*Some Comments on Chadha’s ‘Hinduism and Science’*

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In her thoughtful and knowledgeable ‘Hinduism and Science’, Monima Chadha discusses the relation between Hinduism and science. She holds that there is a tension between Christianity and science, at least post-Renaissance, but there is not such a tension in Hinduism. She explains this by noting the more pluralistic nature of Hinduism. I think that Chadha is right about many things, though the relationships between science and the religions is a bit more nuanced than she suggests. Let me explain why.

*The Tension Between Science and Christianity* Chadha is absolutely right that there has been a tension between science and Christianity since the so-called scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. True, most Christian theologians in the last 100 years have made their peace with science, but the history of the matter speaks for itself. (See, further, the discussion of the matter in my comments on De Cruz.)

One has to be slightly careful here, though. It is not exactly accurate to say that the revolution was made possible by ‘the rejection of Divine order’ (p. 5). Galileo, Newton, Bacon, Boyle, were all Christians, as were all the leading European scientists for the next two hundred years (as far as I am aware)—including Darwin. It might then be fairer to say that the tension was between religious orthodoxy and science. Or perhaps better: between those in positions of orthodox Christian power and science. To what extent this was driven by these people wishing to preserve their religious views or by wishing to preserve their power (or both), I leave for historians to argue about.

Notwithstanding any of this, the scientific revolution, and its consequences for the next couple of hundred years, were clearly a European phenomenon. Hence during that period science did flourish in a Christian culture.

*Hinduism and Science*

Chadha claims that Hinduism is more pluralistic than Christianity, that science flourished under Hinduism, and that the tolerance of science in India is at least partly explained by the more pluralistic and tolerant nature of Hinduism.

To consider these claims, I think it helps start by putting matters in a more general context. It is true that, at least since the early Middle Ages, Europe was largely mono-religious. True, there were many Christian sects, and at times the relationships between them were highly antagonistic and vicious. Sometimes the conflict was driven by dogma, sometimes by power; sometimes both. But all were Christians.

By contrast, in the last two thousand years, the Indian sub-continent has accommodated multiple religious: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism, and—it should not be forgotten, Christianity. Some of these religions (such as Hinduism and Buddhism) have a number of things in common. Some of them (such as Hinduism and Islam) have much less in common. Often, the coexistence of religions was peaceful; sometimes (and increasingly at present), it has not been so. At any rate, there is clearly a greater pluralism here than in Europe.

Turing to Hinduism itself, this has canonical and authoritative texts—the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, just as Christianity has the *Bible*. Chadha notes that there has always been a plurality of different interpretations of the Hindu canonical texts. The same, of course, is true of the *Bible*. Whether there is more flexibility in the Hindu texts than the *Bible*, I leave for scholars to debate. It is certainly true, as far as I know, that power struggles of a kind that have characterized the relationships between Christian groups have been largely absent between Hindu groups. So we do seem to have greater tolerance here.

And as Chadha nicely demonstrates, scientific endeavours did flourish under Hinduism: mathematics, astronomy, linguistics, and, we might add, medicine. It should be noted, though, that these examples are all from a period before the scientific revolution in Europe, when, of course, there were similar advances taking place in Europe. It is much harder to give examples of scientific developments in India after this period, when, of course, the scientific revolution was producing major novelties in Europe. And as noted, this was occurring in a Christian society, one where most scientists were themselves Christians. It is therefore hard to attribute the difference between Christianity and Hinduism in their attitudes to science to the religions themselves. It is perhaps more plausible to put it down to the nature of the power structures of the two religions.

*The Scientific Revolution*

Anyway, all this raises an obvious question. Why did the scientific revolution occur in Europe? Given what Chadha says, the ground for it had been laid in India, and there was nothing religious preventing it from occurring there. For the same reasons, it would appear that it could have happened in China, which had made many advances in, amongst other things, mathematics, astronomy, technology, and medicine in the period in question. Ditto in the Islamic world, which was arguably the most advanced culture in science and mathematics in the early Middle Ages.

The scientific revolution was produced by two novelties, one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical one was the use of mathematics in a novel way. As Galileo said, the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics. The practical one was the use of experimentation, as opposed to simple observation. With this, nature can be ‘tortured to reveal its secrets’, as Francis Bacon is sometimes—infelicitously—quoted as saying. But why did these ideas appear when and where they did?

That, of course, is a question that has been the occasion of much scholarly debate, and this is hardly the place to take a deep dive into it. For my part, I doubt that there is a simple explanation of the matter. Historical developments of this kind are invariably the result of a complex combination of circumstances, and many things were happening in Europe at the time in question which could have been conducive to producing the scientific changes. Capitalism was hitting its strides—at least in the form of merchant capitalism. Profit could be made from new ideas. Because of exploration and incipient imperialism, Europe was starting to get a sense of the whole world, its geography and natural science, in a way that no civilization had done before. The long-distance travel itself put new demands on technology. The printing press had recently been invented, and that made it easier to disseminate new ideas in a timely fashion. This in turn made it possible to form novel scientific communities, such as the Royal Society in London. And of course, one should never underestimate pure happenstance: the appearance of characters with the quirky ideas of a Galileo or a Newton: the “butterfly effect” of the history of ideas.

Maybe one should throw some religious factors into the mix as well. Another thing that was taking place in Europe about the same time was, of course, the Reformation, when Christian thinkers such as Luther and Calvin were challenging the authority and some of the dogmas of the Catholic Church. Maybe this contributed to the critical scientific spirit of the times. But if, as Chadha says, a preparedness to take on orthodoxy was a feature of other cultures at the time—notably that of India, where the scientific revolution did not occur—it is hard to see this as playing a dominant role in the matter.

At any rate, perhaps understanding what role, if any, religion played in the scientific revolution is the biggest challenge posed by Chadha’s Hindu perspective.