

*Refuge in the Real*

January 21, 2018

Readings: “A Response to *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*” by Shailly Gupta Barnes; Psalm 62:5-

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Someone asked me a great question recently: if you had to boil down the essence of what the ASBC experience is in one sentence, what would that be? Without thinking much, I answered, “We’re outward-focused rather than upward-focused.” What I meant was this: that theology in a place like this one is deeply concerned with what God has to say about life on earth, rather than primarily concerned about what God promises us after death. This outward-focused theology often distinguishes more liberal theologies from their conservative counterparts by approaching liberation in the immediate context, responding to oppressive systems that create human suffering in the here and now. The upward-focused ethos emphasizes freedom as well; it just sees liberation as anticipation of a sweet bye-and-bye that we can only experience after death. Usually, these two approaches express themselves in how we as people of faith respond to human suffering – whether we acknowledge or ignore systems that create suffering. While we vary in our experiences of the divine in this place, and hold both upward and outward-focused belief systems, we are bonded together by a commitment to, as our sister Claudette recently articulated, “remembering that we are put on this earth to leave it a better place than we found it.” Her words so beautifully describe what I see as the essence of a solid outward-focused theology, where our individual spiritual journeys, including our personal relationships to the divine, are buoyed by and grow through our relationship to the world around us. Some of us may take this for granted, especially if we were raised in communities where this was emphasized, yet I am constantly reminded that this is not an obvious focus for many religious traditions, even ones that we may romanticize in their more unfamiliar wisdoms. One such tradition has long focused its efforts on individual transformation, and that tradition is Hinduism. Like any philosophy which abstracts a value system from the lived reality of our embodied experiences, Hindu theology has largely fallen into the category of the upward, not outward, focused ethos. One of the oldest world religions that’s still popular today, Hinduism is wildly complex and varies from culture to culture, denomination to denomination, much more so than Christianity. And you’ll know, if you know practicing Hindus, you’ll find that one may see the faith as monotheistic, worshipping one God in variant forms, while another may say, no, it really is polytheistic – we have many deities that we may worship, many different expressions of the divine. But one aspect that has bonded Hindu traditions together is that its theologies have primarily been upward-focused. Now, in order to avoid framing Hinduism within the confines of liberal Christian theology, it’s useful to delve into a basic background of how Hinduism has approached human life and its meaning on earth. Its thousands of years acquired hundreds of texts, from the Vedas to the Bhagavad Gita; they include stories of ancient warriors who fought against evil forces and triumphed with God’s help, as well as proverbs and laws around ethical behavior, and instructions for spiritual practice. For example yoga, which we’ve popularized in American culture as an exercise regime, is actually a Hindu spiritual practice that readies the body and mind for meditation with the goal of leading the practitioner toward greater happiness. Hinduism synthesizes four themes around these texts that most practitioners follow or hold as a basic belief system: dharma, samsara, karma, and moksha. Dharma refers to righteousness or ethical conduct; samsara refers to the continual cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth; karma refers to actions and their consequences; and moksha refers to the concept of liberation from the samsara, a kind of transcending the here and now. These four pillars are

beliefs, but they also include goals for living – including artha, which is the pursuit of economic prosperity, and kama, the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure. These are vast categories that are meant to cover the whole of the human experience, but they are also compartmentalized within a larger social order that has existed in India for millennia – the caste system, which organizes and morally sanctions a socio-economic hierarchy. In other words, it maintains five classes of society from rich and educated to poor and undereducated, with little to no room for change or upward mobility, and certainly no room for a radical equalizing of society such as what we hear of in Jesus’ ministry, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first. In its most extreme form, Hinduism’s caste system has supported legalized racism, sexism, and severe poverty by justifying these systems as divinely ordained. What has reified such a cultural phenomenon is the belief that the material world is subpar to the world of ultimate reality, or brahman – that the human being’s goal should be to transcend this world and gain moksha, the freedom of the soul. But wait – you may ask – what about those goals of artha and kama? Aren’t those rooted in the physical, material needs and desires we have? You might be seeing where this belief system becomes a bit dicey in the same way ascetic practices have been in Judaism and Christianity, as it must answer to the physical and material reality of being human while also instructing its followers to renounce their bodily experiences. The danger of renunciation here, as Anantanand Rambachan puts it in his book entitled *A Hindu Theology of Liberation*, is this: “when Brahman (ultimate reality) is known, the world ceases to be, and Brahman cannot be known as long as the world is experienced. After the reality of the world is denied, it is easy to deny meaning and value for its concerns.” What he means is, that when thousands of years have painted a picture of humanity through a ranking order that’s folded into a religious structure, it is difficult to reconcile working against systemic inequality with one’s religious values. When the goal is renunciation of this world, with all its joys and suffering, it becomes too easy to disregard our moral imperative to respond to human suffering in a way that overturns and reworks our social structures. In the past, rather than interrogate this problem, Hindus have fled the faith for conversion to Buddhism and Christianity, where liberation theologies found roots much earlier. But Hinduism has recently found itself challenged by globalization and liberal western theologies to ask why this has happened, why so many of its poorest followers feel no liberation in its system, and subsequently are reclaiming this key component in its sacred texts. For the progressive Hindu, the question is, what value does religion hold if it doesn’t answer to the real life needs of its most vulnerable populations? Rambachan and others point to a close reading of the canon of texts that reveals that Hindus are actually called to fight economic disparity as an evil, and thus fight its fallout in gender and race injustice as equivalent evils. His claim revises the ancient worldview, arguing that the world ought not to be renounced as illusion, refuted in all its imperfections, but embraced as a holy outcome of brahman’s intentionality in creativity. In some of the ancient warrior stories we have, he points out, the saviors fight the worldly evils of hunger and of violence. The Bhagavad Gita, even though it is considered conservative in its regard to caste, argues for lokasamghraha, which means concern for the well-being of the world, with the intent that the reader acts in pursuit of the common good. Without embracing the material world and acknowledging all the common needs of all humans within it, the goals of artha – economic prosperity – and kama – aesthetic pleasure – cannot be justified as religious values. With this simple shift, one sees that in order to flourish in artha and kama, society has an obligation to create opportunities in which all may thrive. This includes the fight for education, healthcare, and economic upward mobility for all people, not just the males of the highest castes.

This month, as we segue from MLK day in January into Black History month in February, as we celebrate the uprising of women's voices in a new movement that has said enough to harassment and enough to abuse, as we stretch and strive toward a more holy society for all, I've been curious about how other faith traditions grapple with relevance at a time in our human evolution where we have the moral sagacity and technological resources to eradicate systems of inequality. Our psalm for this morning immediately struck me as very Buddhist in nature, but I found that the language is more rooted in the Hindu worldview from which Buddhism evolved. The first half reads similarly to other Hebrew praise psalms, contemplating God as the immovable foundation of one's faith; but its latter verses expand the concept of God as a rock of refuge into a wider meditation on the transience of human life, and end with a clearly karmic worldview, where actions have divine consequences. Verse 9, reading "those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion," suggests a worldview that juxtaposes God's infinite care for human beings with the possibility that our realities are insignificant, that wherever we find ourselves in society – powerful or powerless – is meaningless in the grand cosmic scheme. "In the balances, they go up," the psalmist continues, "they are together lighter than a breath." Translations on this verse differ in their usage of words such as breath and lightness, but scholars tend to conclude that the meaning is as it would read here – that they have no substance, that they are a lie, they hold no meaning in the context of God's power over humanity – they are, in Hindu terms, but an illusion. This idea *can* provide great comfort – for in this context, it is said that King David is praying to God to protect him from powerful enemies that seek to destroy him. In the following verse, he goes on to reaffirm that God is the only one on whom he can count – whether he is manipulated by his enemies' extortion or is showered with material riches, neither holds any meaning. We may find refuge in this teaching that one person's wealth or might holds no value in God's eyes, that whatever the powerful may do to us when we are vulnerable is meaningless. But here's the dilemma: if we refute what is real, we're also left without a moral response to the suffering of the powerless. Without that, consider the last line of the psalm: "steadfast love belongs to you, Oh Lord. For you repay all according to their work." Does this not leave us with a world where karma is as karma does? Where the impoverished deserve to be miserable? Where violence is meant to happen, where gender injustice is ordained, where entire systems that create human suffering are given a green light by God? How do we respond, within a mindset where actions are weightless, to the evils of human-created suffering? If we are to honor our traditions in their most capacious forms, if they are to be relevant, if, at their cores, our faiths are to give life, then this is the most pressing question for the Hindu seeking liberation. And it isn't just a Hindu question, because we find this issue in Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist denominations as well. We find it in the Buddhist focus on non-attachment, which can characterize suffering as a response of the spiritually immature as they journey toward enlightenment. We find it in Jewish fundamentalism, which upholds patriarchy like an idolatrous golden calf and devalues women, children, and those who are differently gendered. And of course, we find it in Christian pietism, which teaches us to suffer our fate whether it's poverty or domestic violence or sexual abuse, with the promise of that sweet bye-and-bye where all our tears will be wiped away. Well, we may be merely human, but these responses deny that we hold an awful lot of power over each other, and to place responsibility for the violence caused by racism, sexism, and poverty onto individuals - to deny that we have by our own doing constructed and maintain systems which continue to devalue and destroy human beings - is blasphemy in any of these religious traditions. In the words of our justice-seeking brother James Baldwin, "if the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can

only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, it is time we got rid of Him.”

Luckily, we who hold ourselves and our faith to the task of making us larger, freer and more loving, have found another path. Rather than getting rid of God, we must strive to continually seek refuge in the reality of God’s liberating spirit. Anything which is not in this spirit, is not then of God. Shailly Gupta Barnes, the Program Manager for the Kairos Center here in New York and the writer of our first reading today, is one such Hindu who sees in all traditions far more spaciousness, far more capacity for fighting our collective sin of destruction than in their capacity to only make meaning in the individual journey of the heart. Gupta Barnes is just one of many who are recognizing that our task lies not in clinging to the confines of what we have known, but in uncovering what we have missed that’s already there. The task is in seeing where we have fallen short, and asking, is this the best we can do as people of God? Is this the right way to seek oneness with Brahman? If the answer is no, then may we seek refuge in knowing that this world and everything in it *is* divine, *is* brahman, is infinitely valuable. May this comfort become our rock in order that we may trek onward toward a larger, freer, and more loving existence for all.