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Vedic Anarchism

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*“My dear Arjuna, because you are never envious of me,
I shall impart to you this most secret wisdom,
Knowing which you shall be relieved
Of the miseries of material existence.”
— Bhagavad Gita As It Is, 9.1*

*“Lead me from the unreal to the Real,
Lead me from darkness to light,
Lead me from death to immortality.”
— Incantation, the Upanishads*

*“Freedom is free of the need to be free;
Free your mind and your ass will follow
(The Kingdom of Heaven is within!)”
— Funkadelic*

Despite the antiquity of the Vedic religion, very little exists on the connection between Vedic philosophy and anarchism. The roots of anarchism rest in the Vedic faith tradition of the Indian sub-continent, formerly known as Hinduism. Before I go in depth on

this subject, I would like to clear up what I consider a major issue with the nomenclature of this wide-ranging belief system with 1.15 billion followers worldwide. Much like Mohammedanism as a label for Islam, the widespread usage of the terms Hindu and Hinduism originate in the racist Victorian writings of British colonizers and Orientalists from America and Germany.

During the 20th Century, “Mohammedanism” began to go away as the accepted label, perhaps owing to the theological fact that Muslims do not worship Mohammed and are explicitly dualistic in their theism. “Hindu” relates to the Indus River, a mighty river indeed, but hardly representative of the breadth of this religion’s geographic origins. Other terms describing this belief system from the Sanskrit language are *Sanatana Dharma* (eternal truth) and *Vedanta* (the end of knowledge), while *Veda* itself means truth/knowledge. I intend to avoid using the term “Hindu” henceforth unless it is in a quote. Unless a significant body of Vedic practitioners object, I encourage others to adopt this practice.

Clearing up that mistake, I’d now like to reframe religion for the people in my generation who have suffered from its abuse, exploitation, and oppressive misuse. Certain words tend to piss people off, and none more so than “God” and “religion” itself. Since college, I’ve met countless people — many of whom raised in the church or synagogue — who regard themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.” Typically, they have an idea of an omniscient Being, one that is ultimately unknowable to our human senses.

I’ve been quick to point out that for many believers of the Dharmic faiths, which includes the Vedic tradition, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, that is the very concept of God upon which so many meditate and worship. Beyond the formless, there is the notion of God having a perceptible form, typically that of a human male or female, though animals are often revered in deity form as well. There is also the deity form of Ardhanarishvara, who is androgynous in nature, half-male, half-female, and

ate. This relates to the performance of social “obligations” that are best if viewed as simply the logical flow of personal development. Note that these stages have very few specific obligations other than sincerity. *Dharma*, often a nebulous concept in the West, is our wisdom in action; it is better defined as our Will or Purpose, the worldly way in which we are best able to serve our Creator and benefit Creation by our presence. Lastly, *janapada* literally means “foothold of the people,” representing root-level democracy and a non-hierarchical system of government.

Before encountering Vaishnav’s article, I spent a lot of time meditating on the concept of anarchism as it relates to the teachings of the Vedas. I was brought to the idea of Vedic anarchism through my study of the Bhagavad Gita As It Is, the historic 1972 translation and commentary by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the International Society for Kṛṣṇa Consciousness. I was drawn to the idea of the voluntary society, that is, “a community where people transact, socialise, and trade without fearing any coercion, hierarchy, and taxtortion.” Vedic anarchism promotes the power of cooperative efforts, mutual respect (or mutual affinity, to borrow the language from the Indigenous Action Network’s stunning essay, “Accomplices Not Allies,”) and mutualism in favor of “the usual prescriptions and solutions for society’s ills.

I am in the early stages of exploring this concept formally, which I believe holds the secrets to the revolution in the head so desperately needed here in the West, the land of Maya.

☐ (Om)

May we hear only what is good for all.

May we see only what is good for all.

May we serve you, Lord of Love, all our life.

May we be used to spread your peace on earth.

☐ Peace, peace, peace

— Incantation, the Upanishads

often depicted with a third arm. That’s right, this religion has a genderqueer depiction of God, dating back to the 1st Century CE.

Furthermore, God has many names. In the Vedic tradition, there are deities bearing 108 different holy names, some even going up to 1008. Each name speaks to a different aspect of the Almighty, while Vedic deities themselves depict various states of being. If “God” doesn’t suit your needs to connect to the Divine, find one that does. Living in a city at the convergence of two mighty rivers, I have become partial to the Saivite name *Kudalasangamadeva*, “Lord of the Meeting Rivers.”

For brevity, I use the Gaudiya Vaisnavite name Krishna (alternately Kṛṣṇa) in my spiritual practice, but it is my belief that any name that, when prayed, meditated, or chanted upon, brings the seeker a sense of connection to the Eternal Truth of our Creator, is good and should be used in the individual’s practice. However, understand that names have meaning. In the case of Kṛṣṇa, it means anointed, blessed, all-attractive, or dark-skinned one. The name Christ shares in its etymology, as explained by Srila Prabhupada upon hearing Christ meant “the anointed one,” as per the Greek:

“*Christos* is the Greek version of the word Kṛṣṇa...When an Indian person calls on Kṛṣṇa, he often says, ‘Kṛṣṭa.’ *Kṛṣṭa* is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘attraction.’ So when we address God as ‘Christ,’ ‘Kṛṣṭa,’ or ‘Kṛṣṇa,’ we indicate the same all-attractive Supreme Personality of Godhead. When Jesus said, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, sanctified be Thy name,’ that name of God was ‘Kṛṣṭa’ or ‘Kṛṣṇa...’ ‘Christ’ is another way of saying *Kṛṣṭa*, and ‘Kṛṣṭa’ is another way of saying *Kṛṣṇa*, the name of God...Similarly, ‘God’ is the general name of the Supreme Personality of Godhead, whose specific name is (*in his spiritual tradition -ed.*) Kṛṣṇa. Therefore whether you call God “Christ,” “Kṛṣṭa,” “Kṛṣṇa,”

ultimately you are addressing the same Supreme Personality of Godhead.”

— “Kṛṣṇa or Christ — the Name is the Same,” from *The Science of Self-Realization*.

In its purest form, religion is best defined not by the many misuses, abuses, and exploitations enacted in its name by the human species. Such a definition merely breeds atheism. Instead, let’s look at what religion is: the pursuit of universal truth, knowledge, and happiness. That pursuit takes many forms, and so long as that pursuit does no harm and promotes love, it is legitimate. Some of the greatest Vedic teachers in the 20th Century sought to transcend religion.

Prabhupada delivered a system he said could be practiced by anyone in any religion — remembering and chanting God’s holy name — while Meher Baba, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Sai Baba of Shirdi all lived as saints whose practices combined disparate faith traditions. Sai Baba of Shirdi is honored both as a Vedic saint and a Muslim *faqir*, Sri Ramakrishna practiced Vedic, Christian, and Muslim traditions, and Meher Baba — who also professed to be the Avatar of the age — represented a syncretic union of those three above traditions as well as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Judaism.

It is my aim to begin an ongoing study of the historic Vedic anarchist tradition and examine its modern application in the 21st Century. Though little writing exists on the subject, one source has come into fruition since I began my own endeavors as a Vedic anarchist in my own community, from Prof. Jaimine Vaishnav of Mumbai. His essay “Vedic Anarchism” provides a historic overview, establishes a definition of its beliefs, and concludes its strength in resisting the forces of colonialism. Victoria’s imperial sun may have set over the capital cities of the British Raj, but its villages remained under the purview of Surya.

Vaishnav differentiates Vedic anarchism from its oft-maligned counterpart: “Unlike the Western anarchism that emphasizes priority to anti-state and anti-rulers [*sic*] policies, Vedic Anarchism primarily deals with self-consciousness, non-hierarchical and decentralized polity, community living, and ecologically sustainable lifestyles through its *varna*, *ashrama*, *dharma*, and *janapada* system[s].”

This focus on self-consciousness is the cultivation of mindfulness, the practice of meditation (in any of its many forms, be it *raja yoga* meditation, gardening, playing music, or walking in nature), and a desire for improvement through reflection. Therein lies the essence of Vedic practice.

Varna is a term that has been misinterpreted and misused, often to denigrate Vedic culture. This term does not relate to occupations assigned at birth, the unholy practice of *jati*, but rather to four specific modalities of being: *brahmin* (priest), *kshatriya* (soldier), *vaishya* (merchant), and *shudra* (laborer). These are not defined as jobs, but rather correlate to spiritual practice, the four yogas. Again, peeling back layers of misunderstanding, yoga as a term has little to do with people in spandex stretching themselves beautiful. Yoga means “union,” specifically method of union with the almighty.

To be a shudra is to engage in *karma yoga*, yoga in action, works, and deeds. To be a vaishya is to engage in *jnana yoga*, philosophical speculation, scriptural study, and debate, willing to haggle, compromise, analyze, and profess with the same faith a merchant or farmer has in their goods. To be a kshatriya is to engage in *raja yoga*, engaging in the mental battle of meditation, fighting like a warrior to still the mind and bring it under one’s control. To be a brahmin is to engage in *bhakti yoga*, which is devotional loving service offered to Creation and/or Creator. This includes formal worship, but also artistic, ecstatic, and ritual expression.

Ashrama governs age-based life stages, which Vaishnav says “empowers individual freedom and independent expressions.” These stages are student, householder, retiree, and lastly renunci-