2015

Evil and Theodicy in Hinduism

Sunder Willett
Denison University

Evil and Theodicy in Hinduism

Sunder Willett

The concept of evil colors much of today's understanding of the world. In "The Abuse of Evil," Richard Bernstein writes that evil is often used to obscure, to demonize and to stifle intelligent dialogue about serious issues.[1] By calling something *evil* one can avoid having to understand and analyze the conditions which allowed such events to occur. And yet what exactly is meant by the term *evil*? Due to the moral connotations of *evil*, there tends to be a generalization of *evil* as an absolute term. However, even in the supposedly secular United States of America, there is a distinctively Christian bias to the popular understanding of evil: that it is unnatural, wrong and in need of subjugation. But is this understanding true outside of a Christian frame of reference?

I argue that it is not. To illustrate this, I analyze how Hinduism, a religious tradition with beliefs and theologies very different from a Christian or even an Abrahamic perspective, treats evil and theodicy, or the study of how evil and a benevolent god can both exist in the world. Because Hindu conceptions of evil and theodicy are very different, one cannot examine evil and theodicy in Hinduism from a Christian perspective. In fact, due to the theological differences between the two religious perspectives, the two come to very different conclusions about evil and theodicy. The Hindu perspective on evil and theodicy is informed by its unique, multifaceted and ultimately context-sensitive theology and on its unique beliefs in rebirth, reincarnation and karma.

In this paper I examine evil and the question of theodicy within Hinduism. To provide a greater context, I compare the Hindu conceptions of evil and theodicy to how Christianity generally treats evil and theodicy. Beyond a simple examination of these two, however, I first look at how the terms "evil" and "theodicy" have usually been used and some of the cultural and religious baggage these two terms carry. Because of the origins, or at least heavy influence, of a predominantly Christian framework, "evil" and "theodicy" are context-sensitive terms that cannot be used freely outside of said Christian framework. Finally, I examine how Hinduism actually treats evil and theodicy. In doing so, I look primarily at the doctrine of karma;[2] however, I also examine

---

1 Richard J. Bernstein, "The Abuse of Evil," in *Deliver Us from Evil,* ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 102.

2 It should be noted that *doctrine* is also a loaded term, especially in this context referring to karma. *Doctrine* implies an official systemization or codification of ideas. This is not necessarily how karma was organized. There was not a Hindu equivalent of a Council of Nicaea which established the "doctrine" of karma.

Hindu mythology and extensively use Wendy O'Flaherty's seminal work, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*.

A Brief Discussion of Comparative Religious Study and Problems Therein

Comparison is everywhere. Unless faced with an entirely unfamiliar subject and having had no useful previous background, it quite likely that one will use some sort of comparison when evaluating new information. Sometimes comparison, as William Paden went so far as to say, is "simply unavoidable."[3] This is especially true for religious studies, as it is extremely difficult to examine a religion entirely on its own without looking at how its perspectives might match up (or not) to a religion more familiar to one's own context. Furthermore, the term 'religion' is itself difficult to define.

In his introductory text, *Studying Religion,* Gary Kessler discusses some of the difficulties scholars have had in defining what "religion" is or is not. For his purposes, Kessler chooses to identify more closely with William Alston's cluster definition, which states that the "essence" of religion cannot be precisely defined. Rather, religion can be described as generally having certain characteristics, which he goes on to list. However, he adds that there can be no set determination of which combination or how many of these characteristics precisely define what a religion is. Rather, all of the world's religions, in some fashion, possess at least some of these characteristics.[4]

However, while such a definition allows for intellectual broadness in considering religion, the term itself contains within it certain biases. The word *religion* comes from the Latin *religio* which in classical times indicated a "ritual observance or sacred, binding obligation."[5] Some of this old usage can be found in the adverb *religiously*. According to Kessler, though, throughout the early Christian church and well into the Middle Ages, *religio* referred to "genuine sincere worship" and was used to distinguish the dedicated monastic orders from the lay believers.[6] The use of the term *religion* to refer to belief systems such as Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism is only a more recent usage of the past few centuries. *Religion* doesn't even necessarily have corollaries within other cultures.

For instance, within Sanskrit, there is no actual word that can be translated as *religion*. The word most often translated as *religion* is *dharma*, but this is itself problematic because *dharma* is essentially untranslatable into English as it likewise has

---

3 William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 2.

4 Gary E. Kessler, *Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 18-22.

5 Paden, *Religious Worlds,* 11.

6 Kessler, *Studying Religion,* 22.

no English corollary.[7] *Dharma* means something like order, virtue or way of life. So while it is similar to a Western-Christian conception of what religion might be, applying *religion* to Hinduism still imposes some sort of cultural bias.

If this is true with the most general term *religion*, definitions become even more problematic when using the terms *evil* and *theodicy* to describe elements of Hinduism and Hindu theology. To be sure, there are definite corollaries between a Christian conception of evil and theodicy and a Hindu conception, but to use such terms without any sort of caveat would cause assumptions about Hindu theology that otherwise could be avoided.

What is Evil?

Like *religion*, evil is also a term that is somewhat difficult to define. One answer to what *evil* is has been defined simply in moral terms: that evil is the opposite or absence of good. However, this definition creates problems, one reason being because it does not distinguish between action and intent. If the Holocaust was carried out with the best of intentions, does that lessen the evil of its effect? If someone murders a grandmother whose grandson is then inspired to become a prosecutor and subsequently convicts hundreds of murderers, does that lessen the evil of the intent?[8] In addition, this simple "opposite of good" definition also leaves out the idea of natural evil, or disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes which can disrupt and ruin innocent lives. Finally, is it evil that, around the world, millions of children die of starvation, that they are deprived of a basic human necessity by mere circumstance?[9] These questions are still debated by academics and intellectuals; however, there is a general consensus that *evil* includes both natural and moral elements although there is not a clear definition of moral evil.[10]

Within Judeo-Christian theology, evil is perceived more specifically as a taint or impurity that defiles an otherwise perfect creation.[11] Christian theology even more explicitly goes on to argue that this defilement has emerged from the dis-obedience of Adam in the Garden of Eden as told in the third chapter of the book of Genesis in the Old Testament.[12] Adam's disobedience created something called "original sin" which, as the first father of all humankind, Adam passed on to all of

7   John Cort (Lecture, REL-215 Hinduism, Denison University, January 28, 2014).

8   Manfred Kuehn, "How Banal Is Evil?" in *Deliver Us from Evil,* ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 145.

9   Mark Larrimore, "Evil as Privation: Seeing Darkness, Hearing Silence," in *Deliver Us from Evil,* ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), 151.

10   David Parkin, "Introduction," in *The Anthropology of Evil,* ed. David Parkin (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), 15.

11   Donald Taylor, "Theological Thoughts about Evil," in *The Anthropology of Evil,* ed. David Parkin (New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985), 32, 38.

12   Ibid., 36-38.

his descendants, i.e. all of the world's population. So, in this sense, all of human-kind has been defiled and exists in a state of impurity. This concept of "original sin" also helps answer the question of theodicy in Christianity, as it explains how evil entered into the world if it was created by an ultimately good God. However, this concept also means that, within Christianity, evil is inherently unnatural as it was introduced into creation by beings who were not the creator. Therefore, Christianity ultimately seeks the elimination of this evil, which defiles God's creation and is in contradiction to the creator God.

This Christian view of evil can create problems when examining evil in other contexts and religions. If evil is viewed as being against the natural order of the world, then an examination of evil would involve looking at how other religions cope with the existence of evil. This has two implications. First, such a comparative viewpoint will always perceive evil as being antagonistic towards people and a force that must be combated or otherwise countered. Second, such a viewpoint presupposes that good and evil must exist in a dichotomy or binary. Thus, if one is not already, one would seek to be on the side of good through salvation or redemption, both of which are prominent features of Christian theology. However, both of these implications lean towards a triumphal conclusion, an ultimate victory of good over evil, which can truly be said to be present within Hinduism.

What is Theodicy?

Christians, as far back as Augustine of Hippo in fourth century CE, have grappled with the problem of believing in a good God.[13] The problem is not the fact that He is supposed to be good. The problem is that there is so much evil in the world, both moral and natural. Whether in the form of the Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, Hurricane Katrina, the 2011 Japanese tsunami and Fukushima disaster, or just the multitude of thefts, rapes and murders that occur every day, evil exists in the world. Even if one does not believe in a god or goddess at all, there are still the time-old questions of "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and "Why do good things happen to bad people?"[14] Theodicy, literally "divine-justice,"[15] is the attempt to answer these questions and, if one is religious, reconcile the belief in a good god with the existence of evil. While the term itself originates with the eighteenth century philosopher, Gottfried Leibniz, the actual questions surrounding theodicy have existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.[16]

---

13 Bernstein, "The Abuse of Evil," 101.
14 Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 138.
15 From the Greek: *theos* "God" + *dike* "justice"
16 Bernstein, "The Abuse of Evil," 101.

Theodicy has been potent within a Western-Christian theological and/or philosophical context for a few reasons. First, Christian theology puts forth that the Christian God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and ultimately benevolent. These claims are difficult to reconcile with the observable evil in the world. Emerging from this contradiction is the second point: if there is such evil in the world, does this not disprove the existence of a benevolent God? Thus, the question of theodicy has not only centered on reconciling the existence of evil and God, but it also has evolved into a justification of whether God can even exist with such evil in the world.

However, it is important to note that these concerns of theodicy are somewhat peculiar to a system of belief which revolves around the particular theology of the Christian God. In addition, they also dichotomize the two values of *good* and *evil* as binary terms that are ultimately irreconcilable. As such, if one did not subscribe to a particular system of belief that involved a supreme god that was omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and ultimately benevolent or that dichotomized good against evil, one would have rather different theodical concerns. Hinduism is one such system of belief.[17]

Hinduism's Treatment of Evil and Theodicy

Unlike Christianity, Hinduism does not dichotomize good against evil. Hindu mythology depicts evil as being created alongside the rest of the universe. Thus, there is not the perspective that evil is unnatural and must be vanquished or conquered as there is in Christian theology, especially surrounding the figure of Jesus the Christ.[18] Much of Hindu theology, in fact, focuses on the idea of maintaining balance between order and chaos, *dharma* and *adharma*.[19] Even though Hinduism predominantly treats evil as a natural force of the universe, it still holds that people should strive to live their lives in a good way as opposed to an evil way. Even so, as I discuss below, the roles that gods play are somewhat ambiguous in their moral classification. Hindu mythology does not clearly define whether or not Hindu deities are purely good. In fact, the lack of a dichotomy between good and evil in Hinduism extends down to gods and demons in Hindu mythology. While gods are popularly depicted to be good and demons depicted to be evil, one's interpretations could vary depending on the specific myths one believes. However, Hinduism does offer us an answer to the question of theodicy in the form of karma.

---

17 Although what exactly Hinduism is and whether or not it is truly a system of belief according to Western conceptions of religion is debatable.

18 Taylor, "Theological Thoughts about Evil," 35-36.

19 *Adharma* is essentially the absence of *dharma* which itself is roughly translated as "order."

Simply put, karma is a combination of the principles of cause-and-effect with the South Asian belief in rebirth or reincarnation. It actually offers a fairly rational explanation for why both good and bad things happen to people, according to or in spite of their most recent actions. Even though karma answers theodical questions fairly well, it does so by omitting divinity from its consideration. As I discuss later, this causes problems for some Hindus, and while karma has been hailed by Western scholars as a wonderful doctrine for its explanatory logic, ironically, it is not held in the same high regard by all Hindus.

Karma as Theodicy

Karma has a curious place within Western philosophy. In his *The Sociology of Religion,* the famous sociologist, Max Weber, wrote sweeping adulations about karma, saying, "The most complete formal solution of the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian doctrine of *karma*."[20] In another text, Weber wrote, "[Karma] stands out by virtue of its consistency as well as by its extraordinary metaphysical achievement."[21] Part of Weber's delight with the doctrine of karma is how it treats the question of theodicy and why bad things happen to good people. Peter Berger has said that karma is the most logical answer devised to the question of theodicy,[22] so perhaps this is why karma has become popular outside of India and Hinduism.

The doctrine of karma basically states that the moral implications of one's past actions dictate what sort of events will happen to one's future self. As outlined by Bruce Reichenbach in *The Law of Karma,* karma involves five basic principles. First, every action which is "performed in achieving some result or which arises from desire and passion" has a consequence. In this sense, an action must not be disinterested and instead contain a motivation in order to "attract karma."[23] Second, every moral action has a good or bad consequence depending on whether it is right or wrong. Third, consequences arise immediately in this life, in the next life or at some time in the distant future. Fourth, karmic effects can be cumulative, and fifth, humans experience rebirth. This final principle is perhaps the most crucial for the proper functioning of karma because it explains why a murderer may continue to experience good things and why a young child might develop cancer when he or she has clearly not done some great wrong in this lifetime to deserve such a disease.

---

20 Weber, *The Sociology of Religion,* 145.

21 Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology,* trans. & ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 359.

22 Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

23 Bruce R. Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 13-22.

In addition to describing the fundamentals of the doctrine of karma, I must make two additional points. The first is that, as noted previously, "doctrine" is a very slippery word. While most scholarly articles and texts refer to the *theory* or *doctrine* of karma, as with many terms, *theory* and *doctrine* come with specific academic baggage. Foremost is the idea that a theory or a doctrine must have been rigorously formulated or systematized. Regarding karma, this is absolutely not the case. This is not to say that karma lacks rigor or systematization, but that it should not be treated as a scientific theory that has been carefully designed and tested. In fact, this is one of the theoretical problems Reichenbach discusses in his text. Because karma relies on the idea of rebirth and reincarnation, karma is "a convenient fiction."[24] One rarely has memory of why karma is affecting him or herself. Even if plausible reasons for karmic effects could be conceived of, they could never be verified or falsified (falsifiability is key to the Scientific Method). In addition, karma is not an empirical answer to the question of theodicy; rather it is a rationalization which, while satisfactory for many, is still just another "interpretation of human experience."[25]

Part of this lack of memory poses another problem to philosopher Whitley Kaufman, who writes that if karma exists, it is an immoral and unjust solution to theodicy. If one suffers karmic events due to actions of a past life, there can be no idea of why one is being punished or rewarded, which he claims is central to justice.[26] Kaufman goes on to describe five other problems he specifically finds with the doctrine of karma including that of verifiability. While Kaufman does bring up interesting points, karma is actually not a systematic answer to the question of theodicy. More importantly, unlike in Christianity, within Hinduism there does not exist a theodical dilemma of how to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with the belief in an all-powerful, benevolent God. Therefore, unlike Christian theological treatments of theodicy, karma only seeks to explain the existence of evil and suffering.[27] Karma is not a divine method of dispensing just punishment and reward. Rather, it is an explanation of why both good and bad things happen to people. In its most simplified form, karma is a law of cause-and-effect. However, karma does extend beyond this simplification.

According to many Hindu sacred texts, including the Upanishads, humans are bound to a cycle of rebirth called *samsara*. Ultimately, *samsara* is a kind of

---

24 Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction,* Honolulu: The UniversityPress of Hawaii, 1973, 76. Quoted by Bruce R. Reichenbach in *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 38.

25 Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma,* 38.

26 Whitley R. P. Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," in *Philosophy East & West* 55, (January 2005): 19-20.

27 Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis, "Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman," in *Philosophy East & West* 57, (October 2007): 534.

suffering because one is continually forced to re-experience birth, life and death as well as all of the pain that is associated with life. This cycle of rebirth is perpetuated by karma.[28] The reasoning behind this argument is actually related to Sir Isaac Newton's law of motion: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. As a human accumulates karmic action or response through motivated moral actions, these accumulations must inevitably be released in that person's present or future lives. In this sense, karmic response keeps a person's soul attached to the person's physicality so that the accumulated karma can ultimately be dispersed. Since karma keeps people attached to this world through *samsara*, karma is actually undesirable since it perpetuates suffering.

As stated previously, the first principle of karma involves moral action that is motivated by desire and passion. Therefore, if one's actions are instead dispassionate and not motivated by a desire for effect, then one can escape the cycle of *samsara* through attaining salvation or *moksha*. If one ceases to accumulate karma, then there will no longer be karmic action holding him or her to this world and that person will thus attain release. As the *Katha Upanishad* states, "when a man has understanding, is mindful and always pure; He does reach that final step, from which he is not reborn again."[29]

In short, while karma provides an answer to why good and bad things happen, it is not at all an answer to theodicy as more traditionally defined by Christian theology. The role of divinity in allowing evil to happen is completely outside the scope of karma. More importantly, though, karma does not need to address what the role of divinity in allowing evil is because, in Hinduism, the theological conundrum of a good god allowing evil to exist is simply not relevant as it is in Christianity. So even though karma does address theodical concerns of evil and suffering, they are not directly tied into theistic concerns.

Problems with Karma

However, within Hinduism, karma possesses certain problems of its own. First, it undermines the authority of deities. If karma ultimately dictates what happens to individuals who have incurred a karmic burden, this means that gods and goddesses can never be omnipotent and are ultimately subservient to the power of karma. This would make karma the supreme power in the universe and not Vishnu or Shiva as many Hindus believe. According to Wendy O'Flaherty, the implication of this is that, for those Hindus who believe in such supreme deities, karma is actu-

---

28 Akiti Glory Alamu, "The Concept of Karma in Hinduism and Christianity: an Appraisal," in *Asia Journal Of Theology* 23, (2009): 249-52.

29 *Upanishads,* trans. Patrick Olivelle, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Katha Upanishad 3.8.

ally "relatively unimportant and can be overcome by devotion."[30] This is actually a core aspect of Vaishnavite and Shaivite theology, that through proper devotion to one's respective god, one can receive salvation and grace. Despite the high regard in which Western philosophers, such as Max Weber, might hold karma, karma is not readily accepted by a majority of Indians and Hindus.

Lawrence Babb describes how in Tamil Nadu, the southernmost Indian state, there are two explanations for misfortune. The first involves karma. The second involves a belief called *headwriting*, which basically says that one's destiny is written on one's forehead six days after birth. Depending on the desire of the individual, whether or not one wants to take responsibility for moral actions or assume, fatalistically, that such deeds were inevitable, one could conceivably choose between either karma or headwriting to explain events and actions.[31]

Finally, some scholars have raised the problem of free will and how karma figures into free will. Johannes Bronkhorst discusses how through the accumulation of spiritual power, Brahmin priests were capable of inflicting curses on people.[32] However, if a priest inflicts a curse on an individual, is it because of karma or because that priest chose to curse that individual? If a person is destined to suffer karmic consequences based on past deeds, are inflictors of karmic consequences compelled by karma or are they in control of their actions?[33] Can bestowing blessings or inflicting harm be justified through the doctrine of karma?

The general consensus appears to disagree. Even if a terrorist decides that killing others is justified because, if he succeeds, he will be meting out karmic retribution, he has no way of knowing that his actions are karmically ordained.[34] Moreover, karma does not say that every event or action is explained by karmic retribution. Rather, it is only every action done with desire that incurs a karmic debt.[35] In addition, since karmic debt is cumulative, if one has overall incurred a negative karmic debt, it is possible to reverse that trend through action with positive karmic consequences.[36] Therefore, karma ultimately cannot be applied fatalistically because it does not actually claim to be responsible for every event.

30 Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 14-15.
31 Lawrence A. Babb, "Destiny and Responsibility: Karma in Popular Hinduism," in *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry,* ed. Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 172.
32 Johannes Bronkhorst, *Karma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 98-100.
33 Kaufman, "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil," 24-26.
34 Chadha and Trakakis, "Karma and the Problem of Evil," 546-47.
35 Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma,* 26.
36 Ibid., 52-53.

Evil and Theodicy in Hindu Mythology

Unlike the dichotomy of good and evil in Christian theology, Hinduism does not contain a straightforward separation between the two. For instance, there are beings called *suras* and *asuras* in Hinduism which are roughly analogous to the concepts of angels and demons within an Abrahamic concept.[37] However, while *suras* can generally be equated with angels on the side of the gods and *asuras* can generally be equated with demons in opposition to the gods, there is not necessarily a clear distinction of virtue between the two. This is because, according to Hindu creation myths, the creator, Brahma or Prajapati, created both good and evil.[38]

An explanation for this is that the creator felt it was necessary for the universe to contain both good and evil in order to be complete. Another explanation says that the creator inadvertently created evil and that he was unable to undo his bringing evil into the world. Brahma is often considered a part of the Hindu trinity of primary deities, creator, preserver, destroyer,[39] yet he only has one major temple while the other two gods have thousands.[40] Some scholars suggest this may be because other gods offer salvation from evil while Brahma created it.

Another problem with dichotomizing good and evil in Hindu theology is that it is unclear which beings represent which. According to some Hindu legends, the difference between Hindu gods and demons is that the demons are aware of the proper order of the world whereas the gods are not. Unlike the gods, the demons are enlightened beings and, if they behave antagonistically towards humans, it is because they are aware of what is best for the universe as a whole, not just what is best for humans. However, the demons, while universally benevolent, are powerless compared to the gods who are wicked.[41] Because the gods have the greater strength, they subjugate the demons and selfishly establish themselves as the beings for humans to worship. Other texts describe the relationship between gods and demons as evolving out of the jealousy of the gods. The gods desire humans to ultimately be good, but in order for people to have an incentive to be good, there must be evil in the universe which pushes humankind towards the gods. Therefore, the reason demons or evil continues to exist within the universe is because the gods permit it.[42]

Since even the good or evil of the gods themselves is ambiguous, one might be tempted to conclude that Hindu gods are not benevolent and that Hindus wor-

---

37   Theodore Gabriel, "The Sura-Asura Theme in Hinduism," in *Angels and Demons: Perspectives and Practice in Diverse Religious Traditions,* ed. Peter G. Riddell and Beverly Smith Riddell (Hampshire, England: Ashford Colour Press Ltd, 2007), 126.

38   O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology,* 60.

39   Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva

40   Cort, John, (Lecture, REL-215 Hinduism, Denison University, April 3, 2014).

41   O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology,* 63.

42   Ibid., 87.

ship out of fear of divine retribution. However, this is not the case. As Wendy O'Flaherty points out, while Hindu gods may want humankind to worship them, it is usually out of a desire for the salvation of mankind that they want worship.[43] The gods might even go so far as to appear in forms of evil to bring humanity closer to salvation. According to O'Flaherty, it is this action of the gods which comprises another division of Hindu mythology: devotional mythology or *bhakti*.[44] The following story of the Pine Forest Sages is an example of how such devotional myths make use of evil.

In a cave in a pine forest, there was a group of men who are either heretics themselves or Brahmin priests (some texts even specify that they are Buddhists). Whoever the men are, the story goes to say that they have unabsolved sins. The god Shiva appears before them in the form of a heretic known as a Kapalika.[45] Shiva comes into the cave and begs for alms with a bowl made out of a human skull, an extreme example of an impure object. The priests in the cave are repulsed by this figure, not recognizing Shiva, and, depending on the source, they beat him or kill him. However, the priests ultimately end up recognizing that this impure figure is Shiva who behaves mercifully and, while his precise action varies according to the text, then offers them a blessing: if they become devoted to him and worship him, he will absolve their sins (which are unnamed) and grant them release or salvation, also known as *moksha*.[46]

The story of the Pine Forest Sages provides a counterpoint to the previous examples of ambiguous virtue amongst the Hindu gods. It also provides an alternative explanation to why the gods allow evil to exist in the world. In orthodox Hinduism, by not destroying all the demons, the gods allow evil to persist because "dharma is only…valuable, when adharma also exists to balance and to contrast with it."[47] Within the story of the Pine Forest Sages, *bhakti* mythology provides an alternative explanation for why there is evil. Because the gods want to provide *moksha* to humankind, they actually become evil to encourage people to new levels of devotion through which they can obtain salvation.

These two different interpretations of evil in Hindu mythology are different from each other and allow for very different interpretations of Hindu gods. However, according to O'Flaherty, this is perfectly acceptable. Hinduism is a religion which has developed without one single driving doctrine motivating it. For in-

---

43 Ibid., 378.
44 Ibid., 82-83.
45   Kapalikas are Hindus who worship Shiva with offerings of meat, blood and sexual fluids, all otherwise impure substances to orthodox Hindus. This is because Shiva himself once appeared in this form before the Pine-Forest Sages, shrouded in ritual impurity. See O'Flaherty 160-64 and 285.
46 O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology,* 316-17.
47 Ibid., 378.

stance, there are differing beliefs as to who is the Supreme Lord of the universe: Vaishnavas believe it's Vishnu, Shaivas believe it's Shiva and Shaktas believe it's Devi. Neither of these sects is technically wrong in their belief in a different Supreme Lord. All of these beliefs act alongside each other and each sect is true and valid for different people. In the concluding paragraph of *Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, O'Flaherty writes, "Hindu mythology superimposes on older views certain conflicting later views and balances the two… [T]hese views together provide a working solution to the problem of evil."[48] Therefore, in examining the question of theodicy within Hinduism and how it treats evil, while there appears to be multiple answers, all could be true, in some fashion, depending on the specific context.

Conclusion

For hundreds of years, philosophers, scholars and theologians have wrestled with questions of theodicy: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and "Why do good things happen to bad people?" Within the study of theology, these questions also include questions about the role of divine beings, specifically, "If there is a benevolent god, why does he/she/it allow for the existence of evil and suffering?" Hinduism treats these questions in unique ways.

First, it provides an answer to the first two questions with the doctrine of karma. Through a combination of the principle of cause-and-effect and the unique, South Asian conception of rebirth and reincarnation, karma gives an explanation for why both good and bad things befall people. Second, it possesses a unique mythology which contains at least two distinct explanations for why gods would allow evil to exist in the world.

While a religious scholar coming from a Christian background might be seeking to find a specific Hindu answer to theodicy and how it treats evil, the reality is that, within Hinduism, there rarely is a single, universal answer to any given question. For instance, while karma is a very rational answer to theodicy, if one is a believer of *bhakti* mythology, then he or she would probably relegate the importance of karma in comparison to the benevolence and power of his or her Supreme Lord or Lady. Unlike Christianity, within Hindu theology, there are no absolute universals. Therefore, in order to better understand how Hinduism treats evil and theodicy, one must examine multiple perspectives and the contexts in which they are applicable.

48 Ibid., 379.

WORKS CITED

Alamu, Akiti Glory. "The Concept of Karma in Hinduism and Christianity: An Appraisal." In *Asia Journal Of Theology* 23, (2009): 244-65.

Babb, Lawrence A. "Destiny and Responsibility: Karma in Popular Hinduism." In *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry,* edited by Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, 163-81. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion.* New York: Doubleday, 1967.

Bernstein, Richard J. "The Abuse of Evil." In *Deliver Us from Evil,* ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling, 100-114. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.

Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Karma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011.

Chadha, Monima and Nick Trakakis. "Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman." In *Philosophy East & West* 57, no. 4 (October 2007): 533-56.

Clooney, Francis X. "'For Your Own Good': Suffering and Evil in God's Plan According to One Hindu Theologian." In *Deliver Us from Evil,* ed. M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling, 169-185. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.

Cort, John. Lecture, REL-215 Hinduism, Denison University, January 28, 2014.

Cort, John. Lecture, REL-215 Hinduism, Denison University, April 3, 2014.

Deutch, Eliot. *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction.* Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1973.

Gabriel, Theodore. "The Sura-Asura Theme in Hinduism." In *Angels and Demons: Perspectives and practice in Diverse Religious Traditions,* edited by Peter G. Riddell and Beverly Smith Riddell, 126-139. Hampshire, England: Ashford Colour Press Ltd, 2007.

Inden, Ronald. "Hindu Evil as Unconquered Lower Self." In *Anthropology of Evil,* edited by David Parkin, 142-164. New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985.

Kaufman, Whitley R. P. "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil." In *Philosophy East & West* 55, no. 1 (January 2005): 15-32.

Kaufman, Whitley. "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics." In *Philosophy East & West* 57, no. 4 (October 2007): 556-60.

Kent, Eliza F. "'What's Written on the Forehead Will Never Fail': Karma, Fate, and Headwriting in Indian folktales." *Asian Ethnology* 68, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 1-26.

Kessler, Gary E. *Studying Religion: An Introduction Through Cases.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

Kuehn, Manfred. "How Banal Is Evil?" In *Deliver Us from Evil,* edited by M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling, 130-148. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.

Larrimore, Mark. "Evil as Privation: Seeing Darkness, Hearing Silence." In *Deliver Us from Evil,* edited by M. David Eckel and Bradley L. Herling, 149-165. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.

Macfarlane, Alan. "The Root of All Evil." In *The Anthropology of Evil*, edited by David Parkin, 57-76. New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985.

O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976.

Olivelle, Patrick, trans. *Upanishads.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Paden, William E. *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Parkin, David. Introduction to *The Anthropology of Evil*, edited by David Parkin, 1-25. New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985.

Reichenbach, Bruce R. *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990.

Taylor, Donald. "Theological Thoughts about Evil." In *The Anthropology of Evil*, edited by David Parkin, 26-41. New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1985.

Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.

Weber, Max. *Essays in Sociology.* Translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.