

THE CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA

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Abstract

The two major dimensions of dharma are that in one case one identifies oneself with some religious brand and the other one is to accept it as an ethical value. The problem with the compatibility between these two dimensions is that in blindly identifying with a religion and sticking to its rituals alone does not leave scope for accepting the ethical or the value aspect of dharma. For quite a long period the universality aspect of dharma could not be recognized. But many contemporary thinkers of India have highlighted the value aspect of dharma remaining within the fold of the traditional religion. The only requirement is to give up the narrow understanding of religion and to have the proper understanding of the concept of religion as true religion. The paper exposes the views of some contemporary thinkers regarding the proper understanding of the concept of religion.

Keywords

Institutionalized religion, universal religion, true religion

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‘Dharma’ is such a primitive concept that it appears that scholars have failed in finding its exact origin and use. Moreover, the concept is not seen to be used in a single sense to find out its exact origin. Some have treated this term to be very flexible one whereas some have treated it to be eternal. In the opinion of Dandekar, “*Dharma* has always been regarded as not being static. The context of dharma has often changed in the changing contexts of time, space and environments.” On this view of Dandekar, Nayak says that “It may be true so far as it goes, but for the Indian mind, it is also a fact that there is a sort of irrepressibility associated with the concept of dharma which cannot be lost sight of. *Dharma* is venerable, eternal and universal, (*Esadharmahsanatanah*). In any case, changeability of the context of *dharma*, whatever may be its theoretical value, has never been allowed to become the uppermost in the minds of millions in India.”¹

It is seen that the concept has been used in so many ways for which reason in respect of the categories of dharma no uniformity is seen among different scholars. One of the very common uses of the term is found in the sense of ‘religion’ for which reason in many sources the English rendering of the term dharma has been given as ‘religion’. But this rendering has not been taken as the proper rendering which is also a correct view. It is interesting to note that the Indian rendering of the English term ‘religion’ is dharma. So in the Indian context one has to take both the aspects of the concept, that is its ‘religion’ aspect and dharma or ethical aspect.

To find out the understanding of the dharma with the help of its definition is also not so easy because it has been defined in various ways in different literatures and also in a later period by different scholars. However, these above-mentioned factors cannot be taken as an excuse to remain silent about the traditional understanding of the concept. To have an understanding of the ‘dharma’ attempt will be made to find the relation between religion and dharma according to contemporary thinkers.

The relation between religion and dharma

The difference between the two concepts is obvious in the sense, the latter term has much wider connotations as compared to the former concept. The former concept has a Western origin whereas the latter concept has an Indian origin. ‘Religion’ is supposed to have come from the Latin word ‘*religio*’ standing for the understanding ‘*relegate*’ or ‘to treat with care’. There is another Latin term, namely, ‘*relegate*’ is also connected with the origin of the term religion with the understanding, ‘to bind together’. In fact, it was seen that groups of people (small or large) were found to be the followers of some common faith or principle and prepared to surrender partially or fully to some authority. This trend must be the origin of institutionalized religions like Christianity,

Buddhism, Jainism, etc. In the common parlance dharma is identified with different institutionalized practices, sects and cults. There are so many religious sects in the world that are suffixed with the term dharma in our Indian terminology and used by Indians. The religious sects being termed as, Hindu dharma, Buddha dharma, Jaina dharma, Sikh dharma, Christa dharma, etc. are found to be used in India. In the above sense dharma designates a 'religion' or a religious sect.

The huge growth of such a religious tree became so vast that a number of definitions have emerged up to describe 'religion'. Let us have a look at some of the widely accepted definitions of the Western trend. In a very simple manner it has been said that 'Religion is a faith in Deity (Samuel Alexander) and 'Religion is a belief in the spiritual beings' (E. B. Taylor). Whitehead has said that 'Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things.' The most famous in the field of philosophy of religion, Paul Tillich has significantly articulated a view in relating the life to the ultimate concern with the words "Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains answers to the question of the meaning of our life." Hick has taken note of the definition of religion provided in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "Human recognition of a superhuman controlling power and especially a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship." In fact, the understanding given in the dictionary happens to be most comprehensive and suited to the general view about religion. In the Western trend there has been less scope for finding a definition of 'religion'. All the above definitions are the explanations of dharma as religion.

Some of the definitions, where emphasis has not been attached to the faith on the supernatural factors are found to represent true dharma. The following cases are the examples of this category. Attaching emphasis on the emotional aspect of the religious life Mathew Arnold has said that 'religion is mortality touched with emotions.' Without resorting to having faith in super super-supernatural entity it has also been said by Hoffding that 'it is the faith in conservation of values'. But such cases are few.

So far as the Indian trend is concerned it is preferred to mention some exemplary views from different fields. For example, the views given by Swami Vivekananda, R. N. Tagore, and S. Radhakrishnan will be taken into account. In the contemporary trend the writings of these notable thinkers are found in the English language and obviously there is the use of the term religion mostly in an ethical sense. From their elaborations it is almost clear that though there are two different uses of the term dharma in two different senses but it does not lead to ambiguity. It

is because in one case it only indexes a trend or a cult and identifies the cult. The use is seen in a suffixed pattern, e.g. Hindu dharma or Jaina dharma. In the other case it refers to some sort of value or ethical principle. Their understandings of religion are found in the following manner that they have tried to isolate the religious fanaticism from the religion. Religious fanaticism has caused a lot of harm to the society. These thinkers in explaining dharma in a refined manner have played the role of social reformers.

Swami Vivekananda, to whom the people of the world recognize as a religious preacher, has given his opinion on 'religion' that "Religion is a realization; not talk, nor doctrine nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed to what it believes. That is religion."² In his writings one can find that he has made a clear-cut distinction between dharma as religion and dharma, a moral value. One can find the use of the term 'religion' for several hundred times in his *Complete Works*. But the use of the term dharma is seen on a few occasions. It shows that he has attempted to make the people aware of the distinction between the two concepts. If we think of his stand on the two concepts then we can realize that for him both the concepts come under human creativity having different purposes.

In respect of the origin of the 'religion' his view is that the practice of either ancestor-worship or nature-worship seems to be responsible for the origin of religions. Man has the unique nature of struggling to transcend the limitations of senses happens to be the most significant common factor behind their act of worship either to ancestors or nature. So, it is some sort of spirit-worship like ancestor worship has led us to think that religion or the awareness of the tremendous power of the forces of nature has created the notion of religion in man. Prof. B. K. Lal elaborates Vivekananda's stand as:

"Man remains active throughout his life, and suddenly he dies. The primitive man could offer no explanation for this phenomenon because his senses could not apprehend the realm beyond death. He wanted to have a glimpse of what remained there after the body was dissolved. Ancestor-worship was an expression of that wish. Likewise, Nature-worship was an attempt to understand the working behind the force of Nature - a phenomenon that was not evident to the senses."³

Vivekananda did not try to define religion. He was aware that no precise definition of religion could be possible. The existing definitions of religion may not be completely wrong. But none of those can be considered as satisfactory one. Because in the meantime, religion has become so vast that an attempt to define it would miss one or another aspect of it. So it is better to talk about the religion through its basic forms.

He has pointed out that it is important to know that a religion has two aspects, namely, internal and external. When one performs religious rituals or activities, which are open to all they are considered as an external aspect of the religion. It has the importance only so far as recognizing someone's concern with his institutionalized religion. But at the same time there is also the need for the commitment to the religion. It is somewhat internal to man. This internal aspect is much more important than the external aspect. It is because Vivekananda has considered that truly the religious sense has to grow from within. The external activities may not be superfluous but secondary. The real essence of religion lies in realizing its real aim of it.

Vivekananda has defined the institutional religions by taking the effect aspect of the religions. The 'proper faith in a religion can bring changes in the life of a being' is his opinion on institutionalized dharma or religion. It does not appear that he has given any definition of the non-nationalized concept of religion. But one can very well know about it from his views regarding 'universal religion'. He says that the every religion has three characteristics, namely, mythology, rituals and philosophy. The religions differ in respect of their mythology and rituals but not in respect of their philosophy. It can be said that the philosophy of a religion represents its dharma.

Lastly it may be made clear how Vivekananda has distinguished between religion and dharma. We have already seen his views on religion. 'Dharma' has been used by Vivekananda mostly as a value that is very much at the root of proceeding towards the goal of mankind that is *moksha*. He has categorically mentioned that:

There is no greater Dharma than this service of living beings. If this dharma can be practiced in the real spirit, then *muktikarphalaayate*, Liberation comes as a fruit on the very palm of one's hand"⁴

Tagore, one of the great visionaries and modern thinkers of the contemporary era, has given his ideas on religion in a novel manner. He considers that a religion can be treated as a true religion through which one gets the realization of one's kinship with everything. Both in the *Gitanjali* and *The Gardener*, he has made it clear that he has no faith in asceticism and he clearly mentions:

"Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight... No, I will never shut the doors of my senses. The delights of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight."⁵

"No my friends, I shall never be an ascetic, whatever you may say no friends, I shall never leave my hearth and home and retire into the forest solitude..... if its silence is not deepened by soft whispers. I shall never be an ascetic."⁶

In his opinion man should cultivate a close relationship with everything so that the feeling of universal love can be achieved. If this is the proper learning from the religion we share then it can be treated as the true religion. Such religion cannot be a narrow one or be restricted to any dogmatic religion. In his opinion the true religion shares the qualities like spontaneity and naturality so that there would be no compulsion of any type. Tagore considers that:

“In dogmatic religion all questions are definitely answered, all doubts are finally laid to rest. But the poet’s religion is fluid, like the atmosphere around the earth where light and shadow play hide and seek...it never undertakes to lead anybody anywhere to any solid conclusion; yet it reveals endless spheres of light, because it has no walls around itself.”⁷

The concept of religion was so important for Tagore that in most of his writings he had taken attempted to make explicit the nature of true religion. In his work, *Sadhana*, he has said that just like we can know the dharma of a tree when it takes the proper shape in a similar way “dharma is the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth of all things.” He mentions:

“In my language the word religion has a profound meaning. The wateriness of water is essentially its religion, in the spark of the flame lies the religion of fire. Likewise, man’s religion is his innermost truth. ... Man possesses an extra-awareness that is greater than his material sense this is his manhood. It is this deep abiding creative force which is his religion.”⁸

Thus religion cannot be a dogmatic follow-up of certain activities being prescribed by some institutional religion. That might be with someone from the birth. But that does not signify his religion properly. He has made it clear that a man is a Hindu or a Christian, which is his institutional religion, is a matter of accident. Man has to cultivate a true religious spirit to elevate himself from the state of ordinary religion to the state of true religion based on moral principles, through which his inner essence will be exposed.

It is also seen that Gandhi did not conceive of religion without Truth and Righteousness. He considers that “*true religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion is to morality- what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil.*” Religion purifies man. The purification is reflected in human motive, conduct and behaviour. A true religious life makes a man social and cooperative. The religion for him, is not merely an ‘ism’ to be accepted or a ‘sect’ to bind some people within its fold. For him, religion is an integral part of one’s moral living. He has made it clear that the religion should not be understood in the formal sense or customary sense. The religion stands for such moral principles that purify

man. It is based on moral values which should be capable of harmonizing all formal religions under one platform.

Among the academic philosophers, on the concept of 'religion' the contribution of S. Radhakrishnan is quite remarkable. There has been some resemblance in thought between Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan that both have thought regarding the origin of religion from human anxiety to proceed beyond image and concepts and to have some cognitive experience about the ultimate reality. Radhakrishnan has become more specific in adding to it that religion is the product of human aspiration to rise up to the conception of God or beyond God. He writes that

"All seers, whatever be their sects or religions to which they belong, ask us to rise to the conception of a God above Gods, who is beyond image and concepts, who can be experienced but not known, who is the vitality of the human spirit and the ultimacy of all that exists. This is the highest kind of religion- the practice of the presence of God"

Radhakrishnan's stand seems to be that religions are not mere religions. It also shares cognitive elements which has been disregarded profusely and landed the society in disharmonious situations. He suggests that both the elements (cognitive and feeling) of religion are to be followed 'religion' stands for both.

Thus, Dharma, in the sense of cardinal values should constitute the very basis of every institutionalized religion. Religions should attempt to promote excellence in the individual and social life through the inculcation of values in the individual and collective psyche. Religion is named as dharma but dharma should not be considered as mere religion.

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