 'Summa Theologica' and the writings of St. Paul and St. Augustine action is considered positive if detached from a return. In Christ's life there are plenty of examples. While his healing sessions did not expect any return (lepers ran away after being cured in the New Testament), he directly acted against those who expected returns (Jesus chased the money-lenders away from the temple in the New Testament). Interestingly the need for selfless action would be re-emphasized with the Protestant Reformation. But Christian nations were forgetful and engaged in warfare and wild capitalism. Remembering the original economic messages from Christianity may be a useful tool for enlightened leadership and management.

Also indirectly related to the idea of Karma yoga is the concept or tradition of "Darshan" or seeing the divine image. Basically the divine is found in everything, as everything is a manifestation of the divine. As such the concept of 'Darshan' has vast implications for ecological awareness which manifested itself in various ways within Hinduism. 'Seeing everything as divine' invites a responsible behavior with the environment. Skiba (2008) refers to the Rajasthani community of Baishnoyis, protecting its wildlife. In Catholicism 12th century St. Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of ecology and carried the concept so far that he was communicating to the birds in the forest where he choose to live. To St. Francis nature itself expressed divinity.

There is also the concept of 'Prasad', as a blessed offering to the God, reflecting the right product, and the just salary and price. This corresponds perfectly to the sacrament of Holy Communion and Thomas Aquinas' socio-economic interpretations in his 'Summa Theologica'. If Prasad or the bread, as the 'body of Christ', is not the result of just economic relationships then the anti-God or the anti-Christ is actually worshipped.

The traditions of gurus and pilgrimages are also useful phenomena. The Maha Kumbha Mela for rishis or gurus at Haridwar attracts every 12 years up to 30 million people. This and similar gatherings allowing both gurus and followers to cleanse themselves, reflecting the need of mutually beneficial interactions, e.g. fair play relations. Thus, they are essentially an intuitive practice of interdependence (as opposed to independence) as a main socio-economic drive for individuals as well as society in general. As companies can only survive in a similar situation (monopolies or firms of oligopoly destroy fair and free markets, thereby destroying companies) there is a strong incentive from this religious tradition. Similarly the Catholic tradition of pilgrimages is very strong (Czestochowa, Fatima, Lourdes, etc.) and basically express the same idea. The comparison may be useful to reinforce and reinterpret this unique Catholic experience. Already post-modernist interpretations, inspired by Eastern philosophies, have reintroduced the medieval pilgrimage tradition to Santiago de Compostela as a cleansing and enlightening experience. The Catholic and Orthodox monastic traditions and the idea of 'Jesus-apostles'-relationships similarly express the same intuitive practice of interdependent 'guru-guru' and 'guru-disciple' relationships.

Gandhiji introduced the Buddhist-Jain concept of Ahimsa to the world, reflecting non-violent interactions, connected to the law of 'Karma' (of cause and effect). Violent interactions basically invite more violent interactions. Hostile take-overs invite even more corporate hostility. The Bible, the writings of St. Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas' 'Summa Theologica' point out the need for peaceful approaches to socio-economic and political problems. Christ gave the ultimate sacrifice in that respect: he preferred to die on the cross instead of initiating a revolt against the Romans.

Indian traditions and Catholicism also share the need for Charity. The tradition of charity as a concept was and is practiced in India in order to generate merit for future rebirth. Catholicism propagates a similar 'paternalist' behavior towards the poor in order to secure a place in heaven. In both cases feeding and distributing alms to the poor is a common practice at festivals and gatherings (langar, etc.). Actually in both cases these attitudes have often been based on wrong interpretations. Making people more independent implies increasing their possibilities and choices in a sustainable way. Facilitating micro-credit may make people independent while charity in the form of gifts may make them dependent. Saint Nicholas, the historical 4th century figure still being remembered and revered among Catholic and Orthodox Christians, reflects this idea by his reputation for secret gift-giving, such as putting coins in the shoes of those who left them out for him, and thus becoming the model for Santa Claus, whose English name comes from the Dutch 'Sinterklaas'. The main point is that his charity was anonymous and therefore could not have aimed at increasing people's dependence on him. In Hinduism the concepts of Daan (alms-giving) and Sewa (service to others) is built into the Hindu way of life through Karma injunctions and an almost every day ritual of some sort. The Bhagavad-gita insists on simplicity, honesty and dedication. Accordingly, everyone should be judicious in giving alms where they are correctly utilized and serve the poor directly in a proactive manner.

Hinduism knows the tradition of worshipping “wealth” or prosperity in the form of Hindu Goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, especially during Dipawali festival as well as ritualistic gratitude toward monetary rewards. Lakshmi refers to prosperity, light, wisdom, fortune, fertility, generosity and courage. She is believed to protect her devotees from all kinds of misery and money-related sorrows. While Vishnu is often conceived of as a patriarch, Lakshmi represents a more soothing, warm and approachable mother figure who willingly intervenes in the lives of devotees on his behalf. As such wisdom refers to a Motherly feeling of responsibility and love. Lakhsmi is also the personification of the 'spiritual energy' within humans and the universe called Kundalini. Finally she is the embodiment of God's superior spiritual feminine energy or the Param Prakriti, which purifies, empowers and uplifts the individual. Hence, she is called the Goddess of Fortune. Due to her compassion she is believed to be the Mother of the Universe. This interpretation of wisdom suggests that the corporate world is merely a mediator between demand and supply, between people and production. The biblical Mary (Our Lady, Mother of Jesus) who has, according to Catholic theology, also a divine status, has a similar intermediary role. This also corresponds with the biblical idea that wealth in itself is not a bad thing. It is a person's attitude toward wealth that makes it 'good' or 'bad'. Again St. Francis of Assisi is relevant here because he was the son of a rich textile merchant. But, as Catholic patron saint of merchants (apart from animals and ecology), he chose to find true 'wealth' living in nature as a poor man.

A reference should also be made to the tradition of keeping physical wealth without practical utility. In both Indian and Catholic traditions this was identified with investing in gold as a security. The clarity and purity of the material were considered to be divine qualities. Investing in gold allows to retreat from investing in production. It enables an 'economics of fasting'. This concept was introduced by J.K. Mehta (1901-1980), a philosopher, economist and follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Body fasting actually only refers to the removal of poisonous matters from the body. It has little to do with not drinking and eating which is impossible to most people. Its aim is to improve the quality of action and ultimately the future condition of living. Likewise a firm should undertake two kinds of fast. First, a bodily fast, meaning that nothing should be added to its infrastructure, machinery, stock, etc. Second, a mental fast, meaning that the manager should think piously. He should not think of capturing markets of other producers or improving technological efficiency which will increase unemployment. In other words, he should be non-violent. Owing to violence and selfishness many businesses are diseased. They should be persuaded to undertake a fast. Ultimately, Mehta warned that there may be an inverse relationship between economic growth and moral progress. In Catholicism many alchemists were saint or priests, even though artificial gold is referred to in the Bible and in Thomas Aquinas' 'Summa Theologica' as fraud.

Finally, while searching for leadership and management wisdom, also the essence of wisdom needs to be explored. In Hinduism wisdom is represented by the goddess Saraswathi, the female consort of Brahma, representing the creator. Interestingly Brahma himself is hardly worshipped. Saraswathi is much more worshipped, as she translates spiritual wisdom in worldly arts, literature, and the academic field. These become expressions of and tools for detachment from the world and consequently enlightenment. Basically this goes against the conventional 'utilitarian' approach of economics. According to the doctrine of the Catholic Church wisdom originates from the Holy Ghost, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. Though really distinct, as a Person, from the Father and the Son, He is consubstantial with Them. Being God like Them, He possesses with Them one and the same Divine Essence or Nature. He brings the gift of wisdom, by detaching humans from the world and making them relish and love only the things of heaven. The gift of knowledge points out the path to follow and the dangers to avoid in order to reach heaven. Consequently, the Holy Ghost, Saraswati and also Dharma (truth, path) are similar concepts referring to a deeper wisdom.

Close to wisdom is 'knowledge'. Jnana yoga, one of the main philosophical Hindu schools, however, offers a unique feature. According to Klostermaier (2009, p. 200-201) the concept of 'jnana' (knowledge) considers the “ethic” of a person as the indispensable condition for 'knowledge': 'The claim to be on the way of truth- 'brahmajijnasa'- can only be made after certain qualities of character have been established- freedom from passion, from egotism, from ambition- otherwise it is sheer hypocrisy'. In most other traditions ethics are derived from knowledge. In jnana yoga knowledge is the result of ethics. Jnana also exposes the fallacy of a 'value-free' science: knowledge is a value by and in itself, and the search for truth is a value orientation. So management and leadership should not get trapped in all different kinds of “isms”, it should proceed in a basic ethical way to gain insight into true wisdom. Again this concept is to be found in Christianity. The “Ten Commandments” and the Catholic ideal of unconditional forgiveness (confession) can be considered as a precondition for “wisdom”.

Conclusion: Making Philantrocapitalism Realistic?

Despite the economic crisis of 2008, the world philanthropy was not much effected. 'Philanthrocapitalism' was a new word coined by Matthew Bishop, an American Business editor who applies business principles to international development. Bishop identifies a new generation of billionaires and their foundations and how their huge donations change the world. But can the rich save the world? Edwards (2008) writes: *'The application of business principles to the world of civil society and social change has fashion, wealth, power and celebrity behind it. But where is the evidence that 'philanthrocapitalism' works, and are there better ways to achieve urgently needed global social progress? It's time to end the hype and start the debate'.*

Are business approaches at odds with those needed for social change: competition versus cooperation, individual versus collective action, an emphasis on measurable results in a short time versus patient, long-term support for the messy and unpredictable processes of social change? Are NGOs increasingly becoming agents of philanthrocapitalists and contributing to the integration of the poor into global capitalism? Is there any alternative to global capitalism? Is ethical capitalism feasible? Is it possible to eradicate poverty without capitalism?

A return to the genuine socio-economic basics of religious traditions with an open mind may be a starting point for genuinely integrating free market principles into a sustainable and integrated answer to development problems. If may be a collective loss of memory that has caused mankind to continue from one socio-economic crisis to another and recurring levels of poverty and scarcity. Leadership and management should be aware of the original paradigms, also contained in their own traditions, and be open for other traditions in order to identify them. The Indian traditions offer a unique way since their terminology is very direct and there has been a unique psychological human feature to refer to India as a way of offering socio-economic alternatives and initiating transformational leadership.