

ISHA AND JESUS:  
A COMPARISON OF THE ISHA UPANISHAD  
AND CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Dawn Sopron  
06/15/2010

Submitted as requirement for 300 hr. YTT  
Surya Chandra Healing Yoga School  
J.J. Gormley-Etchells

## I. INTRODUCTION

My interest in this topic began with a casual first reading of the Isha Upanishad after I received a copy of Easwaran's *THE UPANISHADS* for Christmas 1 ½ years ago. Having spent 4 years as a student in an Evangelical Christian college, the first line of verse 3 immediately jumped out at me: "Those who deny the Self are born again..." (Easwaran, p. 57) The concept of "born again" is fundamental to the Evangelical Christian tradition and, though I no longer believed in it, I was intrigued that an ancient Vedic/Yogic text used the same language. As I meditated on the text, it became clear that Isha's view of "born again" was diametrically opposed to Evangelical Christianity's positive use of the concept. In this paper, I plan to compare and contrast the theological viewpoints of the Isha Upanishad and modern Evangelical Christianity, identifying their opposing basic premises, while also noting some areas of congruence which may be surprising.

## DEFINING EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

For the purposes of this paper, Evangelical Christianity is best described by its most prevalent presentation in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century. British historian, David Bebbington, defines "evangelical" as all Christians who affirm some key doctrines: conversionism (a belief that lives need to be changed), activism (actively living out tenets of faith in daily behavior), biblicism (an emphasis on literal interpretation of Christian scriptures), and crucicentrism (focus on the substitutional sacrifice of Christ on the cross). (ISAE Web Site)

Since 1976, the Gallup organization has been asking 1000 adults in the U.S. per year the question: "Would you describe yourself as a 'born-again' or evangelical Christian?" Between 1976 and 2005, the average has been approximately 39%. Several more recent studies by sociologists and political scientists that utilize more complex definitions have estimated the number of evangelical Christians in the U.S. at 25-30% of the population, or roughly 70-80 million people. (ISAE Web Site)

Most evangelical Christians subscribe to a "born again" theology, which is defined succinctly in a publication called *THE FOUR SPIRITUAL LAWS* written in 1952 by the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ. (Campus Crusade for Christ Web Site) It is based on the bible passage, John 3:16, which says: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (NIV, p. 1140) The four spiritual laws are: 1. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for you; 2. Man is sinful and separated from God; 3. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for solving man's sin, so through him is the only way to know and experience God's love; 4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in order to know God's love and plan for our lives. (Campus Crusade for Christ Web Site) Out of this theology comes the idea that only those who accept Jesus "into their hearts" will be "saved."

## DEFINING THE UPANISHADS

In Hindu tradition, the Vedas are scriptures believed to be revealed knowledge given to humanity at the beginning of time. The first part of each Veda defines the rituals of the religious practice. The Upanishads are the universal wisdom teachings of the ancient sages and form the second part of each of the four main Vedas: Rg, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. The reason the word universal is used is that the Upanishads are not considered to be specifically Hindu, but applicable to any time and culture. (Easwaran, p. 18-19)

The word “Upanishad” can be translated as “sitting down near” (Easwaran, p. 19) or “sitting near devotedly.” (Prabhavananda, p. xvii) The texts are records of the teachings of sages, both male and female, but the purpose seems to be more for inspiration than actual instruction. The implication is the listener must interact with the material and that the personal spiritual experiences of both the teachers and the listeners impact the application of the material. No one knows when these texts were composed, by whom, or how many once existed. The subject of this paper, the Isha Upanishad, is one of ten considered the “principle Upanishads” since the time of Shankara, an eighth century Indian mystic. (Easwaran, p. 19-20)

Shankara defined the Upanishads as “the knowledge that destroys the bonds of ignorance and leads to the supreme goal of freedom.” (Prabhavananda, p. xvii) Unlike the rest of the Vedas, which are focused on ritual, practice, and the tangible reality of the outside world, the Upanishads are concerned with the interior world of human consciousness. They teach that each of us, our real Self, is at one with the power that created the universe, and we can access this Reality directly, internally, and without any outside mediation of other people or structures of religion. (Easwaran, p. 21-22)

## II. ANALYSIS

Having defined our theological “schools of thought,” let us now further explore their tenets by addressing 5 areas of comparison and contrast: Separation between God and Man; Salvation; Sin; Roles of Faith and Works; and Timing of Spiritual Awakening. Please note all quotes from the ISHA UPANISHAD, unless otherwise noted, are from the Eknath Easwaran translation.

### SEPARATION BETWEEN GOD AND MAN: DUALISM vs. MODIFIED MONISM

“The Lord is enshrined in the hearts of all.” ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 1

“The Self is one...” ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 4

The central theme of Evangelical Christianity is a type of dualism: man is inherently separated from God and God, in the form of Jesus Christ, can save man. Dualism strictly means there are two equal and independent powers, one of them good and the other bad, and they are in constant battle in the universe. (Lewis, p. 37) An Evangelical Christian alternate version of dualism suggests that the “good” power is dominant because the very

existence of a “bad” power implies intelligence and will, which are good traits and therefore must come from the “good” power. Put more simply, Christians believe the “bad” power was created by God as good, but went “wrong.” Christians also believe the resultant war between good and evil is not a war between independent powers, but actually a rebellion from within, a kind of civil war in which the universe is occupied by the rebel, the devil, who keeps man separated from God. (Lewis, p. 39-40)

Vedic philosophy, the underlying philosophical tradition of Yoga, as outlined in the Isha Upanishad, is a modified monism: God, termed “Self,” is inherently within all, so the One is within the Many. (Aurobindo, p. 21) A Christian view would be the Upanishads are “preaching” pantheism, the idea that the universe IS God, that anything you find in the universe is a part of God. The Christian counterpoint is God MADE the universe, but is not within it. (Lewis, p. 33) In the Isha Upanishad, God is referred to as “the Lord” or in some translations, Brahman. The oneness of Brahman can neither be diminished nor increased, nor divided. It is in all, but not diminished by this apparent separateness. It is complete and entire in all. For example, waves are not really parts of the sea. Waves are each of them the sea itself, their diversities being superficial appearances caused by motion. So each individual soul is really the whole Brahman in a different visible appearance. (Aurobindo, p. 21) As such, there is no separation between God and man and therefore, no need for an outside savior.

#### SALVATION FROM WITHOUT vs. SALVATION FROM WITHIN

“Those who deny the Self are born again, blind to the Self, enveloped in darkness, utterly devoid of love for the Lord.” ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 3

The Christian concept of “born again” is defined as a spiritual birth which occurs when one freely and openly confesses faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ and the substitutional sacrifice of his death to “save us from our sins.” This belief comes from Jesus’ words in the Bible verse John 3:3: “...I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (NIV, p.1140) The salvation comes to us from an external source vs. an internal process. Likewise, spiritual transformation comes from without versus from within and is not open to all, it is only open to those who believe in Jesus Christ as savior.

In contrast, Isha teaches that in order to realize our true nature (EVERYONE’S true nature!) as one with God, we need to clear the cloudiness and ignorance of the ego (Avidya) through internal spiritual practices. Isha defines “born again” as a negative consequence of Avidya. (Aurobindo, p. 15) If you deny that you are One with the Self, you are in ignorance and forever caught in dualism and therefore caught in a similar philosophy to the Evangelical Christian, that is: believing you are defective in and of yourself and require an external “savior” in order to be good, acceptable, forgiven...”saved.” According to Isha, this separateness between God and man is an illusion because man is already one with the Self – you don’t have to ask for IT to come to you! This is clear at the outset in v. 1: “The Lord is enshrined in the hearts of all,”

(Easwaran, p.57) not “the Lord is enshrined in just the hearts of those who believe that Jesus died to save them.”

In addition, being “born again” could mean cycles of reincarnation until achieving full spiritual transformation. Another interpretation is “born again” could mean being “stuck” in the earthly, concrete world and not realizing the spiritual realms. It is a problem to over-emphasize one or the other; the goal of spiritual transformation is to be liberated from attachment to either one or both. For example, too much focus on “birth” in the body leads to limitations of growth and interminable rounds of ego battles. Too much focus on “non-birth” (spiritual liberation) leads to nihilism, or being lost in a void, not grounded in the reality of incarnation. (Aurobindo, p. 58-60)

However, one could also interpret Isha in verses 12-14 as concurring with the Christian view of Jesus as both “transcendent” (God) and “immanent” (man or earth-bound). The passage reads: “In dark night live those for whom the Lord is transcendent only; in night darker still, for whom he is immanent only. But those for whom he is transcendent AND immanent cross the sea of death with the immanent and enter into immortality with the transcendent.” (Easwaran, p. 58-59) The difference that remains is the evangelical view that Jesus is the necessary ingredient. My interpretation of Isha is the realization and integration of the transcendent and immanent can be achieved in each one of us. In the words of Andrew Harvey, we can all be “Christed.” (Harvey, p. 123) A biblical reference supporting this idea is Luke 17:21, in which Jesus says: “...the kingdom of God is within you.” In that passage, Jesus was not just talking to Christians. As a matter of fact, there were no “Christians” because he hadn’t died yet!

#### SIN vs. AVIDYA or INHERENTLY BAD vs. INHERENTLY GOOD

“Bright is the Self, indivisible, untouched by sin...” ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 8

In the evangelical Christian view, God is perfect and man is born flawed, tainted by sin. This concept comes primarily from the writings of St. Paul in the New Testament of the Bible. For example, in Romans 3:23-24 St. Paul states: “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (NIV, p. 1208) Jesus Christ bridged the gap. Because he was man, he suffered surrender and humiliation of death, but because he was also God, he was perfect and rose from the dead, effectively conquering death. By sharing in his suffering and accepting his sacrifice for us, we can share in his conquest of death and be promised a new life after we have died...a life in which we will be made perfect and perfectly happy in heaven. (Lewis, p. 51) This concept also comes from St. Paul in the Book of Romans 6:22-23: “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.” (NIV, p. 1211)

Isha states over and over again that the Self is within us and the Self is divine. Therefore, we are inherently good. This, however, does not mean we don’t have problems. Our perception is clouded (Avidya). Avidya could be a type of synonym for sin except that it

is just our state of being, not our actions. It is an obscuration, lack of clarity. Kausthub Desikachar describes Avidya as “wrong knowledge, no knowledge, inaccurate knowledge, or opinions not facts.” (K. Desikachar, 06/03/10) Another definition of Avidya is “ignorance of oneness.” This ignorance manifests as the illusion of the ego, which causes us to believe we are separate independent personalities. (Aurobindo, p. 15-16) Avidya is the consciousness of multiplicity and the opposing concept is Vidya (or Viveka, according to K. Desikachar), which is the consciousness of unity. Both are necessary. Isha talks about integration, not getting lost in one side or the other. The goal is to have an accord between Vidya and Avidya: multiplicity becomes conscious of its oneness and oneness embraces its multiplicity. (Aurobindo, p. 49-50) Everything that changes in us, such as our minds, bodies, behaviors, etc. is not our real and unchanging Self, but the becomings of the Self through the movement through life, moving from the state of Avidya to Vidya. When the unity has been realized in every part of one’s being, then one becomes perfected, liberated from ego and dualities. (Aurobindo, p. 85) Vidya depends upon Avidya for the preparation and movement of the soul towards this unity. (Aurobindo, p. 53) Through meditation, those corruptions of knowledge clear and we have connection with the Self within us, “indivisible, untouched by sin.” In some sense, this concept is similar to the evangelical Christian notion that we must embrace our sinfulness and need for God. As I quoted above in the book of Romans, St. Paul says: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (NIV, p. 1208)

#### ROLES OF FAITH AND WORKS: “FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD” and “COMBINE ACTION WITH MEDITATION”

“But those who combine action with meditation cross the sea of death through action and enter into immortality through the practice of meditation.” ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 11

An important tenet of Evangelical Christianity is that faith is necessary, but insufficient. We are “saved” by declaring our faith, but it logically follows that, if our faith is true, then we will behave according to Jesus’ teachings. Ephesians 2:8-9 states: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” (NIV, p. 1254) The concept is expanded in James 2:24,26: “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone...As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (NIV, p. 1303) Both of these biblical passages are frequently quoted in evangelical circles and influence codes of moral conduct and missionary zeal.

From the Upanishad perspective, Isha emphasizes in verses 9-11 the need to combine action with meditation. Works performed without attachment to outcome are a means to spiritual transformation. We should renounce the ego, not living life itself. “Life in the world and life in the spirit are not incompatible.” (Prabhavananda, p. 1) When Avidya is clear and we operate out of Viveka mind, then we shift from managing our lives into living our lives from the Self. (K. Desikachar, 06/03/10) Clearing Avidya is the

meditation part and “living our lives” is the action part. The difference between the Christian perspective and Isha is this: Christianity requires FAITH with the works and Isha proposes MEDITATION with the works.

#### TIMING OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING: CLARITY LATER vs. CLARITY NOW

“Those who see all creatures in themselves and themselves in all creatures know no fear...know no grief.” ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 6-7

“O nourishing sun...spread your light and subdue your dazzling splendor so that I may see your blessed Self. Even that very Self am I!” ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 16

In the evangelical Christian perspective, we can achieve spiritual awakening at any time, instantly, if we accept Jesus Christ as our personal savior. However, mysteries remain which we cannot understand until after physical death. The words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12 illustrate this point: “Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (NIV, p. 1232) Other translations of the Bible use the language “now we see as through a glass darkly...” This sounds a lot like Avidya...

Isha again offers a process we do ourselves, combining action and meditation, and with that offers a solution here-and-now during this incarnation, not one for which we have to wait until heaven: a realization of the Self. Isha exclaims: “Even that very Self am I!” Through the process of meditation our mind is refined in three areas: sensory, cognitive, and beyond cognitive. An example is “glasses clean, eyes clean, deeper feelings clean.” (K. Desikachar 06/02/10) Isha invokes Surya, the “Sun-God,” to illuminate our minds, reveal the truth, show us the clarity.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I offer passages from each tradition:

John 3:19-21: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” (NIV, p. 1140)

Matthew 6:13: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” (NIV, p. 1041).

ISHA UPANISHAD, v. 18: “O god of fire, lead us by the good path to eternal joy. You know all our deeds. Deliver us from evil, we who bow and pray again and again. OM shanti shanti shanti. (Easwaran, p. 59)

Alternate translation of v. 18: “O god Agni, knowing all things that are manifested, lead us by the good path to the felicity; remove from us the devious attraction of sin...” (Aurobindo, p. 8)

So, at the very end of the Isha Upanishad, we arrive at some congruence between the spirit of Evangelical Christianity and Vedic/Yogic Spirituality: darkness moving into light, evil moving toward good. However, the underlying premise remains divided: Christian salvation is a movement forward and comes from without. On the other hand, Yogic Spirituality is not a journey forward, but a journey backward to the Self which is within us all. (K. Desikachar, 06/03/10)

## REFERENCES

Aurobindo, Sri. 1921. ISHA UPANISHAD. Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press.

Barton, John and J. Muddiman, eds. 2001. THE OXFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

CAMPUS CRUSADE FOR CHRIST, Web Site. 2006. [www.campuscrusade.com](http://www.campuscrusade.com)

Desikachar, Kausthub. 2010. MEDITATION AND PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION, Intensive Retreat. Red Wing, MN: Bluewater Yoga Studio. June 2-6, 2010.

Easwaran, Eknath. 1987. THE UPANISHADS. Tomales, CA: The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation.

Harvey, Andrew. 1998. SON OF MAN: THE MYSTICAL PATH TO CHRIST. New York, NY: Tarcher/Putnam.

HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (NIV). 1978. East Brunswick, NJ: International Bible Society.

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF AMERICAN EVANGELICALS (ISAE), Web Site. 2008. Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College. [www.isae.wheaton.edu](http://www.isae.wheaton.edu)

Lewis, C.S. 1943. THE CASE FOR CHRISTIANITY. New York, NY: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company.

Prabhavananda, Swami, and F. Manchester. 1947. THE UPANISHADS: BREATH OF THE ETERNAL. Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Society of So. California.

