

BOOK REVIEW

Rajiv Malhotra. (2012). *Being different: An Indian challenge to western universalism*. (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India), pp. 474, h/b, Rs. 599, ISBN 978-93-5029-190-0)

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“BEING DIFFERENT” emphasizes how to celebrate and BE DIFFERENT. Rajiv Malhotra, the author of this book, wrote this book as the result of 40 years of practice under several Indian spiritual masters, combined with a serious study of Indian and Western philosophical systems and histories. The author, Rajiv Malhotra, is an Indian-American researcher, writer, speaker and public intellectual on current affairs as they relate to civilizations, cross-cultural encounters, religion and science. A scientist by training and now full-time founder-director of the Infinity Foundation in Princeton, NJ, he also serves as Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Center for Indic studies at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and as advisor to various organizations.

The book’s main objective is to disprove the Western claims for universalism. In this book, when the author uses ‘the West,’ his focus is on American and European History and Culture, because they are most prototypical of the Western identity today. He tries to uncover the roots of the West’s self-understanding and its approach to India. Further, he gives special attention to the role of Germany in shaping the Western approach to Dharma.

The author ignites some questions in readers’ minds like: Why do religious differences have to be encouraged? Is it better being different or getting digested? What is cultural digestion and how does it create serious problems? Why mutual respect is better than tolerance? How does the West and the East react to chaos, complexities, and ambiguities? How does Indian civilization differ from Western history-centric religion? The arguments which the author gives for all these questions make the reader understand what is present in Indian civilization or Hindu worldview and how is that gets digested in Western universalism.

The author has done detailed research on Indian worldview and Western religions’ worldview. He uses the traditional Dharma discourse – Purvapaksha, the method that involves building a deep understanding of the opponent’s point of view before condemning it. In Chapter 1 (“The audacity of difference”), Malhotra states that purvapaksha “is the traditional dharmic approach to rival schools. It is a dialectical approach, taking a thesis by an opponent (‘purvapakshin’) and then providing its rebuttal (‘khandana’) to establish the protagonist’s views (‘siddhanta’). The purvapaksha tradition required any debater first to argue from the perspective of his opponent in order to test the validity of his understanding of

the opposing position, and from there to realize his own shortcomings.” The author strongly advocates mutual respect rather than religious tolerance. He makes the readers to understand easily by quoting ‘no husband and wife would appreciate being told that his or her presence at home was being *tolerated*. Tolerance, in short, is an outright insult. Whereas mutual respect merely means that, ‘I am respected for my faith, with no compulsion for others to adopt or practice it’. In this chapter, adding to the terms religious tolerance and mutual respect, the author has coined a term “difference anxiety.” This term refers to ‘the mental uneasiness caused by the perception of difference combined with a desire to diminish, conceal, or eradicate it.’ This chapter describes the ways by which the difference anxiety pushes the western thoughts towards the homogeneous ideas, beliefs, and identity. As a way of resolving difference, the western civilizations take out the best elements of other religions, place them in their own concepts, and formulate themselves as progressive races. This categorization privileges the western gaze and enables it to declare itself as the universal norm for others to emulate. This chapter gives the historical evidence of slow invasion of the West in Indian culture, which later made Indians feel proud to follow the west and feel ashamed or inferior calling themselves as Indian. This leads to the digestion of the so-called inferior religion by the West. When a particular civilization labels itself in the position of superiority, it tends to dominate the less powerful civilization and kill the less powerful religion. In this chapter, the author strongly claims ‘the cross-fertilization among cultures can be sustained longer than the merging of one into another.’ To give more clarity, he speaks about the Indian traditions that embody the approach of difference with mutual respect based on the radical idea that differences are not a problem to be solved.

Having discussed the importance of *difference with mutual respect* in Chapter 1, he moves on to Chapter 2 (“Yoga: Freedom from history”). This chapter mainly focuses on giving clarity to the readers that Indian culture is not history-centric but inner science. In Dharmic tradition, through spiritual practices, an ordinary man can recover the ultimate truth and can understand the true self and the highest truth. Dharmic emphasis on an individual’s ever-present divine potential runs contrary to the Judeo-Christian emphasis on ‘salvation from sin’. From the Dharmic point of view, the Judeo-Christian fixation on history is strange. For the West’s continuous claim that the stories on India are entirely mythical with no historical evidence, author explains very clearly that Dharmic spiritual practices do not rely on some anthropological values. Further he says ‘truth is not dependent on history; rather, history is a manifestation of it’. Thus, Dharmic relation between history and myth is not comparable to Western relation between truth and fiction. This understanding of highest truth never showed Indian sense of manifest destiny to rule the world. Having explained very clearly the inner science of Dharmic worldview, he questions the western religion: Will the western worldview exist if their history is destroyed?

Making the readers to understand the history-centrism of Western worldview, he moves to Chapter 3 (“Integral unity and synthetic unity”). Here he explains integral unity as “ultimately ONLY the whole exists; the parts that make up the whole have but a RELATIVE existence. The whole is independent and indivisible.” It can be discovered and experienced through spiritual practices. According to the Dharmic worldview, creation is not separate from God and God is not merely the creator (the external force) of the world. However, as per the Abrahamic faith, synthetic unity starts with the parts that EXIST separately from one another. According to the Western worldview, physical and non-physical parts have independent existence and are linked by external force i.e. the divine power.

The Judeo-Christian worldview is based on the separate essences for God, the world and the human souls. This result has been a forced unity of separate entities, and such a unity always feels threatened to disintegrate and remains synthetic at its best. In Dharmic worldview, everything emerges from unified WHOLE. Moreover, this makes the readers understand God is the world.

After highlighting that God IS the world, the author goes to Chapter 4 (“Order and Chaos”). After reading about the synthetic unity, readers can comprehend very clearly the author’s view of the deep-rooted anxiety of western worldview towards chaos, uncertainty, and complexity. To make it clear that Dharmic worldview is decentralized and is flexible with chaos, the author brings in Sri Aurobindo’s quotes on decentralization that “unity must be created, but not necessary uniformity.” Adding to this, the chapter describes how Dharmic worldview sees chaos as a creative catalyst built into the cosmos to balance out order and hence it adopts a more relaxed attitude towards it. In this chapter, the author gives a beautiful analogy – Dharmic as forest and Judeo-Christian as desert. This analogy will help readers get a clear idea of Dharmic worldview’s flexibility towards *chaos*.

In Chapter 5 (“Non-translatable Sanskrit versus Digestion”), the author argues about the problematic impact of translating and representing the Dharmic worldview in western frameworks. Dharmic worldview is in Sanskrit. This is the reason why Hindu worldview cannot be translated on western framework. In Sanskrit, the fundamental sounds have a link to the experience of the object they represent i.e. the root sound and vibrations. This chapter clearly states how the digestion happens due to this kind of translation to western worldview, which actually cannot be translated at all.

Understanding about the non-translatable Sanskrit when readers travel along with the author takes the reader to Chapter 6 (“Contesting western Universalism”). He explains it in detail with a case study citing Germany in western digestion and synthesis. The author very clearly claims universalism cannot be western, Chinese, French or any other. He says the word ‘Western

Universalism' is an Oxymoron. It assumes that it is superior to all and so it should be the norm for all the world's peoples. In this chapter, the author strongly condemns Western universalism and mapping other religions on western worldview.

The author accepts that Purvapaksha is challenging not only to westerners. Those on the Dharmic side will also require education and a sincere, open commitment. There is need of recovering the practice of Purvapaksha and Dharmic leadership back in India. A formal study of the West on Dharmic terms is needed. Some study of the West has happened but on an occasional basis and has not been institutionalized or perfected over time. It is similar to the manner the West has done with respect to the study of Dharmic societies.

After reading this book, the readers will admire the detailed work of the author Rajiv Malhotra and understand the importance of being different. This book will bring to Indians a feeling of pride in being an Indian and will make them take some steps in not getting digested.