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Abstract: In this paper a comparison is presented between the analyses of the human condition offered by Christianity in terms of sin, and by Saiva Siddhanta in terms of *anavam* (darkness, ignorance). Following a summary of the Saiva teaching on *anavam*, more detailed comparisons are made between the two religions in relation to particular issues in which the outworking of those doctrines is seen, such as the nature of salvation, of the saviour and of the redeemed state, etc. Areas of difference and of common ground between the two religions are highlighted and discussed.

THIS paper sets out to offer a comparison between the analyses of the human condition offered by Christianity in terms of sin, and by Saiva Siddhanta in terms of *anavam*. The latter is the system of religious philosophy that originated among the Tamil speaking people of South India, particularly from the thirteenth century CE onwards, through the work of such thinkers as Meykanta Tevar (c. 1221 CE), Arulnanti (c. 1253) and Umapati Sivam (c. 1306). It can be seen as the philosophical elaboration of the religious ideas implicit in the Saivite form of devotional Hinduism, which gained widespread popular support through the work of a succession of poet-saints in that region in the sixth to eighth centuries CE. Since readers may be less familiar with the Saiva Siddhanta system, we first shall give a summary of its teaching on *anavam*.[1]

Anavam

According to Saiva Siddhanta, there are three eternal entities, viz. God (Tamil and Sanskrit, *pati*), souls (Tamil and Sanskrit, *pacu*) and the three-fold bond (*pacam;* Skt. *pasa*). The constituent elements of the bond are *anavam* (darkness, ego-centricity; Skt, *anava*), *karmam* or *vinai* (deeds; Skt *karma*) and *mayai* (matter; Skt *maya*). It is the bondage of these three impurities that determines the human condition. Like God, souls exist from eternity and to eternity, and from eternity they are in the grip of this three-fold bond. No cause or reason is advanced for this: it just is so. Of the three impurities, *anavam* is basic. It is to deliver souls from *anavam* that God causes them to become involved in matter (*mayai*) by taking bodies, and thus to perform actions (*vinai*), with the ultimate goal of attaining release. This embodiment of souls takes place in repeated cycles, as God creates, sustains and destroys succeeding worlds in order to give souls innumerable opportunities progressively to work their way towards release.

Anavam is a power which is eternally attached to souls, and prevents them knowing the true nature of themselves, the world and God. It is compared with verdigris, which coexists with copper as long as copper exists. It is *anavam* which clouds or obscures the knowledge of the soul, and causes it to think in egoistic terms of "I" and "mine". So by the power of *anavam* the soul is deceived into thinking that it is not God but itself that is the agent of all its actions.

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The Lord in his grace repeatedly brings the world of matter back into existence and directs the operation of *mayai* and *karmam*. Thus souls become united with matter (*mayai*) and experience pleasure and pain in fulfilment of previous *karmam*. They also perform further actions, so that good and evil *karmam* may eventually become balanced. Even doing good, if only for one's own benefit or in expectation of reward, is harmful because it simply expresses and reinforces egoism. "Moral demerit is like iron fetters and moral merit is like golden fetters."[2]

So adhesive and pervasive is the power of *anavam* that souls cannot of themselves attain the knowledge that would save them from its grip.[3] They have some part in gaining release, in that they have to progress through certain defined stages of religious observance towards the attainment of maturity. But the point of maturity is only reached when ultimately the soul gives up trying, recognizes that all its supposed deeds are done not by itself but by the Lord acting within, and casts itself at the feet of the Lord. Then all deeds both good and bad are seen as being alike, and life is lived with no consideration of reward or punishment (*iruvinaiyoppu*, literally = "two (kinds of) deeds the same."[4] That realization is itself the action and the gift of the Lord in grace.[5]

When the soul is ripe, the way that God reveals himself is through taking human form as a guru or teacher. The guru is not to be recognized by any unmistakeable outward sign or mark; his coming is incognito.[6] Since the human condition can only be known from the inside, the guru lives as a human being alongside other humans. However, this form is in fact only a cloak, used to commend the guru and his teaching to the recipient.[7] Because God cannot become involved with matter (*mayai*), he cannot be so closely bound up with human flesh as to be born or die.[8] But to dispel the darkness of *anavam*, the Lord appears as the guru as often as, and in as many different guises as, is necessary for the enlightenment and release of souls.

After enlightenment, there is still work for the soul to do. For worthless thoughts will still arise in the mind, particularly the idea that the soul is the agent of its deeds.[9] The soul has to learn to overcome such vestigial effects of *anavam* until "the normative becomes the natural."[10] Insofar as this is achieved and all actions are seen as the Lord's, the soul is free from the obscuring effect of *anavam*. Then the soul enjoys the bliss of loving union with the Lord and longs for final release.[11] Seeing the suffering of unenlightened souls, it suffers with them and works for their release also.

Discussion

We shall go on now to draw a comparison between some particular aspects of *anavam* with the Christian teaching about sin.

a) At first sight, an obvious and basic similarity between the two systems is that for both, human beings are trapped from birth in a condition which is both innate and universal.[12] From that condition moreover they are unable to free themselves to fulfil their destiny by their own unaided efforts. They are helpless prisoners of the condition.

However, it does not take much detailed scrutiny to reveal differences. For example, in Saiva Siddhanta no cause is postulated for *anavam*; it is eternally part and parcel of the structure of existence. In Christianity on the other hand, human choice is seen as responsible for the advent of sin into a previously sinless world. For modern Christians the mythical account contained in the book of Genesis raises all sorts of problems. Nevertheless, the Christian analysis clearly identifies the fault in the human condition as essentially a moral one, whether it be pride or disobedience, whereas according to Saiva Siddhanta the fault is of a structural or even an ontological nature.

That being said, on further examination the difference does not seem quite so clear cut. For example, although in the Genesis myth sin entered the world through human choice, that choice can be seen to have consequences that affect the very structure of human existence in the world. For with sin came death, and in the biblical perspective the whole world thereafter becomes subject to the rule of evil powers. In Paul's language, "in Adam all die" (I Cor. 15.22, RSV); and in John's, "the whole world is in the power of the evil one" (I Jn. 5.19).[13]

Moreover, responsibility for the fall does not

rest only with the human beings involved. There is another actor in the story, viz. the serpent who tempts the woman into disobedience. If we ask, where does the tempter come from, there is no answer. It just appears, and as an embodiment of the principle of resistance to the divine will, it seems to be an inherent part of the way the garden is constructed. Evil in the shape of disobedience is an intrinsic possibility in a world where human beings are created free to choose. So perhaps we may say that evil, or at least a fault line, is to that extent structured into the Christian scheme just as it is in the Saivite one.

Similarly, when we look more closely at the Saiva Siddhanta teaching, although *anavam* appears as an ontological reality without beginning or end, moral choice and reponsibility are given a place in the doctrine of *karmam*. Souls cannot be held responsible for their attachment to *anavam*, but there seems to be some measure of responsibility and moral choice if they continue endlessly in that state. On one view, the soul only becomes ripe for enlightenment when the score of good and evil deeds are brought into balance. On an alternative view, what keeps the soul trapped in thrall to the three impurities is not so much the preponderance of evil *vinai*, but the persistence in accumulating *vinai* of any kind, whether good or evil. The only kind of actions which do not accumulate further *karmam* are those performed solely for the good of others, without any self-regard or claim to self-agency.

However, to talk of "good" and "bad" *vinai* and to make moral judgements at all must imply that humans carry some responsibility for their actions and so for their continuing imprisonment, if not for their initial association with *anavam*. Even though we may then get into difficulties in reconciling human merit and the gift of grace, it seems that the conclusion is inevitable: "The soul ... has to strive a little. But this very effort is inspired by God".[14]

b) Christian and Saivite agree that good works in themselves, performed with the intention of earning salvation, are a dead end. For Paul, "works" done in obedience to law and apart from faith are ineffective. There is no other way but to give up the attempt to save oneself by one's own efforts, and to accept God's free gift of salvation through Christ by faith. Such faith in Christ is expected to result in a radical change in the believer, whereby s/he may begin to live a life of love that springs not from the effort to win salvation, but from gratitude for salvation that has already been bestowed by grace and received through faith. Faith manifests itself in love.[15]

According to Saiva Siddhanta, the soul can perform good deeds and evil deeds, and each will receive its own reward or punishment in accordance with the law of *karmam*. But neither has any value for gaining release. That will depend only on the soul's readiness to give up the claim to agency, and to recognize in and through all its works the gracious activity of God.

In both these positions, good actions in themselves have no value towards salvation. The only actions which have value are those that spring from faith (Christianity, cf. Rom. 14. 23), or that are rooted in *iruvinaiyoppu,* without the illusion of self-agency (Saiva Siddhanta).

Although these formulations seem different at first sight, on closer inspection they are not so far apart. For example, in the Christian scheme faith does not claim any virtue or merit for itself, nor look for any reward or benefit. Nor is it attached to the fruit of its actions in any self-regarding way, whether in terms of material benefit or praise. This is not far removed from the Saivite scheme, for there too actions performed under the illusion that the self is the agent will have an aim or goal related to the interests of the doer, however concealed or sophisticated, while to act without that illusion surrenders the thought of goal-orientation or self-interest. Indeed, to disavow self-agency can be seen as a kind of act of faith. Seen in this light, the two formulations do not seem so widely at variance.

c) The touchstone by which the extent of human helplessness may be judged in the teaching of these two systems is to be found in their doctrines of salvation: how is salvation to be obtained, and how far has the individual a part in the process? If we look first at the bhakti poetry of Tamil Saivism, we find that the poets make no claim to any merit or virtue of their own as the ground for their attaining the feet of Siva. Rather, Manikkavacagar can make self-denigrating protestations comparable to anything

in Christian devotional literature.[16] There is nothing that he can do to win the feet of the Lord, except perhaps to weep in sorrow for his sin. When in blissful rapture he describes the experience of being one with the Lord, that is ascribed entirely to grace, unmerited and unconditional.[17]

The Bible offers a similarly pessimistic view of the condition of the human heart, from Jeremiah ("the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt", Jer. 17.9) to Jesus himself ("out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder ..." Mk. 7.21). In harmony with that position Paul too asserts the universality of sin as a paralysing bondage which renders humans totally unable to help themselves. He cites his own experience of repeated moral conflict and failure, culminating in the desperate plea "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7.15—20, 24f). So from first to last, salvation has to be the work of God's grace in Christ, without regard to any attempted conformity to moral or ritual obligations (e.g. Rom. 3.23f; cf. Eph. 2.8f). Thus in Paul's letters we meet another overwhelming experience, and advocacy, of grace.[18]

d) Both Saiva Siddhanta and Christianity affirm that for humans to gain deliverance from their condition nothing will suffice but the intervention of God's grace, and that takes place when God himself appears on earth in human form within the material world. That in itself is a measure of the seriousness of the human plight. The way in which the divine intervention is effected also tells us something about how that plight is viewed.

According to Saiva Siddhanta, the divine person who comes as the remedy for the human condition can only fully understand the disease that afflicts human beings by becoming subject to it himself.[19] Again, only God is adequate to bestow the true wisdom of enlightenment on mortals wrapped in the darkness of *anavam*. So it is God himself who comes, and his form is so fully human that the onlooker cannot differentiate him from other human beings.[20]

However, since the human body and matter are essentially forms of *mayai, it* is inconceivable that he should be so far identified with *mayai* as to be born or die in a human body. Nor, of course, since he is to impart saving wisdom, can he be subject to the darkness of *anavam*. The inevitable conclusion is that for fundamentally ontological reasons the coming of God in human form within the Saivite scheme is what Christians would call "docetic", i.e. a semblance, rather than constituting what in their terms would be recognized as a "real" incarnation.

In contrast to this, within the Christian context the coming of God into the world in human form, besides being one off rather than repeated, is viewed as a full assumption of human nature. Thus in coming into the world, God the Son emptied himself of such divine attributes as omnipotence and omniscience, because those were not necessary for the fulfilment of his task in human form (Phil. 2.6-8). Rather, the purpose of his incarnation was to show what humanity is like in its perfection, and in that flawless humanity to offer himself to the Father.

Yet even here there is a reservation: "[Christ] had to be made like his brethren in every respect .... in every respect [he] has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebr. 2.17, 4.15). The specific reservation at this point is a moral one: he was "without sin". In this important respect, insofar as he remained "without sin", he also remained cut off from a universal dimension of common human experience. The humanity that he assumed was "unfallen". So neither system allows a "full" incarnation, the one for moral, the other for ontological reasons.

Further, in making sense of the Christ event, Christian thinkers postulated a degree of differentiation within the godhead, however that differentiation is to be defined. It was not the unitary God Yahweh of the Old Testament that became man, but his "Son". And why was that? What would have been the consequences for their view of God and of the world if they had come to the conclusion that Yahweh had become man? Or what prevented them from taking that step? While a *kenosis* (self-emptying) of the Son is conceivable, it might be a different story if that were to be predicated of the Father God.

It is striking that Saiva Siddhanta also allows for a differentiation within the godhead, in terms of the distinction between Siva and his *sakti*, although Umapati Sivam is at pains to

deny the possibility of division within the supreme being himself.[21] *Sakti* is Siva's grace in action, ikonographically represented as his consort, Parvati, who can even be incorporated as the left hand side of Siva's own body, as in the classic eikon of Aruttanaricuran. Although strictly speaking it is *sakti* that performs the gracious action of Siva in the world, the Siva Nana Potam and the Tiruvarutpayan are also happy to state that it is God the first cause (*tam mutal;* Skt *nimittakarana*) who appears as the guru to impart knowledge,[22] and the supreme being itself (*porul*, i.e. *param porul;* Skt *paramatma*) that comes to bestow grace.[23]

So although the means are available to differentiate between the different aspects of the godhead in terms of the different functions attributed to them, Saivite philosophers have not found it necessary as their Christian counterparts did to safeguard the absolute transcendence of the supreme being by attributing his incarnate activity to another "person" within the godhead.

e) What happens then to the individual believer/devotee after grace is bestowed? The Bible describes that change in terms of repentance, which is fundamentally a moral decision. But its results come near to the ontological: when united with Christ a person becomes a new creation (II Cor. 5.17), he passes from death to life (I John 3.14). The writers here are searching for categories radical enough to do justice to the immensity of the change experienced at conversion. In Saiva Siddhanta, at the point of union with the Lord, *anavam* ceases to dominate in the devotee's life, and the power of *karmam* no longer binds. Here there appear to be both cognitive and ontological elements.

But in both systems, the congenital fault continues to be something that has to be struggled against. The Tiruvarutpayan plaintively asks when will come the day when the devotee will be free from the assault of vain imaginings.[24] And so long as life continues, there is work to do, in the form of service for others: the Tiruvarutpayan speaks of the painful sympathy of the enlightened as they behold the continued suffering of those still trapped in bondage to impurity.[25] Similarly, Appar acknowledges his continuing obligation to render service to his Lord.[26] Here too there is common ground. For Paul, too, acknowledges his continuing struggle with the thorn in his flesh, and affirms that although death would be gain for him, continuing life would present further valued opportunities for fruitful labour (II Cor. 12.7; Phil. 1.21f).

That much said, however, there remains a point of radical difference between the two systems in respect of the future. The Christian looks forward to an end, when the cosmic struggle against evil will cease. At that point comes judgement, when God will judge humankind according to their deeds, and his kingdom will come in its fullness. Saiva Sidhanta envisages no such culmination of the cosmic process. Worlds will come into being and pass away in an endless round. For although individuals may gain enlightenment, the task of freeing souls from bondage, from darkness and from the fruit of deeds, will never be complete. Here we come up against a fundamental difference of outlook which underlies the two systems, between the linear and the cyclical views of time, and these different perspectives colour much of the thought and devotion of the two religions.

Conclusion

At first sight, in that both these systems are concerned with an innate and universal fault in the human condition, an obvious and immediately discernible similarity exists between them. Further, both Christian and Saivite regard that human condition as so parlous as to be beyond the power of the individual to remedy. The two religions go on to agree in seeing God as primarily a God of grace, who in grace takes human form to effect the release of imprisoned humankind. The released soul's experience of grace, too, is closely comparable in the two religions.[27] However, the precise diagnoses of the human condition made by the Christian and the Saivite are unquestionably different. The one seems primarily concerned with morality, the other with an ontological entanglement in which souls are trapped. In consequence, the remedies prescribed by Christianity and Saivism differ as well. Whereas the Christian understanding calls primarily for a moral revolution in the

individual, in the Siddhanta the remedy for the ontological predicament is seen in terms of the enlightenment of the mind.

These are readily appreciable, broad-brush comparisons. However, time and time again in this enquiry, closer examination has revealed that the apparent differences on the surface are masking a closer relationship at a deeper level. Our discussion makes clear that both religions are wrestling with similar problems, and end up in positions that are not always so far apart as at first sight might appear.

What conclusion then can be drawn from this discussion? Simply, perhaps, that here are two populations of human people, one living in the Indian subcontinent, the other in the Graeco-Roman world (and its successor territories). Each group is faced with the common problems of human existence, and seeks answers to them using the intellectual and religious tools available to them in their different cultural environments. Hence the very different presuppositions underlying the two systems. But both groups share (within broad limits) a common experience of humanity. And in the case of these two groups, that experience seems to have pushed them some way towards common answers to the problems of existence in the world, despite their different starting points.

It is the task of those fortunate enough to be engaged in the contemporary encounter between religions to penetrate below the surface level of culturally-determined difference, to that area where common human experience is already yielding common understanding, and if possible even beyond that, to the shared discovery of new insight and enlightenment.[28] Thus they will be serving not only themselves, but the interests of the wider human community. It might then be an endeavour that accumulates good *vinai*, or even, if engaged in with appropriately dispassionate detachment, it may accumulate no *vinai* of either sort at all.

Notes

(Citations from Tamil texts are given in translation by the author)

[1] For general descriptions of the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy, see Devasenathi, V.A., *Saiva Siddhanta,* Madras, Madras University Press, 1974; Subramaniya Pillai, G. *Introduction and History of Saiva Siddhanta,* Annamalainagar, Annamalai University Press, 1948.

[2] Devasenapathi, V.A., "Karma and Grace in Saiva Siddhanta," in Clothey, F.W. and Long J.B. (eds.) *Experiencing Siva*, Columbia (MO), S. Asia Books, 1983.

[3] Umapati Sivam, *Tiruvarutpayan* 33: "The flesh never attains knowledge; the soul of itself has no knowledge; if these two lack knowledge, who by their own efforts can attain it?"

[4] Cf. Gangadaran, S. *Saiva Siddhanta with special reference to Sivaprakasam* Madurai: Angayarkanni Agam, 1992, pp. 161-163.

[5] Cf. Dhavamony, M. *Love of God according to Saiva Siddhanta* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971.

[6] Umapati Sivam, *Nencuvitututu* 83-87: "When the Lord takes the glorious form of the guru, he exhibits no external quality or sign by which he may be recognized."

[7] *Tiruvarutpayan* 45: "When grace takes on human form like a cloak, as a decoy to catch and hold humankind, no one in the world can discern it."

[8] Cf. Piet, J.H., *A Logical Presentation of the Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy*, Madras, CLS, 1952, p. 133.

[9] *Tiruvarutpayan* 63: "Even after a man has seen the light shine in the darkness, when will the day come when the vain imaginings of his mind will flee away?"

[10] Devasenapathi, V.A., *Karma and Grace in Saiva Siddhanta*, p. 11.

[11] *Tiruvarutpayan* 63 (see note 9 above).

[12] Devasenapathi, V.A., "Man in Saiva Siddhanta," in Devanandan, P.D. and Thomas, M.M. (eds), *The Christian and Hindu Views Concerning Man*, Bangalore, CISRS, 1960.

[13] Richardson, A., *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, London, SCM Press, 1966.

[14] V.A Devasenapathi, *Karma and Grace in Saiva Siddhanta*, p. 15.

[15] Whiteley, D.E., *The Theology of St Paul*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1970.

[16] Manikkavacagar, *Tiruvacagam* v. 90: "I am all false, false my heart, and false my love. But, trapped in actions as I am, may I not win you if I weep?"; cf. Tirunāvukkaracar *Tēvāram* vi. 95. 937: "Evil my race, evil my character, evil my intentions; sin is all that I have in abundance; even what I hold as good is evil; I am evil in my very self."

[17] E.g. Manikkavacagar, *Tiruvacagam* li. 1, etc: "All this he gave me in his grace, who could ever dream of such a gift!" For an overview of the theology implicit in the hymns of the *Tiruvacakam*, see Yocum, G.E., *Hymns to the Dancing Siva*, Columbia (MO), South Asia Books, 1982.

[18] For fuller studies of grace in Christianity and Hinduism, see Kulendran, S. *Grace – a Comparative Study of the Doctrine in Christianity and Hinduism*, Cambridge, Lutterworth Press, 1964; Jaswant Raj, J., *Grace in Saiva Siddhanta and St Paul*, Chennai, South Indian Salesian Society, 1989.

[19] *Tiruvarutpayan* 42: "Except for one who is himself prey to the sickness of the heart, can anyone else in the world discern it?"

[20] *Tiruvarutpayan* 43: "When the supreme comes to bestow grace as never previously bestowed, who in the world will be able to recognize him?" For a fuller exploration of the Guru theme, cf. Thangaraj, M.T., *The Crucified Guru*, Nashville, Abingdon Press,1994.

[21] *Tiruvarutpayan* 2: "It is *sakti* that enables immortal souls to attain his state, nevertheless, our Lord himself remains without variance or division."

[22] Meykanta Tevar, *Siva Nana Potam* viii.

[23] See note 20 above.

[24] See note 9 above.

[25] *Tiruvarutpayan* 100: "When they consider the suffering of those struggling in the grip of *mayai*, the enlightened themselves struggle in the ocean of compassion."

[26] Tirunavukkaracar, *Tevaram* v. 19. 9: "He is duty bound to uphold me, his servant; I am duty bound to persevere in his service."

[27] Cf. McGlashan, A.R., "Amazing Grace - the Experience of Grace in Hindu and Christian bhakti," *Theology*, vol. cv, no. 828 (Nov.-Dec. 2002): 424-435.

[28] Cf. Clooney, F.X., *Seeing Through Texts – Doing Theology Among the Srivaisnavas of South India*, Albany (NY), State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 298ff; Klostermaier, K., *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban*, London, SCM Press, 1969, e.g. "Only in the dialogue does a Hindu learn the essence of Hinduism, and the Christian find the essence of Christianity." (p. 98).