Religion in a Globalized World: Exploring Advaitic Dimensions

ADITYA K. GUPTA[*]
KANIKA SARAF[**]

With each passing day, amongst people is reducing in order to form what we understand to be a 'global village'. This has been made possible through the means of communication, interaction of ideas and commerce beyond boundaries. In this era of globalization, religion has emerged as one of the serious issues. The manner, in which one practices their respective religion or tries living with it, appears to hinder the growth of globalization. Such a narrow approach of each corresponding religion creates a block in the vision of a globalized village. Today, when everything is in its expansion mode by getting a wider dimension, then it seems to be a petty hindrance that occurs on account of our religions, which are not ready to leave their limiting sectarian beliefs. What the current globalization demands is a new approach towards religions – an approach of culling non-difference from the differences of different religions. This non-difference based on the principle of non-duality shall pave way for a globalized social harmony. This article is a humble effort to give an Advaitic (non-duality) dimension to our various religions.

The word 'religion' is of great significance. Its root word - 'Religare' means 'to tie, to bind'. In other words, the root meaning is to put things together in such a way that a part is no longer a part but becomes the whole. 'Each part becomes the whole in togetherness. Each part separately is dead, but when joined together, a new quality appears in it, the quality of whole. And to bring that quality into our life is the purpose of religion'.[1]Religion, aims to unite not just the mankind rather the whole existence.

In the Indian context, a parallel term Dharma[2], despite wide connotations, can have the same integrative meaning if taken in the modern context of religions. Dharma comes from the root 'dhri', which means 'to sustain' or 'to uphold'. Accordingly, Dharma is that which upholds or sustains the universe or society[3]. It has always been used in the sense of morality or duties. Be it Mahabharata[4], Manusmriti[5], Yājñavalkya Smriti, Buddhism[6], Jainism[7] or Sikhism[8], Dharma has been taken in the sense of morality or duties only. Unlike 'religion', supernatural forces have never been integral parts of Dharma traditions. It was purely secular and morality centric. However, in long run, dharma could not maintain its original meaning even in our country and it started being practiced like 'religion'. Like religious traditions, dharmik traditions also started relying more on rituals, established practices or on supernatural forces. Thus, Religion and Dharma, though 'non- translatable'[9] to each other, were taken as synonyms in practice. Keeping practical aspects in mind, we have taken 'Dharma' in the sense of 'religion' only.

* Dept. Of Philosophy, University of Delhi. Email: akgupta@philosophy.du.ac.in
** Dept. Of Philosophy, University of Delhi. Email: kanikagupta.kg@gmail.com

[1] *'I Teach Religiousness'*, A Talk by Osho.

[2] Dharma as sustaining force

[3] 'धारणादधर्ममित्याहुर्धर्मोधारयतेप्रजा:' (*Karṇa Parva — Ch. 69, Verse 58)*

[4] 'अक्रोध:सत्यवचनं, संविभाग:क्षमातथा॥प्रजन:स्वेषुदारेषु, शौचमद्रोहएवच॥आर्जवंभृत्यभरणं, नवैतेसार्ववाणीका: '(Śānti Parva- Ch. 60 – Verses 7,8) as Retrieved from http://indiafacts.org/hindu-dharma/

[5] धृति:क्षमादमोऽस्तेयंशौचंइन्द्रियनिग्रह:, धीर्विद्यासत्यमअक्रोधोदशकमधर्मलक्षणम(Manusmriti 6.92)

[6] *Dhammenarajamkareti,*(AnṅguttaraNikāya IV,90)

[7] Tattvarthasutra (IX.6) {Dharma p.184-ref7}

[8] Dhauludharamudaiyakaputo, santokhuthaapirakhiya jinni sooti. (Verse-16 GuruGranth Sahib)

[9] Malhotra,Rajiv, 'Sanskrit Non-Translatables'

But, due to the diverse structures and beliefs of the society based on which it originated, religion manifested itself via different expressions in different cultures as well as societies. At times expressed in the form of revelation, through incarnations or through prophets, and at other times through deep rational analysis of human life. In the process of adopting these manifestations, any particular religion adopts the language, myths and rituals of that society, which finally tends to become the reason of differences from other religions. As far as the conceptual level is concerned, any religion would be considered qualitatively better if its extension is wider i.e., if it unites the 'existence'. By this parameter, Advaita or non-dualism offers the best possibility of expression of 'religion'. This non-dualism can be expressed at various levels starting with family moving on to the society to the country followed by the whole world. But it's best expressed when it encompasses the whole existence – animate or non-animate, humans or animals, plants or matter.

Herein, we would be discussing the possibility of escalating 'Religion' to the Advaitic level. We propose that it is at this level, that the differences between any two religions become secondary and should not be taken gravely as the underlying reality is non-different (even in terms of religions). In this context, various expressions of Hinduism as a religion are taken into consideration as well as the Hindus' belief in the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam[10] is quite relevant.

Practice of 'Religion', as some historians believe, is neither enforced by the society nor is the result of any form of economic prosperity. Religion actually comes naturally to the human beings. Religious feelings or activities got embedded in the humans along with their thinking and linguistic capacity.

Even Vivekananda has emphasized that it is only through the realisation of truth, that one could become truly religious:

"It is a change of the soul itself for the better that alone will cure the evils of life. No amount of force, or government, or legislative cruelty will change the conditions of a race but it is spiritual culture and ethical culture alone that can change wrong racial tendencies for the better."[11]

Religion, as we understand today, certainly did not begin all of a sudden with the arrival of Christ, Mohammed or Buddha ratherit was they who augmented the religious feelings of the people of certain areas by systematically channelizing them. It was on account of this particular channelization which was provided to the existing 'religious feelings and activities' that these religions adopted certain languages, myths and rituals of that society. Arabia became the birthplace for Islam, where the language of a common man was Arabic. 'Allah' as a term was already used to denote the principal deity. Prophet Mohammed reiterated all such terms while manifesting his revelation. It is of no surprise that the language as well as most of the rituals/myths of Islam were already existent in the Arabian society. Similarly, in the case of Hinduism as well, the usage of prevalent language-Sanskrit for its scriptures and rituals is ages old.

Herein, we wish to bring in the importance of the philosophy of Advaita-Vedānta, which holds the capacity to bring forth the essence of all religions through its doctrine of non-dualism. Advaita stresses that the underlying reality behind everything is non-different even in this world of duality filled with diverse names and forms, livings and non-livings etc. For the apparent multiplicity or 'otherness' is on the account of Māyā, which is the cosmic power of that underlying reality, Saccidānanda (Brahman). So it is māyā that is held to be responsible for the superimposition of non-eternal on eternal and eternal on non-eternal (Adhyāsa) and that

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[10] Originally found in *MāhāUpaniṣad*
[11] P.K. Sasidharan Nair, *Revealing Advaita Vedānta* (Delhi :MotilalBanarsidass, 2004) p.182.

is the reason why we tend to seriously consider these worldly differences. Intuitive knowledge of that underlying reality, that non-difference (Brahman), liberates us from the disease of 'otherness', thereafter which we are able to realize the ever-prevalent 'non-dualism'. The knower becomes non-dual with the known ultimate reality.

Upon pondering over the history of our great religions, we are able to unearth that the groups amongst which these religious activities were organized as a sect or 'religion' were largely based on this concept of 'non-dualism'. Especially, the manner in which the members of any group become a part of just one 'religion' is mainly based on their non-differences over certain supernatural issues or myths, rituals or beliefs. This consequently causes their respective mutual behavior, religion-based unity, group performance of certain rituals, beliefs in myths etc., which are further driven by the same psychology and understanding that they were non-different from the other members of that particular 'religion'. However, if restricted only to one's own religion then even this feeling of Advaita or non-difference tends to become the reason of serious differences with 'other' religions. Conceptually, a member of one group or religion takes the members of other religion as 'others' – 'different from one's own'. When such a type of dualism encages our mind, then it can potentially lead to a form of enmity culminating in fundamentalism.

So, we find that both dualism and non-dualism are at the center of various religious conflicts as well as cooperation respectively. But our inability to extend non-dualism towards the 'other' religions causes the breakdown of communal harmony. Non-dualism can evidently be seen at various stages of life in which case, love is the only prevailing condition. For instance, in a family-structure since the members take each other as non-different, so love prevails. Similarly, by extending this feeling of non-difference amongst several castes or races, there is love and compassion that thrives amongst its members. This feeling of non-difference is even visible in nationalism, communism, humanism etc. Religion is thus, a uniting force – that which develops feeling of non-difference among its own members. A real religion ought to take us towards Advaita (feeling of non-difference) as is observed in the case of all great religions.

But the painful fact remains that these religions fail to extend the boundary of their own Advaita. So, we are all half Advaitins. This resultant incomplete non-dualism always becomes harmful in a multi-religious and globalized world. Even though this non-dualism, on one hand, increases the level of affinity and cooperation amongst the members of same religion but on the other hand, it also generates the hampering feeling of 'otherness' based on religious dissimilarities. Though every religion is manifesting the 'Truth' in its own way, through its own language but this feeling of 'otherness' disallows our positive interaction with the members of other religions. As is echoed by the Vedic exhortation – "Ekam sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti"[12] (The true reality is one but wise call it by various names).

Instead of teaching this universal non-dualism, our religious leaders have been focusing and emphasizing on the external differences, which has made dead rocks out of certain religions. Such dead rocks neither modify nor concur with the movement of time. Instead, these so-called religions have done greater harm to the humanity by hindering the development of one true religion. Perhaps, it's the human mind that has been so deeply conditioned right from its nascent stage of childhood, by the so-called religious leaders of the world in order to believe that the only religion in which we are born is truly our own. This leads to a Hindu who is made to believe that his religion is the only true religion by rendering all the other religions as false. Similar is the case with Muslims, Christians, and other forms of religions. These religions have thus created a society comprising of blind people who go on telling us that it is not the eyes, which are necessarily needed. Since Jesus or Mohammad already possessed the eyes, so what

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[12] Ṛg Veda 1:164:46

is the need for Christians or Muslims to have eyes? Such blind tendency has further led to orthodoxy and even fanaticism.

Gandhiji was of the view that '…almost every religion has given rise to some fanatic and unreasonable practices...the experience of communal riots in India strengthened this belief.'[13] In such a scenario, religion that ideally acts as a liberating force, is itself in dire need of liberation – liberation from the false dogmas, orthodoxy and restricted non-dualism. The world needs an emancipated religion – as vast as sky, as deep as ocean, as patient as the earth, as sublime as a mountain and as shining as the light of the sun. This religion will not be a new one; rather we have to derive it from our own set of already existing religions. For that a proper understanding of our own religion is indispensable. So, if we are Hindus, we should become a good Hindu. If we are Muslims, then a true Muslim should come out of us. Only post that we could have a religion that openly accepts the vivid diversity exhibited by different paths.

The underlying message of all the Vedas is that a real religion is not limited to one's regular temple visits nor in performing rituals, rather it is in helping oneself in achieving oneness with the universe (Brahman). Without such a realization, finding the underlying connection amongst religions or even developing communal harmony seems to be an utterly impossible task. Our religions are more inclined towards external rituals or symbols but without the realization of non-difference, none of its serves its essential purpose to the mankind.

Adi Śaṅkarācārya, in his famous text 'Vivekacūḍāmaṇi' says it very aptly:

vadantuśāstrāṇi yajantu devān kurvantu karmāṇi bhajantu devatāḥ,

ātmaikyabodhena vināpi muktiḥna sidhyati brahmaśatāntare'pi.

(Let erudite scholars quote all the scripture, let gods be invoked through sacrifices, let elaborate rituals be performed, let personal gods be propitiated – yet, without the realization of one's identity with the Self, there shall be no liberation for the individual, not even in the life times of a hundred Brahmas put together.)[14]

Such forms of religion will be possible only by extending our non-dualism, non-difference towards 'others'. The philosophy of Advaita respects the distinctions and diversity at practical (Vyavahārika) level but at the same time, it also says that these differences should not be taken substantially. Truth is one and various religions are different manifestation of that truth, so the underlying truth behind all the religions cannot all be different. Realizing non-duality whether at the cosmic or at religious level will remain the same as is in the case of a family unit. In a family, despite the differences of views, in-fighting, vivid nature of family members; all the family members take the other members of family as non-different from oneself.

In the ancient Hindu civilization, we had a concept of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbhkam'[15] i.e., the whole world is like a family. Such a realization is possible only in a non-dualistic framework. Only through the realization that the underlying reality of 'everything that exists' is non-different, one would be able to take this world as one's very own family. The critical question that arises at this juncture is – How to generate this feeling of non-dualism for 'other' religions?

In our view, that could be made possible by having a positive mind-set about other religions, by focusing on one another's strengths instead of condescending the other. Every religion has certain good elements that we should try to know since our hate originates either out of our own ignorance about the good part of that religion or from certain incorrect views about it.

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[13]Gandhi,Mahatma. 'My Religion'

[14] Śaṅkarācārya, *Vivekacūḍāmani verse 6.*

[15]अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघु चेतसाम्। उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्-*Hitopadeśa*(1.3.71)

In answer to the question "What is Good in Islam?" Swami Vivekananda replied — 'If there was no good how could it live? The Good alone lives. Muhammad was the prophet of equality, of Brotherhood of men'. A similar answer can be given on behalf of all the other religions, which have progressed in one or the other part of spirituality. As in every religion its own soul is emphasized. Despite the ups and downs in every great religion, the soul of religion never gets lost. Since every religion is a part of the great Universal truth and so it spends whole of its force in embodying and typifying that part of the great truth. As far as this mission is intact, no religion in its true form can be lost. By keeping this ideal of all the other religions in our mind. Since every religion is trying to contribute towards one true religion.

'Each one represents a great truth; each religion represents a particular excellence something which is its soul'.[16] The absence of Truth makes life not just difficult rather impossible to live. As truth forms the very basis of nurturing our mind, enhancing our life manifold by enlightening our soul. Truth-less life is indeed meaning-less. If a philosophy is unable to aid us in the invention of truth, then such a philosophy is not worthy as it fails to give meaning to our lives. The prime task of any philosophy is to shape the human civilization in a manner that nurtures values, determines humane values and directs the human actions for the goodwill of the whole creation. With its vast diaspora of religions, this world should ardently follow the keynote of Religious Pluralism, which is primarily based on the belief of equality of all religions. Instead of 'religious tolerance', what Advaitic philosophy advocates is 'religious acceptance' towards one and all.

While studying or practicing one's religion, people tend to generally focus on the exclusive aspects. Such an exclusive approach gives rise to the narrowed sectarian religious tension. To eradicate this problem what is needed is proper education with regard to not only other religions but also towards one's own religion. Only then, one could make the religion all-inclusive instead of making it exclusive in understanding.

Even though each constitution ensures equality for all religions, nonetheless it's the misinterpretations and misdirection that has led us astray. The correct Advaitic interpretation of the true religion lies in the philosophical claim that 'The idea of Personal God is not sufficient' anymore and so in order to get something higher, we need an 'Impersonal Idea'. This does not imply the destruction of the personal idea; rather Impersonal is adopted to explain the personal, as only the Impersonal unlike the Personal, is infinite in its nature. This extinguishes our skepticism that the personal will could possibly destroy the idea of an Impersonal God; as Vedāntic thought transcends the destruction of an individual by preserving it. Only by the medium of universal, can the individual be defined, as we cannot imagine individual being separate from the Universal.

The beauty of this world is that even though there exists various paths of spirituality and religion; the common goal of each one is to benefit everyone. All these paths give hint of essential non-duality of all religions. Its only through the realization of this non-difference and by acknowledging and paying respect to the diversity of religions in this world that we can truly witness a true harmony amongst various religions. As it's only on the account of differing forms of manifestation, due to which we appear to be different. The ultimate Reality is one without the second. Respecting differences at the external level but deep realization of non-difference is the ultimate goal of Advaita.

This kind of self-realization is the one that gives the men the opportunities for self-growth and development. Such realization comes from thinking. Once it is mastered, then an Advaitin is unable to discriminate on the basis of religion, caste, creed, race, colour, gender etc. and so he becomes truly blissful, as he has achieved the real harmony between life's fourfold objective

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[16]*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. II (Kolkata: AdvaitaAshram, 2009) p. 371

of dharma, artha, kāma and Mokśa. Such kind of self-knowledge does not come from the outside, as it lies buried deep inside of us. For nobody ever creates knowledge, it is very much lying there only, only we need to uncover it.

As Paramhansa Yogānanda says – "Let us separate the dross of superstition from real religion by burning it in the furnace of Scientific Investigation and Realization, and by their practical application to life."

The world of twenty-first century, which is fast moving towards 'True Globalization' is in a gradual need for the religions which respect each other's' differences by not being rigid and are the religions which try to find the underlying non-difference by believing in the fact that the diversity of religions is more because of the apparent difference in languages, conditions or cultures. It is this dimension which would be then called the Advaitic dimension of our 'Religions'.

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