The covenant in the Hindu context: some reflections inspired by Christophe Chalamet's »›Covenant‹ as the basis and theme of comparative theology«

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Der Bund im Hindu-Kontext: Einige Überlegungen, angeregt durch Christophe Chalamets »›Bund‹ als Grundlage und Thema der komparativen Theologie«

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Zusammenfassung

Diese kurze Abhandlung antwortet auf Christophe Chalamets »›Bund‹ als Grundlage und Thema Komparativer Theologie«. Chalamets Aufsatz kann als origineller und kreativer Versuch gewürdigt werden, das Feld der Komparativen Theologie zu erweitern, indem er einen in der biblischen Theologie bekannten Begriff aufgreift und darüber nachdenkt, wie ein solcher Begriff im interreligiösen Austausch produktiv sein könnte. Die Überlegungen bauen auf Chalamets Arbeit auf, indem sie zeigen wollen, wie ein analoges Bundesmotiv auch in hinduistischen Quellen vorkommt, die in ähnlicher Weise Vertrauen und Verpflichtung, die Bitte um Schutz und Schutzversprechen, gegenseitige Liebe, etc. zu wertschätzen wissen. Der hier vorgestellte Vergleich ist einfach ein Experiment, das einen neuen Strang substanzieller komparativ-theologischen Arbeit zu zeichnen sucht, da Themen, die bisher nur als biblisch galten, nun im Kontext anderer religiöser Traditionen gelesen werden können.
Schlüsselbegriffe
Bund, Hinduismus, Vertrauen und Verpflichtung, Relationalität

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Abstract

This brief paper responds to Christophe Chalamet's »›Covenant‹ as a basis and topic for comparative theology«. Chalamet's essay can be appreciated as an original and creative effort to widen the field for comparative theology by taking up a term well-known in Biblical theology, and pondering how such a term might be productive in interreligious exchange. It builds on Chalamet's work by showing how an analogous covenantal theme is present also in Hindu source materials which similarly value trust and commitment, the request for protection and promise of protection, mutual love, etc. The comparison presented here is simply an experiment that seeks to chart a new strand of substantive comparative theological work, as themes hitherto considered uniquely Biblical are now to be read in the context of other religious traditions.
Keywords
Covenant, Hinduism, trust and commitment, divine-human relations

Sumario

Este breve ensayo responde a la obra de Christophe Chalamet »›Alianza‹ como base y tema de la teología comparada«. El ensayo de Chalamet puede reconocerse como un intento original y creativo de ampliar el campo de la teología comparada retomando un concepto familiar de la teología bíblica y reflexionando sobre cómo dicho concepto podría ser productivo en el intercambio interreligioso. Las reflexiones se basan en el trabajo de Chalamet al tratar de mostrar cómo un motivo de alianza análogo también se da en las fuentes hindúes, que valoran de forma similar la confianza y el compromiso, la petición de protección y la promesa de protección, el amor mutuo, etcétera. La comparación que aquí se presenta no es más que un experimento con el que se pretende trazar una nueva línea de trabajo teológico comparativo sustantivo, ya que temas que antes sólo se consideraban bíblicos pueden leerse ahora en el contexto de otras tradiciones religiosas.
Palabras clave
Alianza, hinduismo, confianza y compromiso, relacionalidad

Christophe Chalamet's paper, »›Covenant‹ as a basis and topic for comparative theology«, is as creative and original effort to widen the field for comparative theology by taking up a term well-known and important in Biblical theology, and pondering some possible ways in which »covenant« might be productive in interreligious exchange. He is reluctant to define »covenant«, preferring to »confront right from the start the variety of meanings 'covenant' might have depending on the literary context in which it occurs«, though Christian and Muslim understandings are »directly and ineluctably indebted to the Hebrew Scriptures«.[1]

Chalamet notes that »covenant« is a relational term, and most understandings of covenant are related to memory: »Typically, there are at least two parties in covenant-making. This means that one of the parties may need to remind the other of the covenant both sides have agreed upon or consented to.« It is therefore endangered not only by violation by either side, but also by forgetting, a losing of memory regarding what both sides committed themselves to. Chalamet points for examples to the covenant of God with Noah and the human race after the Flood – never again to destroy the world by water — and the covenantal Passover meal celebrated by Jesus with his disciples the night before he died.

After further considerations of covenant and covenant-making in the Bible, Chalamet near the end opens the door at last to actual comparative study:

> The theme of »covenant« is ripe for comparative study across the main three monotheistic religions (and beyond them too). It may serve as a good way to deepen our understanding of what these traditions have in common and of the ways in which they diverge. It may help us see how what they have in common is in fact already characterized by specific interpretations that differentiate one tradition from the others. We tell the stories of the covenant(s) in distinct ways, on the basis of distinct narratives.

[1] The Oxford English Dictionary in part defines »covenant« in this way: »A mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing certain acts; a compact, contract, bargain; sometimes, the undertaking, pledge, or promise of one of the parties. Phrases: to make or enter into a covenant; to hold, keep, break covenant.« (I a. Covenant, Oxford English Dictionary)

This brief paper, by no means a complete study in itself, is a response to Chalamet, showing specific ways in which a covenantal theme might be discovered in Hindu source materials, such as have little or no Christian influence on them.
Already in very ancient times, the rules for divine-human relations were articulated, enacted, and subjected to modifications and variants. This is true in the Indian context as well as the Biblical context.
As a starting point one might reflect on some of the early research done on sacrifice, for example by the pioneering scholars Hubert and Marcel Mauss who attended closely to the Indian context, though not without much familiarity with the Biblical context as well. For instance,

> In the sacrifice of request, it is sought above all to bring about certain special effects defined in the rite. If the sacrifice is the fulfilment of a promise already made, if it is carried out to release the promiser from the moral and religious bond that binds him, the victim has to some extent an expiatory character. If on the other hand it is sought to bind the god by a contract, the sacrifice has rather the form of an attribution: *do ut des* is the principle, and consequently no portion is set aside for the sacrifiers. If it is desired to thank the divinity for a special favour, the burnt-offering — that is to say the total attribution — or the *shelamim* — the sacrifice in which a portion is left over for the sacrifier — may be mandatory.[2]

While the *do ut des* model can be crudely conceived, as simply a matter of giving in order to get back, it can also be seen as the establishment of a relationship, in which sacrifice is both an act of trust – giving up, let us say into fire of one's own possessions — and an expectation that binds the deity as well, to be generous in return.
When we step outside the ancient, Vedic model of transactional relationships between the deity and human performer, broader and perhaps deeper understandings of the God-human relationship can be spelled out. The relationship is often portrayed as inscribed both in nature and in the social order. Manu, the legendary lawgiver introduced at the start of the *Laws of Manu*, both puts the world in order — creating it as a functioning whole — and establishes the rules and expectations of a hierarchical society. For instance, at the end of the initial presentation of nature and law in the first book of the Laws, we read first of expectations about the proper study of the laws that follow:

> To determine which activities are proper to him and which to the remaining classes in their proper order, Manu, the wise son of the Self-existent, composed this treatise. It should be studied diligently and taught to his pupils properly by a learned Brahmin, and by no one else.

The benefits are considerable:

> When a Brahmin who keeps to his vows studies this treatise, he is never sullied by faults arising from mental, oral, or physical activities; he purifies those alongside whom he eats, as also seven generations of his lineage before him and seven after him; he alone, moreover, has a right to this entire earth.
>
> This treatise is the best good-luck incantation; it expands the intellect; it procures everlasting fame; and it is the ultimate bliss. In this, the Law has been set forth in full—the good and the bad qualities of actions and the timeless norms of proper conduct—for all four

[2] Henri HUBERT / Marcel MAUSS, Sacrifice. Its Nature and Function, übersetzt von W. D. Hall, Chicago 1964, 65f.

social classes. Proper conduct is the highest Law, as well as what is declared the Veda and given in traditional texts.

The conclusion then is that adherence to this law is both natural and prescribed:

> Applying himself always to this treatise, therefore, let a twice-born man remain constantly self-possessed. When a Brahmin has fallen away from proper conduct, he does not reap the fruit of the Veda; but when he holds fast to proper conduct, tradition says, he enjoys its full reward. Seeing thus that the Law proceeds from proper conduct, the sages understood proper conduct to be the ultimate root of all ascetic toil. (I.102-110)[3]

The Law is given, and humans are exhorted to adhere to it. The detailed laws easily rival the detail of Exodus and Leviticus. While the »laws of Manu« are not named a covenant, they are given as the foundation of a proper relationship. We can note too that although Manu is described as a law-giver and even creator of the natural and social world in which humans live, it is not important to decide whether Manu is a divine figure; it is the cosmos that is the context of moral and religious intelligibility, by a kind of covenant essential to the world as such. The law is constituent of the world itself, and there is a deep interconnection between the law, nature, and human prosperity, now and after death.

In Books 7-9 of *Manu*, kings are constrained by rules that establish their powers but just as importantly set out their duties: power is not free or without responsibility, but for a specific purpose within the larger frame of the universe, the order of *dharma* which the king is expected to defend.

Even treatises outside Sanskrit make clear the duties of a king. For example, the Tamil-language *Tirukkuṟaḷ*, usually dated to the early centuries CE, devotes considerable space to the ideal and duties of a good king. Here is a typical set of verse from that classic text, Chapter 55, »the unswerving scepter«:

> Searching enquiry, an impartial eye, punishment as prescribed.
> Are the ways of justice.
>
> The world looks up to heaven for rain
> And his subjects to their king for justice.
>
> The king's sceptre provides the base
> For scripture and right conduct.
>
> The king who rules cherishing his people
> Has the world at his feet.
>
> The king who rules according to the law
> Never lacks rain and corn.
>
> Not his spear but a straight sceptre
> Is what gives a monarch his triumph.
>
> A king inaccessible, unprobing and unjust

[3] The Law Code of Manu, übersetzt von Patrick Olivelle. Oxford 2004, 92.

Will sink and be ruined.

For a king who would guard and cherish his people,
To punish crimes is a duty, not defect. (*kuṟaḷs* 541-546, 548-549)[4]

In that same Tamil context, a key moment in the early drama *Cilappatikāram* (*The Ankle Bracelet*) occurs when the king of Madurai realizes that in haste and anger he had ordered the execution of an innocent man, Kovaḷaṉ, whom he wrong suspected of stealing a bracelet from his wife. At this realization – the crookedness of his scepter – he faints, then dies.[5]

It is a short step from these idealizations of royal duties and the right bond between obedient subjects and the ruler to the portrayal of God as king, who in divine freedom is nevertheless also in a righteous relationship with his people. Take the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, for instance. The virtuous Vibhīṣaṇa is brother of the demon king Rāvana who had kidnapped Sītā, wife of Rāma, the virtuous but exiled prince. Vibhīṣaṇa fails to persuade Rāvana to release Sītā and sue for peace before Rāma surely destroys him. So Vibhīṣaṇa flees Śrīlaṅka, and comes to Rāma's encampment. He explains his situation and surrenders to Rāma, seeking refuge. Some advisors see a trap, and want either to kill or imprison Vibhīṣaṇa.

But Rāma, a prince but also the deity descended to earth, famously holds himself to a higher standard; he will never turn away someone who comes to him humbly and in need of refuge:

> Under no circumstances would I turn away someone who had come to me in friendship, even if he had some flaw. For the virtuous would condemn such conduct.
>
> For the sake of compassion, scorcher of your foes, one ought never slay a poor wretch who has come for refuge, begging for protection with his hands cupped in reverence, even if he be one's enemy.
>
> Even at the cost of his own life, a magnanimous person should save an enemy should has come for refuge from his enemies, whether he be abject or arrogant.
>
> Should one fail to offer this protection to the best of one's ability and the limits of one's strength, whether through fear, confusion, or greed, that would be a sin condemned by all the world.
>
> Moreover, if a man who has come seeking refuge should die for want of protection while the person who could have saved him merely looks one, then the former would depart the world taking with him the latter's good works.
>
> Thus, it is a serious transgression to fail to protect those who come seeking shelter, for it blocks the path to heaven, and destroys one's reputation, and undermines one's strength and valor.
>
> I always grant protection to all beings who come to me for shelter, imploring me with the worlds, ›I place myself in your hands.‹ Such is my vow.[6]

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[4] Tiruvaḷḷuvar, The Kuṟaḷ, übersetzt von P. K. Sundaram, London 1990.

[5] See The Cilappatikāram of Iḷaṅko Aṭikaḷ: An Epic of South India, übersetzt von R. Parthasarathy. Columbia 1993. Der Bericht über die Ermordung von Kovaḷan und den Tod des Königs wird im zweiten Teil ausführlich erzählt, »The Book of Maturai«.

[6] Robert GOLDMAN, The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. Band VI (*Yuddhakāṇḍa*), Princeton 2019. Verses cited are from 6.12.3, 14-18, 20, found on pages 148-150.

The idealization of divine kingship in relation to human rules and human subjects is put this way by Angelika Malinar, as she explains the role of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, within the larger epic of the *Mahābhārata*:

> However, the religious and philosophical doctrines of the Bhagavad *Gītā* are connected not only to other religious doctrines and practices, but also to various political and social issues raised in the epic, many of them connected to royal power. The monotheistic theology presented in this text also offers an interpretation of kingship and royal power. In revealing Kṛṣṇa as the highest god, a new position of power is propagated that serves to reshuffle existing power relations that previously revolved around the ambiguous or double-sided position of the king. He is a figure that combines, on the one hand, aspects of a divine being when he emerges from the ritual coronation and consecration performed by the Brahmin priests as an aggregation of cosmic powers, but he remains, on the other hand, a human being and resembles other householders in that he functions as a patron of sacrifice and thus remains dependent on ritual reciprocity established by his relationship with the Brahmin priests…
>
> With regard to the conceptualisation of kingship, this means that a king is now regarded as subordinate to Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, the highest god. The king is now defined in relation to the highest god, who unites the ascetic power of the detached and liberated yogin with the creative and protective dimensions of his being the overlord of all beings, including kings. This limits the chances of kings to depict and present themselves as divine […] The new conceptual framework, which came into being along with the monotheistic doctrines of the BhG, became the model for later texts and traditions of subsequent religious traditions within Hinduism.[7]

This is acted out in various ways in various texts, of course, but one basic theme is that absolute trust in God as ruler ensures absolute protection by God in return.
In the *Gītā* itself, the devotee – even a warrior like Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa's interlocutor in the teaching – is invited to trust entirely in the Lord. Near the end of the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa sums up his teaching:

> Thus has knowledge more secret than any other secret been declared to you by Me. Reflecting on this completely, then do as you wish.
>
> Hear again My supreme word, most secret of all. You are thus surely beloved of Me. Therefore, I will tell you wherein lies your welfare.
>
> Be Me-minded, devoted to Me, sacrifice to Me, make reverence to Me-thus you will come to Me. I promise you truly, for you are dear to Me.
>
> Relinquishing all dharmas, come to Me alone for shelter. I will release you from all sins. Do not grieve!
>
> You must never reveal this to anyone who does not practice austerity, who does not worship Me, nor to one who does not listen to My teaching, nor to one who reviles Me.
>
> He who will impart this supreme secret to devotees of Mine, showing highest devotion for Me, will undoubtedly come to Me. (18.63-68)[8]

[7] Angelika MALINAR, The Bhagavad Gītā: Doctrines and Contexts, Cambridge 2007, 4f.
[8] Bhagavad Gītā, übersetzt von Georg Feuerstein.

Later texts follow this same theme, portraying the divine-human relationship as one of a divine promise of complete protection and a human commitment to absolute trust in the Lord. Thus, in the Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu tradition that in part looks to the *Gītā* for its fundamental truths, the culminating religious act is one of surrender to the Lord, with a sense of deep humility, helplessness, and the lack of any alternative place of refuge. This act — *śaraṇāgati*, going to refuge – is also known as *bharanyāsa*, the laying down of one's burden, at the feet of the Lord. In return for this act of absolute trust, the person no longer has anything to worry about, since the Lord will now protect and care for this completely dependent person in every difficulty large or small. This is, indeed, a sacred covenant.

I complete my set of examples with one from the 19th century, played out on a more domestic, even homely scale. *The Great Master*, an account of the life of the mystic holy man Ramakrishna (1836-1886) written by his direct disciple Swami Saradananda, includes instances of people giving Ramakrishna »the power of attorney?«: he will care for them entirely, as long as they trust him completely to do whatever is needed. In this passage, for example, a man named Girish, having failed in every attempt to reform his life, finally entrusts himself to Ramakrishna:

> Alas, the Master was asking Girish to do such an easy thing and yet he could not say that he would do it. Girish was in a very sorry plight and remained motion less and speechless; but there raged, as it were, a storm of anxiety, fear, and despair in his heart. The Master looked at Girish again and said smilingly, »You will say, ›I cannot do even that‹; very well, then give me the power of attorney…
>
> This was to Girish's liking. His mind was now calm And there swelled in his heart an infinite onrush of love for and reliance on the Master for his infinite grace. He felt relieved that the bondage of rule, which was a terror to him, was now gone forever. It was now sufficient to have the firm faith that whatever he might do, the Master would save him some way or other by his divine power.
>
> Giving the power of attorney to the Master meant then to Girish nothing more than this: that he would not have to give up anything by means of personal efforts or to bother about spiritual practices and that the Master would remove the last vestige of worldliness from his mind through his own powers.«

But, the last words of the passage indicate the ensuing obligation on the part of Girish, to cling to his new master:

> But he did not then realize that he had put voluntarily round his neck a noose of love a hundred times stronger than the bondage of rule which, he thought, was so unbearable.[9]

The power of attorney in effect establishes a covenantal relationship between Girish and the saint, and thus returns to a human scale the covenantal relationship that had been exalted to the divine level in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Gītā* and similar texts.

In closing these suggestive remarks on possible sites for comparison, I return briefly to Chalamet's essay and his intuition that covenant would make a fresh and fruitful starting point for a new manner of comparative theological exchange among traditions. What have I added to his excellent essay?

[9] Swami SARADANANDA, Sri Ramakrishna. The Great Master, übersetzt von Swami Jagadananda, Mylapore 1952. Die Zitate sind aus III.1, nn. 4-6, 329f.

First, I have offered some examples of covenantal relationships between the king and people, and between God, the ruler, and God's people. There are many more examples in various traditions, all of which could be explored in depth. Such examples emphasize the assurance of total protection in return for total trust in and surrender to the Lord.

While none of my examples is exactly parallel to those adduced by Chalamet – how could anyone expect exact parallels? – there is much common ground that could be explored further, tested, clarified, toward a comparative theological understanding of covenant in relation to divine and human power and interrelationships. From the examples I have given here, one could then return to the world of the Bible. One could explore side by side some of the kingly examples I have adduced alongside various forms of covenant between God and people of Israel, God and kings Saul and David, etc.

Second, still looming, of course, is the fact that once we return to the Biblical context, theologically we are not speaking only of »covenant« as a phenomenon present in the Hebrew Bible and surrounding ancient cultures. Rather, »*the* Covenant« is at stake, the unique and privileged relationship of God and the people of Israel and, by grace and God's free choice, Christian people as well. No number of comparisons can simply add up to this Covenant.

But we need not believe that a privileging of »the Covenant« entirely rules out comparison with the kind of relationships evident in Hindu traditions which I have displayed here. As always, Hindus are not against the idea of a special God-Israel relationship, but they simply do not see a reason why that relationship excludes relationship with Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu, for instance. So we would then be pressed to reflect on what is unique and not unique in Biblical narratives of covenant, *the* Covenant. By extension of course, we might then consider the universality of covenant, God's committed relationship to the entirety of the human family.

Chalamet's provocative suggestions thus offer potentially a rich and multidimensional frame in which to consider the divine-human relationship, as interestingly more than a matter of personal I-thou links between God and the human as if a matter of personal choice, sincerity, etc. The fact of imperfect similarity between the materials considered by Chalamet and the Indian materials I have adduced, is a good thing. It opens up the possibility of a new strand of substantive comparative theological work, uncertain in its beginnings, and uncertain as to where it will end.