

# *The Apollonian*

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies  
Open-access | Peer-reviewed

*Vol 4, Issues 1&2* (March-June 2017)

Submission details and instructions for authors: <http://theapollonian.in/index.php/submission-guidelines/>

SPECIAL ISSUE | INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE IN INDIA: THEOLOGICAL REVISIONING

## **Introduction**

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To cite this article:

Chaturvedi, Namrata. "Introduction". *The Apollonian* 4: 1-2 (March-June 2017): 1-4.

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*The Apollonian*

ISSN 2393-9001

<http://www.theapollonian.in/>



## Introduction

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**ABSTRACT** This special issue focuses on the points of conflict, exchange and enrichment across diverse theological and faith traditions in India in particular and South Asia in general. Inter-faith dialogue is both a necessity and a challenge in the social and political landscape of India. This issue is envisaged with the need to highlight the trends, transitions and directions of inter-faith dialogue practices in India. Papers in this volume problematise these practices and explore the metaphysical and historical dimensions of inter-faith theological debates. This volume is an attempt to showcase metaphysical debates from ancient to colonial India, explore the issues of caste and identity in social and political inter-faith discourses, introduce and document indigenous theological traditions, highlight syncretic traditions in South Asia, and locate the relevance of liberation theologies in the contemporary global scenario.

**Keywords:** Religious Polemic, Colonialism, Inter-faith Discourses, Syncretic Religious Traditions, Religious Fundamentalism.

The inter-faith dialogue in India is a process with varied dimensions and multiple historical and political junctures. It unfolds in the universalising experience of mysticism as also in the exclusivist vocabulary of identity and representation. While shrines like Lal Qalandar dargah in Pakistan point to the potential of mystical experience to transcend semantic limitations of religious vocabulary, they are seen as obvious challenges to religious fundamentalism. Such structures, much common in South Asia, reaffirm the spiritual universalism that continues to iron out the creases of exclusivism and consequent fundamentalism in religious faiths. Exclusivist practices find reflection in *darsana* or theological argumentation, ritualistic practices, and cultural/caste/gender based hegemonic

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models of thought.

Mysticism threatens the very foundations of theological conservatism by demonstrating how realisation as a psycho-emotive experience enables the human consciousness to absorb universality while retaining its individuality. The experiences and teachings of saints remind us that this cognitive structure of knowing and recognising is not only possible but also immensely desirable to human evolution. It is the most powerful counterpoint to the appropriation and implementation of religion as a normative order that rejects questioning, critique and dissent at the roots.

Another dimension of the inter-faith dialogue is at the level of relocating the specific semantic structures of one theology in the context of other theologies in their philosophical as well as lived dimensions. Amongst Christian theologians in India, there have been concerted efforts of revisiting Christology in its theological aspects in the contexts of other theological and cultural traditions. Liberation theology in India has attempted to address issues of caste, gender and other epistemologies of discrimination by focusing on material and metaphysical dimensions of Vedic Hinduism. It has also been pointed out by contemporary thinkers like Felix Wilfred, that the metaphysical dimensions of some Vedic theologies can and do find resonance in Indian Christianity, thereby giving it a character that is distinct from its Western counterpart. While epistemologies of Vedic Hinduism have been explored for resonances that universalize faith, they have also been appropriated in order to justify discrimination in the name of cultural assimilation. Inculturation then doesn't simply remain a mono dimensional model of philosophical rationalisation, but often becomes a process of translation of exclusionary structures of thought, from one semiotic field of religion to another.

In India, the existence of different theologies has a long and turbid historical dimension to it. The religious fundamentalism that seeks to identify India as originally a Hindu nation relies on the historical junctures as points of disruption in the continuity of a Hindu tradition that itself is defined ironically in Orientalist terms. The history of non-Vedic faiths and epistemologies like Tantra, Shaktism, Nath-Siddha parampara, and religions such as Islam, Christianity, Adivasi religions and others have created layers of reciprocative illuminations and inter penetrations. Any attempt at segregating them and reducing their history to binaries of 'foreign' and 'indigenous' are a damaging enterprise. From points of conflict, collision and negotiation, a structure of syncretism has emerged that relies on experiential and cultural matrices that often challenge the exclusionary practices of populist and political religiosity.

This structure of cultural syncretism cannot be severed from the matrices of

caste and gender as they determine the positioning and poetics of dialogue itself. Any study of inter-faith dialogue in India, while it explores its tradition in metaphysical, intellectual and cultural contexts, must necessarily question its practices and limitations to inquire whether it challenges or legitimises hegemonic structures of oppression. Two papers in this volume focus on the problematic of caste in the context of inter-faith theological dialogue in India.

Christopher Conway evaluates the subversive and transformative potential of Chokhamela's poetry and locates it in the evolving discourse of Ambedkarite philosophy. Conway highlights Chokhamela's theological underpinnings and also its limitations in the dynamics of caste and cultural hegemony. Conway argues for 'conscientising' as a guiding principle for a liberative Dalit theology in the context of Hindu as well as Christian theologies in India.

Anh Vo's article explores the principles of liberation theology in Buddhism and Christianity, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia. The teachings of Buddha and Jesus are assessed for their ability to bring about the alleviation of poverty and promulgating the philosophy of peaceful co existence and dialogue.

Mohammed Afzal's paper locates inter-faith theological dialogue between Christian Missionary and Indian Islamic theologians in its historical and philosophical dimensions in nineteenth century India. By focusing on two specific theologians, Mohammed Afzal's paper traces the developments in Indian Islamic theology from colonial to independent India and helps to understand many ruptures, conflicts and directions in contemporary Indian Islamic theology.

Amit Ranjan's paper explores the inter-faith poetics of the Khoja Ismaili tradition in India. Through the text of Dasavtar, his paper explores the praxis of translation, assimilation, and political formations in the practices of this Sufi order.

Sonali Duttaroy's paper focuses on the cult of Bonbibi, a forest deity, in the Sunderban plains in eastern India by locating it in cultural and historical contexts. Her paper offers a detailed study of a localised cult of worship and the anthropomorphic structures of the deification of natural forces and phenomena, a feature that defines Adivasi or indigenous theologies in India.

Mahesh Guru's article stresses on the universality of Buddhist teachings and their relevance for contemporary times. Guru argues that in the global world order with the structures of capitalism informing and co opting cultural and religious motivations, Buddhist teachings of detachment, reflection and concerted action can serve as leading ideas of peace and co-existence.

Ramkishor Maholiya's paper explores the metaphysical dimensions of Advaita Vedanta, Sankara's philosophy that has often been upheld by Hindu apologists as being representative of Hindu philosophy. He argues for the influence of Bud-

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dhism, particularly the Shunyavad of Nagarjuna, on Shankar's Mayavad. He establishes, with references to Shankarabhasya, the ideas that share similarities with Nagarjuna's philosophy. In doing so, he has explored the historical and metaphysical relations between Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta.

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's article studies the ethnic and cultural dimensions of Sarna faith amongst the Santhal Adivasi community in eastern India. Shekhar, drawing on observations and oral knowledge traditions from the Santhal community, introduces the readers to motifs and symbols in Sarna theology. Shekhar has also explored inter-faith dialogue in the context of Sarna and Hindu faith traditions to highlight how symbols and rituals often reflect intermingling of different traditions while at times also show the dynamics of cultural appropriation.

Nidhin Donald's paper dismantles the metaphysical discourse of Hindu-Christian dialogue in south India and raises important questions about the process of such 'dialogues' themselves. By asking to locate the dialogues in their material and social coordinates, his paper critiques the idioms and linguistic structures of caste consciousness that pervade the primary and adopted theological experiences of Hindu converts to Christianity.

These diverse papers offer contexts and arguments for exploring inter-faith spiritualities, hierarchies and exclusivism in inter-faith dialogue, philosophical symbiosis, historical paradigms of inter-religious dialogue, and the liberating potential in the teachings of religions. I hope this volume problematises, enriches and opens paradigms for studying the inter-faith mindscapes of India.