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SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION: AN INDIAN READING WITH THE ŚRUTI AND SMṚTI TEXTS

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Abstract

It is a comparative study of the relation of the 'Śruti and Smṛti' literature of Hinduism with the Catholic position of 'Scripture and Tradition,' for a hermeneutical investigation. There is no question of duality among Śruti and Smṛti scriptures; just as śabda (word) cannot be separated from its artha (meaning), Śruti and Smṛti texts cannot be understood or interpreted independently of each other. Maintaining harmony of Śruti and Smṛti is the metaphysical jewel of religious wisdom that we can assimilate from the Hinduism. While Śruti gives Hinduism its identity and character, the Smṛti tradition represents its growth and development. Śruti represents the soul of Hinduism, the Smṛti tradition forms the body of Hinduism. One can find some striking similarities between the scripture and tradition of Catholic Church with Śruti and Smṛti texts of Hinduism. Both accept the importance of tradition in scripture. This similar position of the Catholic Church and the Hindu scriptures gives ample opportunity for Bible scholars and theologians of the Local Church for dialoguing with the Indian tradition for enriching and developing its own Scriptural Doctrines.

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Introduction

In Hindu religion, both *Śruti* (Revelation) and *Smṛti* (Tradition) texts together constitute the scripture and for that reason, with regard to the matters of scripture, tradition is given its due importance, which is having some shading with that of the Catholic position. Max Müller says, “All progress in human knowledge is achieved through comparisons.”¹ The Ṛgvedic *mantra*, “Let noble thoughts come to us from every side,”² also expresses the same spirit of willingness to listen and discover more from other philosophical customs and traditions. It is through its positive and creative encounter with other cultures that Church could also remain a meaningful presence in the world. In his encyclicals, *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II makes it very clear that Church is not opposed to any culture, and indeed positively, it is always open to other cultures and engages itself with them to adopt divine forms which are alien to it. Pope reminds that in India particularly, it is the duty of Christians to draw from this ancient rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought.³ This noble task is undertaken here, with a purpose of enriching the scriptural theology of the Catholic Church.

The Scriptural Monism of *Śruti* and *Smṛti* Texts

The Hindu religious tradition has two sets of sacred texts, which are generally classified as *Śruti* and *Smṛti*. *Śruti* means “that which is heard” and it is the revelatory part of the Hindu scriptures, consisting of texts from Vedas to Upanishads. The Vedas are called *Śruti* because they are divinely “heard” by the sages, and also because they are transmitted orally from master to disciple, justifying the meaning of *Śruti* as audition. *Smṛti* means “that which is remembered” and is considered as part of tradition. It stands for the collective experience that has been recorded, codified and ratified for posterity by a community. The function of *Smṛti* writings is to clarify the obscurities of the Vedas and to interpret them properly and therefore, they are interpretive in nature and prescribe and caution in

¹Max Müller, *Natural Religion*, London: Longmans, 1892, 417-418.

²*Ā no bhadrāḥ kṛtavo yantu viśvataḥ*, (Ṛgveda: 1-89-1).

³John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 72.

all matters of *dharma*, as the *Manusmṛti*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*⁴ and similar other works do. “*Smṛti* is a great story-teller, codifier, teacher, punisher, revealer, foreteller and guide.”⁵ *Śruti* and *Smṛti* scriptures are not considered to hold the same degree of revelation; where there is a conflict between the two, *Śruti* takes precedence over *Smṛti*. *Śruti* constitutes the prime authority and *Smṛti* amounts to only a second authority. Again, in contrast to *Śruti*, the *Smṛti* texts are the works of human authors (*purusheya*). But at the same time, one cannot deny the fact that from a practical point of view the *Śruti* scriptures (literature) are partially or completely cut off from the religious practices of daily life and are largely based on and shaped by the *Smṛti* tradition. Thus, though the *Śruti* is regarded the ultimate source of *dharma*, in practice, it is to the *Smṛti* that the people from all over India turn to for the explanation of their religious duties and usages. For example, the *Bhagavad Gītā* (“Song of God”), which is perhaps the most influential of any single Indian religious text, is part of *Smṛti*. The same is the case with *Rāmāyaṇa*, another popular text of Hinduism.

Language is the combination of sound and its meaning and in the Indian linguistic philosophy, this concept of *śabda* and *artha* (= word and sense) is a typical manifestation of an innate relationship. This linguistic relation can find some remarkable resemblances with the revelation of *Śruti* and *Smṛti* literature. Just as *Śabda-tattva* (Word-principle)⁶ has taken the form of *śabda* and *artha*, from a lingo-scriptural point of view it can be argued that it also got bifurcated into the sacred texts of *Śruti* and *Smṛti*. As the form of language and the form of reality are identical, the essence of *Śruti* and the essence of *Smṛti* too are identical. There is no question of duality among *Śruti* and *Smṛti* scriptures; just as *śabda* cannot be separated from its *artha*, *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts cannot be understood or interpreted independently of each another. Just like the linguistic monism of Bharṭṛhari, perhaps this may be better termed as a kind of “Scriptural monism or *Śabdādvaitam*.”⁷

⁴ *Manusmṛti* is the ancient legal code of Hinduism and *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are two of its great epics. The ordinary people use them as their important scriptures.

⁵ Julius Lipner, *Hindus - Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Cambridge: Routledge, 2012, 76.

⁶ Brahman or God (Logos) is understood as the Eternal Word principle.

⁷ Bharṭṛhari is an Indian linguistic philosopher, grammarian and poet, who lived in the sixth century (CE). He is the author of the *Vākyapadīya* (“Words in a

Kālidāsa, the great Sanskrit poet of India, begins his famous work *Rahuvamśa* by invoking the mighty God Śiva and his consort Pārvati, who are united like word and its meaning: “To learn word and meaning, I salute the parents of the universe, the Daughter of the Mountain and the Supreme Lord, who are united as the word and the meaning”⁸ (*Rahuvamśa* I.1). Here, Kālidāsa makes use of the linguistic unity of *śabda* and *artha* to penetrate the divine unity of Śiva and Pārvati. Similarly, the linguistic unity of *śabda* and *artha* can also be attributed to the scriptural unity of the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts. In this connection, it is also significant to note the observation of A. Ramamurty: According to him, the *Śruti* and the *Smṛti* traditions can be philosophically viewed in terms of the two major faculties of human being.

They represent the two dominant aspects of human life: one representing the human intellect and the other the human heart, or one representing the rational and even scientific outlook of human being and the other, the emotional or devotional side of human being. The *Śruti* stream of tradition is based more on human’s intellect and tries to understand the nature and meaning of the world in a dispassionate and detached way, while in the *Smṛti* tradition, the heart plays an important role in understanding the nature and meaning of the world in a more passionate and involved manner. But, both can be the source of religion or both can give rise to the religious way of life if they are divinely inspired.⁹

The above-mentioned differences between the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts may be summarized as follows:

Sentence”), on the philosophy of language, according to the *Śabdadvaita* (“Word non-dualism”) school of Indian philosophy. The expression “Scriptural monism” is used here to convey the meaning of relation between the two Scriptural traditions of Hinduism i.e., *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts.

⁸*Vāgarthāviva samprktau vāgarthapratipattayē
Jagataḥ pitarau vandē pārvaṭīparamēśvarau*

Rahuvamśa is a Sanskrit epic poem by the most celebrated Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa. It narrates, in 19 cantos, the stories related to the Raghu dynasty and begins with this particular prayer. Its English translation is: “For the correct grasping of words and their sense, I bow to Pārvati and Parameśvara Śiva who are the parents of the universe and are connected together like words and their meaning.”

⁹A. Ramamurty, *The Philosophical Foundations of Hinduism*, New Delhi: DKP, 2000, 60-61.

<i>Śruti</i>	<i>Smṛti</i>
1. <i>Śruti</i> etymologically means 'what is heard'	<i>Smṛti</i> means 'what is remembered'
2. <i>Śruti</i> is revelation	while, <i>Smṛti</i> is tradition
3. <i>Śruti</i> is manifestation	while, <i>Smṛti</i> is its interpretation
4. <i>Śruti</i> is <i>apurusheya</i>	while, <i>Smṛti</i> is <i>purusheya</i>
5. The authority of <i>Śruti</i> is primary	while, <i>Smṛti</i> is secondary
6. The authority of <i>Śruti</i> is acceptable to all,	While, <i>Smṛti</i> is not accepted by all
7. <i>Śruti</i> is considered 'human Intellect'	while <i>Smṛti</i> considered 'human heart'

Though traditionally such divisions are made between the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts, from a scientific point of view, I do not think it is wise to make these categorical distinctions between them, because, there is a *Smṛti* dimension even in the *Śruti* texts: As first there was an oral tradition of *Śruti* and it got codified only in a later period. The written tradition of *Śruti* is the result of *Smṛti* (recollection) on the oral tradition. The written scriptures of all religions are but mere traditions, so also, the written Vedas. Though it is called *apaurusheya*, it is a kind of *Smṛti* – a recollection of what is heard. Because of it, for the correct understanding of the written scriptures, one has to go beyond it to get access to the real *apaurusheya* revelation. Since revelation is not purely a one-sided activity, there should be an active role for human beings in receiving and assimilating it, which of course presupposes the limitations of human conditions.

Religion: A Harmony of *Śruti* and *Smṛti*

Maintaining harmony of *Śruti* and *Smṛti*, just as in the case of *śabda* and *artha*, is the metaphysical jewel of religious wisdom that we can assimilate from Hinduism. While *Śruti* gives Hinduism its identity and character, the *Smṛti* tradition represents its growth and development. Hence, Hinduism cannot be identified either with the *Śruti* or with the *Smṛti* tradition. Both of them are integral to

Hinduism and help in comprehending its nature and meaning. As Ramamuthy says,

We may say that, while *Śruti* represents the soul of Hinduism, the *Smṛti* tradition forms the body of Hinduism. The development of Hinduism, its richness and integral character are due to constant interaction between the two traditions in which each tried to influence the other. We find in the history of Hinduism, a subtle form of tension between *Śruti* and *Smṛti*, and the development of Hinduism and its integral character are due to significant efforts made by various thinkers and saints in reconciling and harmonising the two traditions. Hinduism is what it is due to such efforts. This process continues as long as Hinduism remains alive.¹⁰

Thus, Hinduism always maintains a healthy relationship between revelation and tradition or beliefs and practices. They are complementary to each other and hence, proper attention is given to both. These lessons of proper integration of *Śruti* and *Smṛti* elements can be better observed in *Bhagavad Gītā*. The *Gītā* is considered the epitome of the Upanishads. It is the immortalizing milk of the Upanishadic cows, milked by Kṛṣṇa, for the sake of Arjuna.¹¹ Swami Vivekananda says,

Than the *Gītā* no better commentary on the Vedas has been written or can be written. The essence of the *Śruti* or the Upanishads is hard to be understood, seeing that there are so many commentators, each one trying to interpret in his own way. Then the Lord Himself comes, He who is the inspirer of the *Śrutis*, to show us the meaning of them, as the preacher of the *Gītā*, and today, India wants nothing better, the world wants nothing better than that method of interpretation.¹²

According to K.N. Upadhyaya, most of the metaphysical elements of the *Gītā* such as the concept of eternity and immortality of *Ātman*, the absoluteness and transcendence of Brahman, its negative and paradoxical characterization etc., are drawn from the Upanishads.¹³ Further, if the teaching of the *Gītā* is critically analysed, neither does it reject the authority of the Vedas, nor does it accept Vedic

¹⁰A. Ramamurty, *The Philosophical Foundations of Hinduism*, vi.

¹¹*Dugdham gītāmṛtaṁ mahat sarvōpanishadō gāvō
Dōgdhā gōpālanandanaḥ pārthō vatsaḥ sudhirbhōktā*
(All the Upanishads are like cows.

The milker is the son of the cowherd, Krishna;
Arjuna, son of Prutha, is the calf;

the men of purified intellect are the drinkers and the milk is the supreme nectar of Gita).

Swami Vivekananda, *Selection from the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2001, 313-314.

¹³K.N. Upadhyaya, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavad- Gītā*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2008, 110-114.

ritualism as a means of salvation. According to the *Gītā*, *moksha* (=liberation) can be attained by the knowledge of *Ātman* (=Self) and not by the performance of the *yajñas* (=sacrifices). The exalted character of the Vedic gods is also not accepted by the *Gītā*. The *Gītā*'s reaction to the Vedic heritage is one of progressive assimilation and integration of Veda, into an entirely new world-view and new ethics.¹⁴

The Relation of Scripture and Tradition in the Catholic Position

Now, let us look into how scripture and tradition is viewed in the Catholic Church. It is held that there are two sources for Christian revelation, the scripture, and tradition. As Vatican II says, "Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church."¹⁵ But, it is an undeniable fact that there was a tension between the tradition and scripture from the beginning of Christianity onwards. In the formula '*sola Scriptura*' the reformists rejected tradition in all its forms. However, it should be admitted that the Bible is not the first source of revelation, either in order of time or in the logical order, as it originated from the tradition, which is wider in its ambit than scripture. There was a gap of several decades between the public ministry of Jesus and the writing down of his words and deeds by the authors of the Gospel. During this time, what was known about Jesus should have been handed on orally. Hence Christian Scriptures are part of tradition as they are the accumulated written expression of the tradition at a particular time and space. For example, we learn from the introduction to Luke's Gospel (Lk 1-4) that when he set about its composition, he had a fair number of gospels available. He evidently not only read these, but used them. In the Eucharistic narrative of Saint Paul, given in eleventh chapter of Corinthians, we see Paul praising his readers for maintaining the Christian traditions that he delivered to them (1 Cor 11:2). The tradition is this: "that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you: do this in remembrance of me'" (11:23-24). Similarly the cup after supplying, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me" (11:25). Then Paul continues without a break into his own interpretation: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (11:26). This formulation is Paul's own, and it enables

¹⁴J.T.F. Jordens, *Yajñas in the Bhagavad-Gītā Asian Studies*, 283-92.

¹⁵Vatican II *Dei Verbum*, 10.

us to see that the sayings of Jesus received modifications as they were handed along in the oral tradition.

Again, the seventh chapter of the First Letter to Corinthians is a fascinating blend of authoritative tradition, derived from the Lord and transmitted, with interpretation, through the Christian communities with the Apostle's own decision on matters related to the tradition, authoritative because of his apostolic call (7:25) and his possession of the spirit of God (7:40). This is to say that in his view the original tradition is not something absolutely fixed or static. It is a tradition which could have been, was, and is being supplemented and reinterpreted as it was and is handed down.¹⁶ In short, the above facts make it very clear that the Christian scripture comes from the tradition handed over to the first generation by Christ During the first generation of Christians – say roughly from 30 to 70 AD; that is, the core of tradition was essentially coextensive with the Gospel. From these oral traditions, only some of them were put into written form at a later period. John 21:25 states that “there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” Thus, scripture is the tradition that preserved in books, especially in the canonical books.

Scripture and Tradition: An Indian Reading with the *Śruti* and *Smṛti* Texts

One can find some striking similarities between relationship between the scripture and tradition according to the Catholic Church with *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts of Hinduism. Our purpose here is never to establish an identity between them; rather to observe some striking similarities that exist between them. Both accept the importance of tradition in scripture. The *Śruti* texts, which are considered as part of tradition, literally means memory. This memory dimension has a vital role in the formation of Christian scripture and tradition. It is only from the memory of the early Church that Gospels were formulated, in which various customs, principles, tales played their significant roles. It is indeed a fact that Jesus did not teach like the scribes, but with incomparable authority. For example, the Gospels are nothing but the memory of the Church on the death and the resurrection of the Lord. Again, the Eucharist or anamnesis, which is at the origin and at the centre of tradition in its full sense implies more than what is meant by remembrance. Thus, as already pointed

¹⁶Joseph F. Kelly, *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition*, Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1976, 4.

out, we should genuinely admit the fact that the Christian scripture and tradition is the result of a memory. But, for the Reformers, tradition, as it had been handed down to the Church, needed to be attacked and reformed at its very basis as a man-made system which stifled the Gospel. For them, tradition was simply the uncritical sum total of the Church's past and hence it had to be rejected as norm of faith. But from an objective study of the various facts of the formulation of scripture, it is something which does not stand to truth. Hence, it may be concluded from the above comparative analysis that the position of Hinduism and Catholic Church, which give its due importance to tradition in the matters of revelation, is something that sounds reasonable.

In Indian linguistic philosophy, *Śabda-bodha* (=Verbal interpretation) is the knowledge that is produced in the hearer by the utterance. It is the message, contained in, and communicated through, the utterance of the sentence. It represents the meaning of each word, along with its semantic connection with others in the cluster. If it is essential to understand the meaning of ordinary sentences of human communication, it is all the more important for scriptures too. In any communication, including the religious revelation, there is a speaker as well as a hearer. In ordinary communications in order to understand the meaning of a sentence, its words are examined dividing further into smaller units such as subject, predicate, bases (*prakṛti*) and affixes (*pratyaya*) for the sake of grammatical description. Similarly, to understand the meaning of a book, it is examined by dividing that single indivisible whole into sections, chapters, paragraphs, sentences and words. In the same way, in hermeneutics a single integrated message of a scripture is analysed into different traditions and scriptures for the sake of interpretation and easy understanding. Hence, just as the meanings of the individual words of a sentence require one another, the different texts of the same tradition need one another. This mutual requirement is a property of the meanings as well as a property of the listener.

The Vedas, as *Śruti*, have a *śabda-bodha* dimension, just as *śabda* is irrelevant without its meaning element (*artha* or *śabdārtha*). In Scripture also the meaning dimension of different texts should not be underestimated. Very often, with regard to scriptural matters, be it *Śruti* or *Smṛti*, only the revelatory aspect is emphasized everywhere. There is a role only for the speaker and the hearer's role is ignored.

The term 'revelation' is derived from the Latin verb *revelo* (noun is *revelatio*), which means 'to remove the veil,' 'to manifest'; hence,

revelation literally means, the act of making known to a person something which was earlier 'hidden' and not known to him/her before.

There is a revelation in the revelation, as understanding a revelation is in itself a new revelation. What is heard (*Śruti*) is the 'First Revelation' and understanding of that heard word is another revelation, which may be considered as the 'Second Revelation.' The first one is 'the heard word (that which is heard)' whereas, the second one is 'the understood word (that which is understood).' It is through this second revelation that the first revelation becomes meaningful, as the word is really revealed through its meaning to the speaker, and linguistically, it is through *śabda-bodha* that any revelation becomes a reality for the listener. That is why Ṛgveda declares that the Vedas do not reveal themselves to just anyone who hears them:

Yet certain ones, though seeing, may not see her,
and other ones, though hearing, may not hear her.
But to some the Word reveals herself quite freely,
like fair-robed bride surrendering to her husband (RV X.71.4).

Vedic Revelation is the communication of truth from a divine person to human beings. It is the result of a growth of many centuries and hence, it cannot be a simple and transparent creed admitting easy definition and classification. The concept of God, as revealed by the Vedas, seems to have a gradual progression through its various stages. "The process of god-making, in the factory of man's mind cannot be seen as clearly, anywhere else, as in the Ṛgveda. We have in it the freshness and splendour of the morning of man's mind still undulled by past custom or fixed routine."¹⁷

Scripture is the language of a spiritual discovery, and in its journey from the known to the unknown, it always uses natural language with all its symbols, metaphors and myths for explaining one's belief. Scriptural ideas cannot be communicated if these metaphors are not employed. Without them, religion would cease to be religion, as even the idea of God is not essential to religion, but myths constitute an inalienable part of religion and no religious view or doctrine can be communicated without them.¹⁸ Thus, it is a fact that all scriptures express their truths, stories, life events,

¹⁷S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, 73.

¹⁸N.S.S. Raman, *Problems of Interpretation and Translation of Philosophical and Religious Texts*, Shimla: IAS, 2004, 144.

prayers and religious rituals, basically through symbols or myth, which negate themselves in their literal meaning and affirm their self-transcending meaning. For example, the *Purusha-sūkta* of the Ṛgveda describes God as a person, but with thousands of heads, thousands of eyes, thousands of feet, encompassing the universe and standing high above it. Such qualifications make it clear that no earthly person is described here.

Conclusion: *Yadhā Divyakāruṇya Bhakti Tathā Kristyāni* (=As the Eucharistic Devotion So the Christian)

From the above exploration, it may be concluded that both in the Hindu as well as in the Catholic traditions, there are some significant parallels with regard to the theme of revelation, as it is understood and interpreted. Both acknowledge the creative role played by tradition in the process of understanding, communicating and codifying the original revelation received by an individual or community. More interestingly, it is also observed that some of the Upanishads do admit that there are wisdoms higher than that of the scripture or Vedas. One can observe its Catholic parallel in the Eucharist, by the Undecaying is apprehended and is regarded as higher than the scripture.

According to *Muṇḍaka Upanishad*, there are two kinds of knowledge that are to be known, the higher knowledge (*parā-vidyā*) and the lower knowledge (*aparā-vidyā*). Of these, the knowledge that we get from scripture, that is from *Śruti* (Revelation, i.e., from the four Vedas, namely, the *Ṛgveda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sāma Veda*, and the *Atharva Veda*) and *Smṛti* (Tradition, i.e., Phonetics, Ritual, Grammar, Etymology, Metrics and Astrology), is lower and the higher is that by which the Undecaying is apprehended (M.U.1.1.5).¹⁹ The Veda is not to be called Veda for there is no veda in Veda. That is truly the Veda by which the Supreme is known.²⁰

Catholic Church is usually known as the Church of the Eucharist, as it gives more importance to Eucharist, while the Protestant Churches are generally considered the Church of the Bible, as they give more importance to the Scripture. In the Catholic tradition, Eucharist is considered the “the source and summit” of the Christian

¹⁹ *Tratrāparā ṛg-vedo yajur-vedaḥ sāma-vedo'tharva-vedaḥ śikshā kalpo vyākaraṇam nīruktam chando jyotisham-iti. Atha parā yayā tad aksharam adhigamyate* (*Muṇḍaka Upanishad*, 1.1.5). See S. Radhakrishnanan, *The Principal Upanishad*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, 672.

²⁰ S. Radhakrishnanan, *The Principal Upanishad*, 672.

life (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1324; *Lumen Gentium* §11) and the above teaching of *Muṇḍaka Upanishad* is something similar to that of the position of the Catholic Church as it considers the wisdom that we get from the Eucharist as higher than the Scripture by which “the Undecaying is apprehended.” Because of the Church’s paramount importance for the Eucharist, there is a saying, *yadhā divyakārūnya bhakti tathā kristyāni*, (as the devotion to the Eucharist so a Christian), which means the norm for being a Christian is one’s devotion to the Eucharist. This parallel position of the Catholic Church and the Upanishadic teaching gives ample opportunity for biblical scholars and theologians of the Local Church for dialoguing with the Indian tradition for enriching and developing its own Scriptural Doctrines.