ANGELS AND DEVAS

Exploring the Parallels between Renaissance Visual and Textual Representations of Angels in Christianity, Angelic beings in Hindu mythology

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The Predicament

The intuitive images that come to mind when one thinks of Christianity are those of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – the Holy Trinity that comes together to represent a greater, almighty God. This God is often described to be omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, and is set above all others in the heavenly hierarchy. In both Christian scripture and literature derived from Christian scripture, the unfathomable power of God is accommodated for by angels – heavenly messengers that carry divine messages to earth. In every essence of the word, Christianity is based upon a monotheistic belief system, where all other heavenly beings are mere extensions of the one true great god. Throughout history, it has been advertised as such, largely to distinguish it from other religions, which were considered somewhat lowly during the European Renaissance period. The weight of this view can be felt in British writing from the 17th century, such as the following:

> …dos [the author] mean by one God with the Father and Son, that the Holy Ghost is a God of the same Divine Kind with the Father and the Son? If this be his Sense, as some other Passages seem to countenance, then without breach of Charity, I must charge him, though I am sorry for it, with down-right Tritheism or Polythe|ism, which I take to be a much heavier Accusation than any he can charge, or has fairly brought against his real Well-wishers the Unitarians. (A.B.)

This excerpt comes from *A letter to a friend with remarks upon two pamphlets lately published, in defence of tritheism viz. A brief enquiry by J.T.* and *The Socinian slain by J.H.*, written by a man who signs off as A.B. This letter was written in response to two pamphlets published during the 17th century that questioned the monotheist nature of Christianity. Some of the ideas brought up in these pamphlets are heavily attacked by the author, such as that of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit, being not one, but three separate divine entities.

A.B. also brings into question how such conjectures pose Christianity's status as a religion, when compared to Judaism or religions of the Middle East.

The primary arguments that are made involve the distinction between Jesus as "our Lord" and what it means to be God himself. A.B. also takes the time to repeatedly address the controversy associated with the viewpoints expressed in these pamphlets. Take the following passage, for example:

> "And the *Tritheists* must pardon the *Unitarians,* who heartily love their Persons, but detest their Errors, if they are compell'd to declare that *Tritheism,* or the Doctrine, Belief, and Worship of 3 *infinite Beings, Minds, or Gods,* with distinct and coequal Veneration, is no Scripture-Doctrine, no Scripture-Faith, no Scripture-worship; but a horrible abuse of the true Christian Religion, a violation of the Law of Nature, a stumbling-block to the *Jews* and *Mahometans,* and a revival of Polytheism, or a plurality of Gods." (A.B.)

Along with this "stumbling block" metaphor, A.B. uses phrases such as "illiterate triatheists" in his letter to further emphasize the divide in ideology.

Moreover, this text suggests that there was contention in understanding whether Christianity did, and should, follow a monotheistic model. It, therefore, additionally implies that non-monotheistic religions are somewhat "incorrect" or not in line with the wholesome, Christian way of viewing religion.

Hinduism is most often categorized as a polytheistic religion, due to the large number of deities worshipped in religious practices. Many temples around the Indian subcontinent, and other Hindu-centric parts of the world, are devoted to a particular subset of these deities, and focus their energy on the values embodied by the worshipped individual(s). For example, there are entire temples dedicated to the warrior goddess, Durga, who happens to be more heavily worshipped in Northern parts of the Indian subcontinent. There are also particular religious holidays where some deities are prayed to more specifically than others, such as the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Laxmi, who is prayed to specifically during Diwali. The delegation of these different elements of humanity – such as wealth, war, etc. – makes it easy to superficially compare Hinduism to pagan religions, such as those stemming from Roman and Greek mythology. However, as the findings of this paper conclude, the actual hierarchy of the mythological Hindu universe is more similar to Christianity than meets the eye. In fact, the pagan dismissals of Hinduism, which imply a lack of spiritual development in Hindu communities, may have actually been pushed further than anticipated, because of the need to draw the distinction between civilization and "savage" or conquerable lands. What follows is an explanation of how the two religious heavenly hierarchies line up, and possible explanations for the propagation of the blanketed polytheistic representations of Hinduism in the Western World.

The Christian and Hindu Renaissance Periods

A Renaissance period, by definition, is a period of reawakening. The Christian Renaissance was very much in line with the European Renaissance and Enlightenment Movements, that spanned from the 14th to 17th centuries.

The Hindu Renaissance, on the other hand, is more loosely defined. Because some scripture of the period around 1900 BC mentions that there were inevitably multiple phases of "reawakening" within Hinduism. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will be referring to the Renaissance period that yielded the pivotal epic poetry of Hinduism, which occurred between the 4th and 6th centuries.

One many "Hindu Renaissance" periods was also observed in the 18thand 19th centuries, during British rule. During this time, the combined influence of enlightenment ideology, and British colonization led to vast cultural developments in Hindu communities. British documentation of Hindu culture at this time period helps us to better understand both, what the culture developed into, and how the British perceived it. These changes, however, didn't necessarily alter or redefine the hierarchical structures of Hinduism in any fundamental way, which is why I will be referring to the early literary renaissance of the the 4th and 6th centuries.

Etymology and Heavenly Hierarchy

The first stage of the misconception being addressed in this paper, is the translation of the various beings of Hindu mythology into English. If we map out a Christian heavenly hierarchy, using information mentioned in Salkeld's *Treatise of Angels*, and Psuedo-Dionysius' *The Celestial Hierarchy* we would get a flowchart that looks something like this:

God → Holy Trinity → Angels → Saints → Humans

Salkeld's *Treastise of Angels* addresses a variety of topics about Angels and how we perceive them. Salkeld's writing provides a very raw view of angels in Christianity, discussing them as objects of study, and as biblical figures. He backs up his claims with evidence from scripture, and takes the time to address some of the difficulties that individuals may have with understanding angels conceptually. Pseudo-Dionysius tells us more about the appearance and characteristics of the angels themselves, dividing them up into three "spheres," each containing sub-categories. The first sphere, for example, includes the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. This opens up the definition of "angel" to be more inclusive of a variety of divine beings.

Our flowchart shows as how information flows towards mankind. We can split this hierarchical flowchart into defined tiers so that we can then transpose the Hindu model on to. God's tier can be called the "Supreme Tier",

which serves as the highest possible position on the hierarchy. The Holy Trinity is what we will call the "Primary Manifestation Tier", where we see the primary aspects of the Supreme Tier being translated into more conceptually digestible entities. Angels occupy the "Liaison Tier", if we look towards the roles and capabilities outlined for them in *Treatise of Angels*. These roles include communicating with God, having access to profound knowledge, and being able to appear (?) to humans. Angel also translates directly to "messenger," which would also place them in this tier of the hierarchy. The saints are in the "Sub-liaison Tier." This includes those that can only occupy physical space on earth, are only capable of commanding specific ideas/areas, and can communicate with the divine. They cannot reside in heaven. Humans are the "Subject tier", which acts as the receiving end of the flowchart.

Kesarcodi-Watson's "Devas" gives us some insight into the translation issues that have skewed the accurate transposition of the Hindu heavenly hierarchy in the past. "Devas" clarifies some of the misnomers that the translation of Hindu scripture into English have created. It brings into question how Hinduism is commonly perceived as a polytheistic religion, when there is in fact a concept of a singular great divine being, "Isvara," or "Brahma" in some contexts. This paper also outlines how "Devas," which translates more accurately into "angels", are presented to man, and where they stand in the greater religious hierarchy.

Kesarcodi-Watson also takes the time to address the perception of beings that fall within these hierarchical levels, and the concept of the ownership of divinity. The paper additionally delves into a sort of holy trinity in Hinduism itself known as "Trimurti," which consists of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Protector, and Siva the Destroyer (Kesarcodi-Watson). With this information, we can place Isvara on the "Supreme Tier", the Trimurti on the "Primary Manifestation Tier," and the Devas on the "Liaison Tier."

Snell's paper on the intersections between Hinduism and Christianity also talks about Isvara, and some of the etymological roots of beings in Hinduism. She narrows down the concept of the Supreme Being to something that is very comparable to Christianity:

> … I think enough has been said to show that it is in some cases, at least, only another way of putting the eminently Christian doctrine that God is the one absolute Being; that all things else are entirely dependent upon him, caused and maintained by his will alone, and utterly illusive in so far as they appear to us to be permanent, necessary, and self-dependent realties. (Snell)

Such views are not limited to modern studies, however. Britain began exploring and colonizing the Indian subcontinent in the mid-eighteenth century. During British rule, the documentation of culture and history within the colonies was crucial, and reports were often sent back to Britain. The studies conducted were largely considered to be anthropological. One such volume, compiled by Nathaniel Edward Kindersley, interestingly includes facts that lie on the

monotheistic side of the Hindu debate. They also introduce a distinguishing factor between Christianity and Hinduism, that further supports the notion of Devas being angelic beings.

While Kindersley's documentation does attack some of the practices of Hinduism, it provides a very thorough account of the hierarchical structures set up in the Hindu mythological universe. It establishes Paraubahrah as an immaterial or incorporeal being that is the "supreme first cause of all things." Kindersley also goes on to mention the Treemoortee, or the "triple god, worshipped as the divine being himself", that composes of three divided powers of creation, preservation, and destruction (Bruhma, Veeshnoo, and Shivven)—spelt as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (ब्रह्मा, विष्णु, महेश) "in an intimate degree consolidated into one compound being." He also goes on to talk about the numerous other "gods" of Hindu mythology as physical extensions of the Supreme Being, almost like an extended family. He talks about them being the material essence that humans can relate to, and how the manifestations of good and evil, male and female, and other forces in the world, are contained within these extensions of the infinite being.

Kindelay notes: that Hindus see the eternal being as infinite, timeless, and boundless. This unfathomable entity, is therefore difficult to embody in a single idol or image. The ideas that Kindersley outlines, explain that Paraubahrah, or Isvara, contains everything within itself, and that the human demand for a representation of God is what sparked the creation of the treemoo(tree) rtee, or trimurti. In fact, there is even a female version of the trimurti, that parallels the creator, protector, and destroyer, roles of Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva. The gender ambiguity in the higher hierarchical tiers of Hinduism highly contrasts the strong "he, him, his" pronouns used to describe God and the Holy Trinity in Christianity. Interestingly enough, the angelic manifestations in each religion take the reverse form on this issue. Deities in Hinduism are allocated specific areas of control, and are clearly gendered to cater towards human perceptibility. Christian angels, however, are seen as more gender-fluid, semi-corporeal beings. The representation of gender, however, appears to be the most glaring distinguishing feature between the tiers of the two religions. Fundamentally, each tier still performs the same function, and links to the next in a similar fashion. In fact, such theories can be seen in practice in Renaissance literary representations of these divine beings.

Literary Representations

Kindersley's writing also makes it clear that each of the divine beings in Hinduism, exists specifically to benefit mankind, as do Angels. Devas are messengers of more specific divine information than angels are, but seem to appear to humans just like angels do. If we look to the *Book of Tobit*, the angel Raphael is able to appear as a human and a guide to Media. He puts Tobias to

the test, giving him instructions and assessing his ability to complete his mission. Raphael eventually reveals himself as an angel. This is an example of angelic shape shifting or disguise, as well as moral-teaching. Raphael was sent to earth with a mission to fulfil, and he served as a mode of communication between God and mankind.

We see similar themes in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Instances of shape shifting in the novel include gender-fluidity, along with the angels' abilities to change size dramatically and instantly. The angels are also capable of taking other forms to better perform their duty, such as when Michael appears to Adam and Eve with multiple arms and a threatening, authoritative demeanour. This multi-armed image parallels some of the images of the daiveudegoel (????) beings of Hindu mythology, such as Caullee from Kindersley's documentation. Caullee, or Kaali Ma, is a destroyer of evil, and one of Durga's counterparts under Lord Siva; her frightening appearance makes her a force to be reckoned with, and enables her to perform her duties effectively.

Milton also gives us insight into how God delegates tasks to angels according to their strengths. The sociable Gabriel, for example, is sent to warn and reason with Adam and Eve, whereas the strong and stern Michael is sent to dictate their fate. Furthermore, Milton's angels eat, sleep, procreate, and travel. They too are capable of being flawed, and are often unaware of the possibility of malicious activity. Uriel at the gate to Paradise, for example, is deceived by Satan. Milton paints angels as more than blind followers of God, and limits God's agency in terms of directly communicating with his creations. God's physical appearance is also never spoken of, further characterizing him as an incorporeal being.

In Hindu mythology, we see angelic beings interact directly with humans to guide them on missions as well. A famous example of this is Vyasa's *Mahabhartha*, an epic, fuelled with brutality and intensity. The famous epic is an exercise in diplomacy.

The story follows the five sons of Pandu – known as the Pandavas, and their enemies the Kauravas, who are the sons of Pandu's brother, Dhritarashtra. The battles that take place in this epic are the result of envy, betrayal, and deceit, and include interaction between the supernatural and corporeal beings. The *Bhagavad-Gita*, contained within the *Mahabharatha*, contains the conversation between lord Krishna (the eighth incarnation of Vishnu), and the third Pandava named Arjuna. These two characters are posed as friends earlier on in the story, and Lord Krishna takes it upon himself to aid Arjuna in battle. The conversation in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, involves Krishna revealing himself as an incarnation of Vishnu, and explaining secrets of the world to Arjuna. Like Raphael, Vishnu assumes a human-like form in Krishna's body, and eventually reveals his true form once Arjuna proves himself worthy.

Paradise Lost, also carries readers through both the fall of Satan and the Fall of Man, showing the consequences of deceit and disobedience. Hindu mythology includes similar stories, that manifest themselves in the way rituals and worship are executed today. One popular example is brought up in Kindersley: the story of Brahma and the pillar of light. In the story, Brahma and Vishnu encounter a pillar that extends beyond what they can see, and agree to split up and find the respective ends. Both soon return to their meeting point. Vishnu admits to being unable to find the pillar's end. Brahma then lies, claiming to have found the top of the pillar. Siva, who was disguised as the pillar, then reveals himself, and declares that Brahma would be minimally worshipped because of his lie. Even today, it is rare to see religious services dedicated to Brahma, despite his status as the "creator" in the trimurti. This is an example of a "fall" in Hindu mythology (Kesarcodi-Watson). If we assume that God himself is all-powerful and all-encompassing, then we would be assuming that the supreme being could never be shunned like Brahma was. This justifies the trimurti's tier positioning: below the Supreme Tier, as opposed to being on the same level as God. The trimurti solely includes the manifestations of God, and those within it are capable of sin.

The second major epic of the Hindu Renaissance is Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* is an epic that tells the story of the lord Rama, another incarnation of Vishnu, born in the human form to defeat the demon lord Ravana. Rama is one of the (many – four— sons of (many) three wives of King Dasaratha, (and is upon reaching adulthood is he being the eldest of the four was named his father's successor. In a jealous rage, one of Dasaratha's other wives Kaikeyee– other than Ram's mother (Kaushalya), succeeds in prevailing upon the (convinces the) king to name her own son, Bharata as the heir-apparent, (king,) and to send Rama into exile (with his wife and brother) for fourteen years. Ram gladly accepted the king's decision and went for exile along with his wife and one of his younger brothers – Lakshman. Ravana later kidnapped Rama's wife Sita. This changed the course of events. With the aid of Lakshman and his devotee, Hanuman, he enlisted several monkeys as part of his Army–to rescue his wife, and defeat and destroy Ravana.

This is one of the most famous stories in Hindu mythology, and is said to be the basis for the Diwali celebrations that occur during the harvest season. It also includes lots of interaction between the supernatural and the earthly beings. Rama himself is depicted as the incarnation of Vishnu; many of the "lords" that appear in the story are introduced as possessor of superhuman powers.

In *Paradise Lost*, we are unfortunately limited to very specific, plot-driving interactions in heaven and on earth, and have little time to see the characters grow and develop. Adam and Satan are perhaps the most developed

characters in the poem, but only exist in separate spaces, within their conversations with others. The *Ramayana* is different, in that the angelic beings exist in human or animal form, and are thus able to continuously interact with the actual humans on earth. God also, does not have direct conversations with the angelic beings as he does in *Paradise Lost*, but is acknowledged as a sort of universal energy, that the characters draw strength and blessings from. Nevertheless, in both cases there is an acknowledgement of a supreme being whose needs must be catered to. In the case of *Paradise Lost*, God sends his angels to prevent the fall of man, and then to further introduce Adam and Eve to the consequences of their fall. In *Ramayana*, the divine mission is to defeat the demon king Ravana, and prove to the mortals of earth that good does in fact conquer evil.

Visual Representations

Along with textual representations of these beings, both Hindu and Christian scriptures have been variously interpreted by artists. It is interesting to note that even on this front, there are similarities between the ways that angelic beings are represented.

Let's look at two images of infant divine beings. On the left we have Krishna, an incarnation of lord Vishnu, with his human mother. On the right we have the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus Christ.

Both of these images are stock photo representations of the young lords and their respective human mothers. Regardless of the religion, it's obvious who is a divine being in which image. The halo, or the glow about the head, is a universal representation of a holy being, and with Vishnu being the incarnation of one of the Trimurti beings, and Christ being a part of the Christian holy trinity, the glow is appropriate.

If we shift down to the next tier, we actually see similar representations on both sides:

On the left we see Durga Maa, the deity of war (Mother Goddess), and on the right, the Angel Gabriel, who we were introduced to in *Paradise Lost*. Both images sport the halo or holy glow behind the head, indicating that the individual is in fact a holy presence. While these images do help us place Gabriel and Durga on the same tier, they also show that halos are not limited to a single tier in both Hinduism and Christianity. Halos are universal representations of divinity in a general sense, and don't necessarily indicate that the bearer is a god or an angel.

Conclusion

Polytheism is a blanketing term that reduces the complexity of a heavenly hierarchy to one basic level: "God." With multiple gods comes a dispersion of responsibility, and furthermore a dispersion of power. Pagan beliefs are often believed to be lesser than the more popular religions of the world, because they assume this dispersal of power. Renaissance representations of Christianity worked to solidify the distinction between the

pagan beliefs and their own developed spiritual ones, that suggest a higher power, and a more complex system beyond our world. Elevating such representations, however, took a toll on the British ability to understand and connect with what was essentially their own religion under a different set of names.

It is often said that the British went forth with colonization because they felt the need to bring civilized life to savage parts of the world. A lot of what was brought overseas, ideologically, came from Christian beliefs and their applications to day-to-day activities. A lack of understanding of Hinduism, may have, led to a gap in understanding the fundamental values of a large portion of the Indian population. There was always one God, and while Hindus were prepared to adapt to other belief systems under the only God they knew existed, the British were less flexible, and therefore defensive.

What has been tried to establish through this modest exercise is not so much a universal model or guide for religion, as it is a universal model for communication. God's supposed ability to communicate with us involves a pathway of middle-men. Each has his/her own means of interpreting the information one receives and to further communicate to his/her audience. This is how we interpret the Supreme tier of our hierarchy as our own abstract ideas, and the Subject tier into other people, we've identified where our personal angels lie. The whole concept of religion, and by extension communication, revolves around getting an idea across, and ensuring that the person listening to it, is also understanding. Our angels are the ideas and information that we collect during the course of our lives to help us better communicate with one another.

Religions, in the end, may just be different due to geographically separate developments of similar ideas. Most of the time, all of us try to say the same thing. We just express it differently, that's all.

Two people's internal angels could never be exactly the same, but that does not mean that two people's minds can not be rooted in the same fundamental values.

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