

BOOK REVIEW



BEING DIFFERENT: AN INDIAN CHALLENGE TO WESTERN UNIVERSALISM

By Rajiv Malhotra

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Western universalism wants everything on this earth (and even literally on heaven) to be assimilated into the western way of thinking. According to the west, there is only one acceptable approach in all fields from science to spirituality.

Rajiv Malhotra boldly challenges this type of biased, intolerant and myopic thinking. He gives a refreshingly different approach of seeing things in the perspective of dharmic traditions of India.

The book contains the following sections:

INTRODUCTION: India has a great civilization, which has gracefully accepted the different cultures, religions and philosophies and respects all of them.

THE AUDACITY OF DIFFERENCE: The cultural and spiritual wealth of Indian religions are dismantled and rearranged into western frame and characterized as universal.

YOGA: FREEDOM FROM HISTORY: In Judeo-Christian traditions, the ultimate goal is salvation after death. It is history centric, based on revelations that are final and cannot be reinterpreted as per current requirements. Indic traditions are a way of life. The philosophy teaches how one can live a contented and happy life here. The ultimate goal is to understand the true nature of Self. The ultimate goal is enjoyed here and now, without waiting for death. Gurus have the authority to reinterpret dharma as per current context.

INTEGRAL UNITY AND SYNTHETIC UNITY: Indic traditions teach that the world is non-separate from the divine, which can be called Integral Unity. Judeo-Christian faiths proclaim that the universe is different from God and promise of salvation in a distant future, which can be called Synthetic Unity.

ORDER AND CHAOS: Indic traditions accept differences, unpredictability and uncertainty as natural and normal. West sees chaos as a profound threat that needs to be eradicated either by destruction or by complete assimilation.

NON-TRANSLATABLE SANSKRIT VERSUS DIGESTION: The meaning of Sanskrit words can be understood by understanding the cultural context, nuances and implied meaning. West forces its culture while translating Sanskrit works in English. There is an attempt to domesticate or distort the vision. The meaning is many times false or misleading. Holding on to Sanskrit terms and thereby preserving their meaning will safeguard dharmic knowledge.

CONTESTING WESTERN UNIVERSALISM: West provides the templates into which it squeezes all other cultures. The result has been the ongoing appropriation, by the West, of the intellectual and cultural property of various civilizations. One needs to engage in purva paksha or reversing the gaze to shed light on how this leads to the misapprehension and denigration of dharmic traditions.

CONCLUSION: Mahatma Gandhi lived as per his sva-dharma and demonstrated how differences may be asserted constructively while maintaining respect for one's opponents at the same time. The big brother attitude of "tolerance" will not work. The attitude should be of "mutual respect" for all religions and should be on an equal platform.

This book is a "**MUST READ**" for those who desire to look at the West through Indian eyes, confident that dharmic traditions are workable alternative in the modern world.

Review by N. Avinashilingam

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