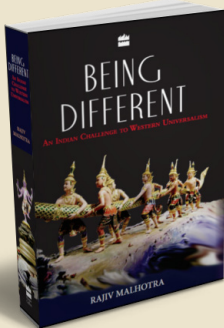


ANNOUNCING A PROVOCATIVE NEW BOOK

# BEING DIFFERENT

AN INDIAN CHALLENGE TO WESTERN UNIVERSALISM



Rajiv Malhotra's *BEING DIFFERENT* is a path breaking book filled with original insights. It reverses the gaze to look at the West, repositioning dharmic civilization from being the observed to being the observer. Rajiv's goal is to generate debates on the following propositions:

- Western claims of universalism are based on its own myth of history, as opposed to the multi-civilizational worldview needed today.
- Historical revelations are the foundations of western religions, as opposed to dharma's emphasis on individual self-realization in the body here and now.
- The synthetic unity of western thought and history is in contrast with the integral unity that underpins dharma's worldview.
- The West's anxiety over difference and need for order is unlike the dharmic embrace of the creative role of chaos.
- Common translations of many Sanskrit words are seriously misleading because these words are non-translatable for sound and meaning.

*"A fitting and major response to Samuel Huntington's position on 'who are we?' as the West... This deserves to be one of the defining books of the age." – John M. Hobson, Univ. of Sheffield, UK*

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING DIFFERENT



FOR WESTERNERS FROM TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS: It shows the way to liberation from religious institutions, dependence on historical prophets, fear of sin and damnation, and fixations with bloodlines and divisive identities.

FOR PRACTITIONERS WHO ARE “SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS”: It critiques the cafeteria approach that “all paths are the same” by explaining key non-negotiable principles of dharma.

FOR PHILOSOPHERS OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE: It contrasts the deep philosophical and metaphysical assumptions underlying dharma and western civilizations. This critique brings out western fixations on historicity and the weakness of the synthetic unity built into its underlying cosmology. The reasons for the West’s unresolved splits between reason and revelation, and science and religion become clear.

FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE PARTICIPANTS: It criticizes religious “tolerance” as a patronizing posture, and explains the far more profound principle of mutual respect. “Tolerance” is exposed as a ploy to protect claims of exclusivity and unique historicity.

FOR POSTMODERN THINKERS: It deepens the understanding of the roots of western hegemony and parochial claims of universalism, while avoiding the nihilistic tendencies in postmodern discourse. It introduces original insights on “chaos” as a source of creativity and use in shaping non-oppressive identities.

FOR PRACTICING HINDUS: It offers a novel way to understand Hinduism in terms of how it differs from Western religions and philosophies, and thereby prevents Hinduism’s digestion into Western frameworks, wrongly characterized as “universal.” This envisions Hinduism as an open architecture of diverse paths.

*“BEING DIFFERENT is a provocative and important book for two distinct reasons. First, the book is one of the few attempts by an Indian intellectual seriously to challenge the assumptions and presuppositions of the field of India and/or South Asian studies tout ensemble, including not only the work of European and American scholarship but as well the neocolonialist, postmodernist and subaltern resentment so typical of contemporary Indian intellectuals. Second, and perhaps of greater significance, is Malhotra’s attempt to analyze the meaning and significance of Indic culture from within the indigenous presuppositions of India’s own intellectual traditions, including the ontological claims of Indic cosmology, the epistemology of yogic experience, the unique Indic appreciation for complexity, and the nuances of Sanskrit expression. The book will be controversial on many different levels and will undoubtedly elicit rigorous critical response.” – GERALD JAMES LARSON,*

# PURVA PAKSHA: REVERSING THE GAZE

*T*he book employs the venerable tradition of *purva-paksha*, a dharmic technique where a debater must first authentically appreciate the opponent's perspective, test the merits of that point of view and only then put forth his own position. *Purva-paksha* encourages individuals to become truly knowledgeable about alternative perspectives, to approach the other side with respect and to forego the desire to simply "win." It also demands that all sides be willing to embrace the shifts in thinking, risky and controversial as they may be.

It is through Western categories, and hence the Western "gaze," that the people who constitute the Judeo-Christian traditions see the world. This gives the Western perspective a de facto status as arbiter of what is considered universally true. As long as one remains in the privileged position of subject, looking at others and not being gazed at oneself, one can assume that one's positions and assumptions represent the universal norm. *Purva-paksha* is the corrective to this mistaken view. In *purva-paksha* one does not look away, so to speak, from real differences, but attempts to clarify them, without anxiety, but also without the pretence of sameness. There is more to this practice than meets the eye. It involves not only a firm intent but considerable self-mastery (i.e., a movement beyond ego) combined with an understanding of the magnitude of the issues at stake.

*"Indian spiritual exemplars traditionally had a strong tradition of studying competing schools of thoughts and debating them vigorously. In some ways, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan did "reverse the gaze" on the West. Now, Rajiv Malhotra has launched the renaissance of this old tradition, and examines the West as the "other" through the lens of dharma. He thereby identifies the signature principles of Indian civilization. This work should become a textbook and it can galvanize a new generation to start a thought revolution (vichar-kranti)." – Dr. PRANAV PANDYA, Head of All World Gayatri Pariwar and Chancellor, Dev Sanskriti University, Haridwar.*

*"BEING DIFFERENT's new purva paksha tries to deconstruct the metaphysical ruptures in Western epistemology, bringing out the discrepancies among different kinds of universals, grand narratives and logocentric positions. It is well structured, deconstructing the philosophical, cultural and cosmological differences that have not been adequately examined for centuries." – R.P. Singh, Professor & Chairperson, Centre for Philosophy, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.*

*"Rajiv Malhotra's work is a kind of yajna that reverses the gaze upon the West through the lens of Indian knowledge systems. This process is traditionally called purva paksha, a distinctive feature of exegesis in Sanskrit, and in Rajiv's work it is given a new importance. BEING DIFFERENT breaks new ground in that direction. The result is a highly original and sincere attempt to compare the basic paradigms of Indian and Western thought. This book is an eye-opener." – Dr. Satya Narayan Das, Founder of Jiva Institute of Vedic Studies, Vrindavan.*

*"BEING DIFFERENT offers crucial strategic perspectives for Indian civilization, a civilization that is only now emerging from centuries of oppression and slavery. This book is a "must read" for those who care about India and its future." – Makarand R. Paranjape, Professor of English, Jawaharlal Nehru University.*

*“ Malhotra writes with passion from within an avowedly dharmic stance and with the intention of undermining the attempts to domesticate and expropriate the Indian traditions in a process of inter-religious dialogue that is ultimately based on a western cosmological framework and religious assumptions. In drawing out the contrast between “tolerance of other religions” and “mutual respect between religions” in chapter one, he brilliantly exposes the pretence in western affirmations of cultural pluralism. He shows that accepting western cultural assumptions is not essential to participation in the benefits of the globalization process. This book is essential reading for western scholars engaged in cross-cultural studies.” – Don Wiebe, Prof. of Divinity, Trinity College in the University of Toronto; and past president of the North American Association for the Study of Religion.*

*“This work commands an amazingly wide scholarship across Indian civilization, Western civilization, and comparative philosophy and religion. I know of no work on this subject which even remotely matches this.” – R. Puligandla, Emeritus Prof. of Philosophy, Univ. of Toledo.*

*“Honest, provocative and wide-ranging, it gives us (Westerners) a rare opportunity to see ourselves through the lens of another worldview, and to re-examine many of our cherished assumptions. It cuts to the heart of the problems created by Christian beliefs about unique historical revelation, and challenges the West’s fixation on linear history. Informed by postmodernism, but moving beyond it, the book levels the playing field for a genuine encounter between east and west and raises issues that any serious revision of Christian theology must address.” – Cleo Kearns, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and Infinity Foundation.*

*“What I found particularly informative and original in BEING DIFFERENT is the discussion on the positive role of chaos in the Indic world as compared to the West’s abhorrence of it. The book explains Hegel’s deep-rooted fear of chaos and uncertainty. He privileged order in Western aesthetics, ethics, religions, society, and politics and classified Oriental traditions into “pantheism”, “polytheism”, and “monotheism” as “world historical categories”. Hegel’s taxonomy of the “West” and the “Rest” provided the conceptual tools for epistemic subjugation of the non-West in the name of order. The dharmic worldview is more relaxed about chaos, seeing it as a creative catalyst built into the cosmos to balance out order that could otherwise become stultifying.” – Shrinivas Tilak, Independent scholar, Montreal.*

*“With stunning honesty, Being Different alerts the reader to the grave dangers of a difference-negating “sameness” that is marketed worldwide by secular and religious streams in Western culture. This is a very important and highly accessible book in the discourse on the interaction between civilizations.” – Rita Sherma, Executive Director, Confluence School of Faith Studies; co-editor, Hermeneutics and Hindu Thought: Towards a Fusion of Horizons.*

*“Rajiv does not restrict himself to abstract theoretical discussion. His insistence on preserving difference with mutual respect – not with mere ‘tolerance’ - is more pertinent today when the notion of a single universalism is being propounded. There can be no single universalism even if it assimilates or, in the author’s words, ‘digests’ elements from other civilizations. The book is engaging, and it can be disturbing or received with celebration depending upon one’s attitude to difference. I have no doubt that its contents will stimulate a meaningful introspection.” – Kapila Vatsyayan, Independent scholar and Member of Rajya Sabha.*

# EXCERPTS FROM BEING DIFFERENT

## Introduction

This book is about how India differs from the West. It aims to challenge certain cherished notions, such as the assumptions that Western paradigms are universal and that the dharmic traditions teach 'the same thing' as Jewish and Christian ones. For while the Vedas say, 'truth is one, paths are many', the differences among those paths are not inconsequential. I argue that the dharmic traditions, while not perfect, offer perspectives and techniques for a genuinely pluralistic social order and a full integration of many different faiths, including atheism and science. They also offer models for environmental sustainability and education for the whole being that are invaluable to our emerging world. The book hopes to set the terms for a deeper and more informed engagement between dharmic and Western civilizations.

India itself cannot be viewed only as a bundle of the old and the new, accidentally and uncomfortably pieced together, an artificial construct without a natural unity. Nor is she just a repository of quaint, fashionable accessories to Western lifestyles; nor a junior partner in a global capitalist world. India is its own distinct and unified civilization with a proven ability to manage profound differences, engage creatively with various cultures, religions and philosophies, and peacefully integrate many diverse streams of humanity. These values are based on ideas about divinity, the cosmos and humanity that stand in contrast to the fundamental assumptions of Western civilization. This book explores those ideas and assumptions.



## 1: The Audacity Of Difference

The distinct cultural and spiritual matrix of dharma is under siege, not only from unsustainable and inequitable development internally but also from something more insidious: its widespread dismantling, rearrangement and digestion into Western frameworks, disingenuously characterized as 'universal'. Much of what is celebrated as an explicit Indian influence on the West is actually threatening to deplete and exhaust the very roots on which it draws. Talk of global culture and universalism often creates the sunny impression that the fusion of cultures is always equitable. This assumption ignores the many distortions and unacknowledged appropriations on the Western side, as well as the highly destructive influences of fundamentalist Christianity, Marxism, capitalist expansionism, and myopic secularism.

## 2: Yoga: Freedom From History

All civilizations ask existential questions such as: Who are we? Why are we here? What happens when we die? Can we transcend death and if so, how? What is the ultimate reality or truth, and how can we reach it? The approaches to these questions and the answers offered by the two civilizations differ profoundly. In the Judeo-Christian traditions, revelation comes 'from above'. It is initiated by God, and its content is strictly God-given. Human receptiveness is required, but this alone is insufficient. God is transcendent and must personally intervene in history from without in order for human beings to discern the truth. The bedrock of such religions is this historical event. This leads to an obsession with compiling and studying the historical details of such ancient interventions and makes them what I call 'history-centric'. According to the dharmic traditions, man is not born into original sin, though he is burdened by his past conditioning, which makes him unaware of his true nature. Fortunately, he has the innate capacity to transcend this condition and achieve sat-chit-ananda in this life. Since the ultimate truth is attained experientially and passed from practitioner to practitioner, it follows that knowledge of the divine is varied and that more than one lineage may be true. I refer to this concept of the origin and transmission of truth as 'embodied knowing'.



## 3: Integral Unity And Synthetic Unity

The dharmic traditions are steeped in the metaphysics of the non-separation of all reality from the divine – what I refer to as 'integral unity'. Their central concerns are how and why seemingly separate entities emerge out of this unity. In spite of important differences in theory and praxis, all dharma schools share the belief in this innate oneness and offer elaborate theories and processes of embodiment for achieving it. This is in complete contrast to the approach in Western religions, which start with the assumption of separateness – of matter, life and the divine. The spiritual goal in the Judeo-Christian faiths is to achieve unity where none existed before. These religions presume intrinsic cleavages: God and humans are separated by sin and utterly removed from one another, the universe is an agglomeration of atomistic particles, and so forth. Furthermore, the reliance on historical and prophetic revelation ties humans to the past, while the lure of salvation keeps them fixated on the future, resulting in dissonance in the present moment. Such a worldview may achieve unity but it is a tentative unity, tenuous and artificial at best. Moreover, force and domination are often used to achieve it. I refer to this as 'synthetic unity'.



## 4: Order And Chaos

People from dharmic cultures tend to be more accepting of difference, unpredictability and uncertainty than westerners. The dharmic view is that so-called 'chaos' is natural and normal; it needs, of course, to be balanced by order, but there is no compelling need to control or eliminate it entirely nor to force external cohesion. The West, conversely, sees chaos as a profound threat that needs to be eradicated either by destruction or by complete assimilation. Chaos arises when one experiences phenomena which do not lie within one's psychological and cultural comfort zones, resulting in a breakdown of cognition. The breaking point varies among individuals and cultures.



## 5: Non-Translatable Sanskrit Versus Digestion

Ancient as it is, Sanskrit remains important for its profound creative potential. The richness of the meaning of a word is often deeply embedded in its cultural context, in the history of how that word evolved over time, and in the wider context of nuances and implied meanings that accompany its usage. A culture consists of the cumulative collective experience that is unique to its geography and history. The unique experiences of different cultures are not always interchangeable, and the words used to refer to those experiences must remain intact; if linguistic categories get lost, so, over time, does the diversity of cultural experience. Many cultural artifacts have no equivalent in other cultures, and to force such artifacts into the moulds that the West finds acceptable or familiar – to ‘domesticate’ them – is to distort them. This is a form of conquest. Many Sanskrit words are simply not translatable and this attests to the non-digestibility of many Indian traditions. Holding on to the Sanskrit terms and thereby preserving the complete range of their meanings becomes a way of resisting colonization and safeguarding dharmic knowledge. I give many examples of popular Sanskrit translations into English that are false or misleading.



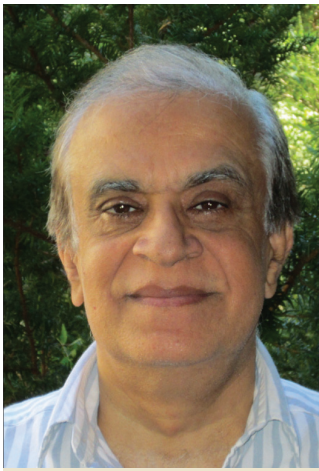
## 6: Contesting Western Universalism

Besides Christianity’s claim of a divine mandate to superimpose its own history-centrism universally, thinkers of the European Enlightenment also developed various conceptual absolutes and endowed these with ‘universal’ status. They claimed that the West is both the driver of history and its goal, providing the template into which all other civilizations must fit – be it salvation or scientific secular progress. Indeed, modern laws, regulations, conventions and common practices are formed with this in mind (whether consciously or not). The result has been the ongoing appropriation, by the West, of the intellectual and cultural property of various civilizations. One of the most important objectives of this book is to refute Western claims of universalism. This view is so deeply entrenched in the consciousness of Europeans and Americans as to form a core part of their identities. Because it is virtually invisible from within the Western perspective itself, one needs to engage in purva paksha or ‘reversing the gaze’, to shed light on how this leads to the misapprehension and denigration of India and dharmic traditions.



## Conclusion: Purva Paksha And The Way Forward

In my prolonged churning of the ocean of creativity, I have drawn great inspiration from Gandhi. His life illustrates many key points made in this book. His purva paksha of the West was challenging and audacious; he saw the inter-civilizational encounter as the kurukshetra or field of action where he performed his sva-dharma, or personal path and calling. His use of Sanskrit non translatables was a strategic way of managing the discourse surrounding his culture; and his way of life demonstrated how difference may be asserted constructively while maintaining respect for one’s opponent at the same time. The respect, in many cases, may not have been mutual, but what is important is that Gandhi set – and lived – the example.



**BEING DIFFERENT** is the result of 40 years of practice under several Indian spiritual masters, combined with a serious study of Indian and Western philosophical systems and histories. The author, Rajiv Malhotra, is an Indian–American researcher, writer, speaker and public intellectual on current affairs as they relate to civilizations, cross-cultural encounters, religion and science. A scientist by training and now full-time founder-director of the Infinity Foundation in Princeton, NJ, he was previously a senior corporate executive, then a strategic consultant and finally an entrepreneur in information technology and media. He also serves as Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Center for Indic Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and as advisor to various organizations.

Rajiv has been churning a wide range of issues and ideas related to this book for the past two decades (hence the imagery of the churning of the ocean on the cover). Using the ancient practice of *purva paksha*, he has benefitted from the advice and criticism of scholars from many Western and Indian traditions during the churning, and he hopes this book will serve to expand these dialogues in the future.

He is the main author of *Breaking India: Western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines*, (Amaryllis, 2011).

See: [www.BreakingIndia.com](http://www.BreakingIndia.com).

He is also featured as the chief protagonist in the book *Invading the Sacred* (Rupa & Co, 2007).

See: [www.InvadingTheSacred.com](http://www.InvadingTheSacred.com)

Rajiv is a prominent blogger on many sites, including the following:

Huffington Post: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rajiv-malhotra>

Sulekha: <http://rajivmalhotra.sulekha.com/blog/posts.htm>

Rediff: <http://www.rediff.com/news/malhotra.htm>

Outlook India: <http://www.outlookindia.com/taghome3.aspx?tag=102635&name=Debate%3A+Rajiv+Malhotra++v%2Fs+Vijay+Prashad+>

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*“BEING DIFFERENT is a memorable book... it asks us to look freshly at India and the West, ... a necessary virtue, essential to understanding our neighbors and even ourselves.” – Francis X. Clooney, Society of Jesus and Parkman Professor of Divinity, Harvard University.*

*“This book, the first of its kind looking at the West from India’s dharmic standpoint, is certain to provoke a major debate in the East and the West for years to come. Rajiv Malhotra’s writings have established him as a “different,” extremely original and robust thinker of our times. In the present volume, he forcefully challenges what he terms the West’s “self-serving universalism” which has been superimposed as a “template” for all nations and peoples.” – D. R. Sardesai, Emeritus Professor of History, UCLA.*