

When Human Frailty Becomes a Religious Alibi

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Catch a believer with his hand in the cookie jar, and the defense arrives: human beings are weak; the religion remains pure. But let a Hindu or Buddhist commit an injustice, and the same apologist may place an entire tradition in the dock. Inside his own faith, wrongdoing becomes a departure from religious truth. Outside it, wrongdoing becomes a revelation of religious character. This is the double standard I challenge: the use of human frailty to protect one tradition while using human misconduct to condemn another.

The issue reaches far beyond a stolen cookie. It concerns how we examine misconduct by religious leaders, the conduct of powerful institutions, and the devastation inflicted by conquering armies. Whether the accused is a rabbi, a pope, a televangelist, or a Muslim sovereign, religious office supplies no exemption from accountability. Nor does a declaration of sacred purpose erase responsibility. When an institution authorizes, enables, or conceals wrongdoing, the inquiry must extend beyond the immediate offender to the authorities and ideas that sustained him.

Consider Timur's invasion of India in 1398. Historical accounts report that approximately 100,000 prisoners were killed before the battle for Delhi. The account attributed to Timur describes their execution in a single day and identifies the prisoners through the religious language of unbelief and idolatry. The number should be presented as a reported historical figure, not a modern verified count. Yet the central issue remains unmistakable: the narrative presents an organized massacre and supplies religious language in its justification. Calling this merely human weakness evades the evidence demanding examination.^[1]

Nader Shah's massacre in Delhi provides another example of deliberate mass violence. According to Encyclopaedia Iranica, approximately 20,000 inhabitants of different religions were killed on 22 March 1739, between morning and afternoon, after he ordered retaliation for attacks on his soldiers. This episode establishes responsibility at the summit of political and military authority. His Muslim identity alone does not establish a doctrinal cause. But neither can personal imperfection adequately explain a command transmitted through an army and executed against a city's inhabitants. Responsibility includes the machinery of organized power. ^[2]

Portuguese Goa supplies particularly direct evidence of cooperation between religious and colonial authority. Archival scholarship documents prohibitions on Hindu worship, restrictions on temple construction and repair, and policies intended to compel conversion to Catholicism. Anti-Hindu legislation was enacted by the colonial government at the request of the Church's Provincial Council. Here the connection between religious authority and coercive policy does not depend on guessing a soldier's private motives. It appears in institutional decisions. An explanation that stops at the frailty of individual Christians leaves those decisions untouched. ^[3]

The assault also reached language and cultural continuity. A Portuguese decree of June 1684 sought to suppress Konkani and compel the use of Portuguese, prescribing imprisonment for violations. The extent of enforcement requires separate examination, but the decree itself matters. A government that attempts to displace a population's language intervenes in the means by which families transmit memory, custom, and identity. This was a policy requiring authorization and enforcement, not an accidental lapse by an otherwise well-meaning individual. Its institutional character belongs at the center of judgment. ^[4]

Portuguese destruction in Sri Lanka belongs in the same examination. Sri Lanka's Central Cultural Fund records the destruction of much of the Koneswaram Hindu temple at Trincomalee and the reuse of its stones in Portuguese fortifications. A sanctuary was dismantled, and its material was absorbed into the architecture of conquest. To discuss such destruction solely as the imperfection of particular believers strips the event of its political organization and its assault on another community's religious life. The temple's destruction must be judged as an act with perpetrators, authority, and consequences. ^[5]

These examples demand more than the convenient observation that everyone sins. Of course people fail their professed ideals. But there is a difference between violating a rule and enforcing one, between disobeying religious authorities and acting with their authorization. Misconduct by a rabbi or televangelist requires examination of the individual and any enabling institution. Policies endorsed by popes, church councils, or sovereigns require examination at those levels. The proper scope of responsibility follows the evidence. It cannot be restricted in advance to preserve a religion's reputation.

The unequal treatment becomes sharper when outsiders are condemned through categories such as "heathen," "pagan," "kafir," or "unsaved." These terms differ in meaning and usage; their relevance here is their use to establish religious inferiority or deny equal standing. Under that reasoning, the insider can plead human frailty after committing an injustice, while the outsider may be condemned before committing any injustice whatsoever. His offense is his belief, his worship, or his refusal to convert. A system claiming universal moral authority must answer for that inequality.

Hinduism and Buddhism need no immunity to make this argument. Caste oppression, sectarian violence, and religious discrimination deserve scrutiny wherever they occur. The demand is for consistency: examine teachings, institutions, decisions, and conduct by the same standards. Do not compare Christian love or Islamic mercy as ideals with Hindu or Buddhist wrongdoing as practice. Do not credit your religion with every humane achievement while assigning its institutional cruelties exclusively to human nature. Otherwise, one tradition supplies its publicity material while another supplies its criminal record.

This does not make every believer guilty of crimes committed centuries before his birth. It makes inherited claims of moral superiority answerable to the historical record and present defenses answerable to ordinary standards of reasoning.

The decisive question is whether an apologist will permit his own tradition to undergo the examination he demands of others. The atrocities establish the need for accountability; the double standard appears when that accountability is selectively refused. Human frailty can explain neither everything nor nothing according to the religious identity of the accused. Where faith restrained cruelty, acknowledge it. Where religious authority justified or organized cruelty, establish it and condemn it. No sacred title, institution, or claim of revelation should place responsibility beyond inquiry. The hand remains in the cookie jar, however solemnly its owner invokes heaven.

Sources & References

Historical sources cited in the essay

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