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THE CARDINAL VIRTUES IN THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING AND SĀMĀNYA DHARMA IN THE MANUSMṚTI: A COMPARATIVE ETHICAL STUDY

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Introduction

The genesis of this study is linked to the statement that captured my attention that “every moral question can be reduced to the consideration of the virtues.”¹ This statement from James F. Keenan, one of the influential contemporary catholic virtue ethicists, generated within me an interest to delve deeper into the study of virtue ethics. The work undertakes an in-depth analysis of the ethics of virtue, its contemporary relevance, and a comparative study of the Christian and Hindu understanding of virtue ethics and its practical implications for day-to-day life. This study commences by deepening

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¹James F. Keenan, “Virtue Ethics,” in *Christian Ethics*, ed. Bernard Hoose, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003, 84.

the understanding of the cardinal virtues in the Greek and Christian tradition and *dharma* in the *Manusmṛti*, one of the famous sources of Hindu ethics. The focus of this study is a comparative analysis of the cardinal virtues in the Christian and Hindu ethics, to decipher the areas of convergence, to build workable bridges between religious outlooks in view of fostering human relationships to strengthen unity and peace. To realize it, this study spells out a few proposals to give proper virtuous education from the early stages of life.

Relevance of the Study

In this age of secularisation, there is a growing danger of the disintegration of faith in real life and a consequent weakening of moral principles and goodness. Explaining the enduring positive effect of virtues, Pope Benedict XVI says, “while other goods ... pass from one to the other as in playing dice, virtue alone is an inalienable good and endures throughout life and after death.”² The *Manusmṛti* (4:238-239) also asks readers to mount up virtues and reap the benefits of good deeds in the other world. For in that world virtue alone endures as his companion. It is virtues that perfect the agent of action into becoming a moral person and which initiates the quest for eternal happiness and union with God.

The Second Vatican Council urge us to make sincere efforts to acknowledge, preserve, and encourage the moral truths found among non-Christians (*Nostra Aetate*, 2, 3). The Council also admonishes us, together with the members of other religions, to preserve and promote peace, human dignity, social justice and moral values (*Gaudium et Spes*, 29). This gave me the zest to pursue a comparative study. Such an exploration, I believe, is both contextually fruitful and enriching for a harmonious life.

Sources, Scope and Limitation

To develop this study, we make use of the *Dialogues of Plato*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ambrose’s exhortation, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, and teachings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas on virtues. Although in history there have been many philosophers and theologians who have contributed to the field of cardinal virtues, we limit our historical analysis to the teachings of the above mentioned

²St Basil, *Ad Adolescentes*, 5, as quoted in Benedict XVI, “St. Basil,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (8-15 August 2007), 3.

five main contributors. With the scope of understanding better the contemporary revival of virtue ethics, our main concern in this dissertation is to study the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (*Prima Secundae* and *Secunda Secundae*) on virtues. Though in *Manusmṛti* there are many elements which could be considered in our research, this study is limited solely to *dharma* with special reference to *sāmānya dharma*. This study also deals with the understanding of virtue ethics and *Dharma* in contemporary Christian and Hindu writings. For contemporary Christian understanding of cardinal virtues, this study considers mainly the perspective of James F. Keenan and the way he incorporates the cardinal virtues into virtue ethics in general.

The Structural Division (Synthesis)

This dissertation has five chapters. Since the kernel of the dissertation is the relevance of cardinal virtues and since contemporary discourses on virtue ethics are influenced by the classical Greek philosophy, the first chapter commences with a historical survey of the development of the concept of cardinal virtues in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. The principal virtues which Plato recommends for the people of the ideal city are wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Wisdom is attributed to guardians/rulers, courage to the military class, while self-control is to be practised by all. Justice is the most important virtue. It is adherence to justice that makes it possible for other virtues to be present and play their role. As humans are engaged in different kinds of activity of intellect, will and appetite, the same four virtues are found in the well ordered human soul as well. Plato believes that one who possesses knowledge is the most virtuous person. For Aristotle, goodness for human beings consists in *eudaimonia* (happiness). The highest happiness is achieved in the right exercise of the functions of one's character-related and intellect-related virtues. One becomes most happy when he/she acts in accordance with the highest form of virtue. The theory of virtues presupposes an ability to judge and to do the right thing in the proper place at the proper time in a proper way.

The second part of the first chapter deals with the traits of cardinal virtues in the Christian tradition, especially in Ambrose, Augustine and particularly in Thomas Aquinas. In Catholic teachings, it is Ambrose who first included in his writings the four virtues, namely, prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance and designated them as 'cardinal.' Ambrose taught that the character traits of persons with

cardinal virtues are the ability to control their passions by reason, the ability to observe a suitable moderation in desires and the ability to do everything that ought to be done at the right time and in the proper order. Augustine sees these four cardinal virtues as four forms of love of God. He distinguishes the ultimate good from material good. According to him, it is the virtues that lead one to the ultimate good and God alone can make human beings happy.

Among the scholastics, Thomas Aquinas is the most significant figure in the history of Catholic theological ethics. He gives a unitive understanding of the human body and soul. It is Aquinas who attributed a teleological nature to happiness, identifying it with the ultimate goal of the virtuous life. Aquinas says that in human beings there are two principles of human actions, namely, the reason and the appetite. Every human virtue perfects either a human's practical intellect or appetite. If it perfects human intellect, it is called an intellectual virtue (prudence); whereas, if it perfects one's appetite, it is called a moral virtue (justice, fortitude and temperance). A good life consists in the best use of rational power, as well as bringing the appetites under the control of right reason. Prudence cannot function without moral virtues and moral virtues cannot function without prudence.

The second chapter deals with the importance of virtue and virtue ethics in contemporary times. This chapter is vital for the thesis, as it presents some contemporary approaches to virtue ethics, and the new proposals regarding cardinal virtues on the basis of contemporary relational responsible anthropology, especially those offered by James F. Keenan, based on which the subsequent discussion in the thesis develops. In the history of ethics, after the time of Aquinas, there was a move towards making moral judgments on the basis of the commandments, duties and rules. The moral principles were rarely concerned with the pursuit of the good. Understanding the deficiencies in doing ethics, both before and after the Second Vatican Council, there was a return to virtue ethics and a person-centred moral thinking which inspired the faithful to live according to their conscience and to lead a virtuous life. This paved the way for modern virtue ethics, which works with the understanding of the self as self-determining being and of what one ought to become. It highlights human responsibilities, and their multiple relationships. At the same time it does not rule out the importance of normative reflection. Virtue ethics also focuses on a human's *teleological* nature which emphasizes humanity's ultimate goal. It is this *telos* which enables

one to desire, order the good and to understand the place of integrity and constancy in life.

In proposing a new list, Keenan had the following reasons in mind. First, the list of cardinal virtues of Aquinas is inadequate and simple, because they basically describes only about a just person. In Keenan's opinion, temperance and courage exist in order to help a person to be just and therefore, in effect, they are only auxiliary virtues. In a similar manner, the function of prudence is to determine the concrete means for justice, temperance and courage. Another point of limitation is the lack of relationality. A person cannot only be just, the demand to care for loved one's may conflict with the call to be fair. As described by Aquinas, each virtue perfects a particular power in us (ST, I-II, q.55, art.2). Justice perfects our will, prudence our reasoning, courage and temperance perfect our particular emotions. But we consider the person as fundamentally relational whose modes of relationality need to be realized rightly. In such an understanding, virtues need to perfect not merely the individual powers, but rather the way we relate with one another. It is to reinvigorate moral theology by integrating the various demands placed on the acting person today from family, friends, society and many other relationships that Keenan proposes a new list of cardinal virtues. He underscores that virtues do not perfect what we do, rather the way we do something and who we are in the mode of our relationships. The newly proposed cardinal virtues are: justice, fidelity, self-care and prudence. Keenan says that as relational beings, in general we are called to justice. Justice as a virtue orders our interior dispositions to have an ordered appreciation for the common good in which we treat all as equal. As relational beings specifically, we are called to fidelity which nurtures and sustains the bonds of special relationships. As relational beings uniquely, we are called to self-care. Self-care as a virtue pertains to how we live with ourselves and the way we see ourselves. Among these virtues, none is ethically prior or auxiliary to another and has to be pursued as an end in itself. And prudence integrates justice, fidelity and self-care. These cardinal virtues are common to everyone and therefore are accessible to all beyond the cultural and religious boundaries. They are cardinal because it is upon these fundamental hinges that hang the image of the moral person.

The third chapter makes an analytical study of *dharma* in the *Manusmṛti* with special emphasis on *sāmānya dharma* in order to decode the aspects of ethical principles common to both Christian

and Hindu religions. *Dharma* in the *Manusmṛiti* is the sum and substance of the laws and regulations for the social and individual life that was practised by the fore-fathers and sages. The word *dharma* refers to that which sustains and holds together the universe itself. *Dharma* is the essential foundation of things in general, and thus signifies 'truth'; it is one's duty, responsibility, imperative, and thereby 'moral obligation'; it is that which is right, virtuous, meritorious, and accordingly 'ethical'; and it is that which is required, or permitted through religious authority, and thus 'legal.' There are distinct divisions of *dharma*, such as, *sāmānya dharma*, *varṇāśrama dharma*-s, and *svadharmā*. It is faithfulness to *dharma* which makes a person good. Only after going through the stages of the householder and fulfilling the responsibilities attached to this stage regulated by *dharma* that one can attain *mokṣa*. The *sāmānya dharma*-s meant for entire human community are: non-violence, truth, self-control, not stealing, and cleanliness. This chapter also gives a critical evaluation of *Manusmṛiti*'s approach on women and caste system.

With the essential findings gleaned from the previous three chapters, the fourth chapter undertakes a comparative study of the Christian and Hindu virtue ethics in order to scrutinize the similitude of *sāmānya dharma* to contemporary understanding of the cardinal virtues. For instance, non-violence as a *dharma* is an attribute of the soul, the virtue of never inflicting pain on any living beings. It is a way of life by which one counters violence. Having the nature of justice and love that demands respect for human life, which is sacred, the non-violent persons love themselves in an unselfish way and are able to respect others.

Truth is the transparency of a person in his/her reason and will. A truthful person desires to do what is righteous and gives everyone one's due. Hence, truth has the characteristics of fidelity and justice. This study also upholds the fact that justice deals with the way we relate to others and the foundation of justice is the dignity of persons, as well as the value of all of God's creation. Justice related issues in society, such as gender discrimination, violence, corruption and environmental issues, are all signs of the absence of justice, truth and non-violence. Thus, these three virtues are converging since they have similar characteristics.

Temperance as understood in both religions is one and the same. Temperance guards sense desires from those that are contrary to good reason. Control of the mind is important, because mind

harmonizes everything towards a healthy personality. From a moral perspective, if we do not give priority to affective maturity and self-control, there will be an increase in the number of suicide, sexual abuse, corruption, violence, etc. These vices go against the human rights and dignity which are against justice. Thus, temperance is important to be just, but not a cardinal virtue.

Abstaining from stealing has also the character of the virtue of justice. People who practise it never try to possess what belongs to another. Those who exploit others unfairly and possess their belongings without consent are equal to thieves. Those actions are contrary to fidelity and to the virtue of justice, truth and non-violence. Fortitude enables one to stand firm against those which threaten human rights, truth, fidelity, and dignity. Fortitude receives its proper significance only in relation to justice and prudence.

The virtue of cleanliness is fundamental to an individual's happiness, harmony and order in life. Habitual training for and knowledge of the value of good manners and cleanliness of the physical body, clothes and surroundings are required to maintain a person in good health. Such a context gives happiness and contentment to oneself and others. In this sense, cleanliness also has the character of justice and self-care. Thus, among *sāmānya dharma* non-violence and truth are similar to justice and the other three virtues of temperance, abstention from stealing and cleanliness are also part and parcel of justice, fidelity and self-care.

These virtues common in both religions open up possibilities for the mutual exchange of moral enlightenment and fraternal living. Hence, virtue ethics can be extended to the realm of interreligious activities for a renewed society.

Blending together the insights gained from the previous chapters, the fifth chapter engages a discussion of the practical implications of virtue ethics in human being's day-to-day life. Wherever people work together for a common purpose, it is necessary to have some virtue-based policies and to have a core ethical forum to deal with religious and political issues by means of dialogue and possible collaborative involvement in society.

Authors from Plato to modern times affirm that the activities of individuals and society to re-awaken the world will be more effective only if we educate the next generation with the knowledge of what is virtuous. If cardinal virtues are common to all, they can be taught impartially and objectively. Therefore, we propose certain ways to

foster a virtuous disposition on the part of the parents, teachers and the respective faith communities from the early stages of education.

Conclusion

I hope that this study has contributed a small but significant step in understanding the contemporary revival of virtue ethics and in finding similarities between Hindu and Christian religious teachings on virtues, especially cardinal virtues. This study, I hope, will stimulate further reflections and facilitate opportunities to appreciate the common ground in both religions to live and work together for the common good. The virtue-based guidelines and the steps suggested for interreligious involvement will strengthen unity and promote cooperation between Christians and Hindus in their joint efforts, to be prudent and act as remedial agents in times of communal violence and religious conflicts. This will further enhance the dignity of human beings and motivate the followers of these religions to stand for justice while building up fidelity, harmony and peace. Such interreligious activities will be more effective, if we educate the next generation to lead a virtuous life.