

**An Indic Contribution Towards an Understanding of the Word “Religion”
and the Concept of Religious Freedom**

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I

Introduction

In this paper I would like to advance three propositions:

- (1) That the word religion, as it is currently employed in English-language discourse around the world, is parochial (as opposed to global) in orientation;
- (2) That therefore the use of the word to refer to the reality it claims to describe as it exists around the world distorts this reality, with serious policy consequences;
- (3) That the examination of the correlative term dharma from within Indic civilization helps identify one dimension of such distortion with precision; and enables one to propose policy recommendations which will help overcome the effect of such distortion.

Before I proceed to the discussion of the three propositions, I would like to offer two clarifications.

- (1) The word religion is being used here not in the philosophically abstract sense of what is religion and how one might define it, but in the historically concrete sense of a religion, that is to say, a specific religious tradition such as Christianity, or Buddhism as employed by the Western academia and media;

(2) The appropriateness of the term religion to describe this reality is being questioned from a global perspective, that is in a geographical way, rather than from a universal perspective with its philosophical undertones and overtones. Hence the issue addressed is the following: Does the word religion correctly describe the religious traditions as found around the globe and not just within the experience of the West. It does not involve a consideration of such matters as whether one can meaningfully speak of religion which shall not be a particular religion, and so on.

II

What does it mean to say or claim that the word religion, as it is used in the English-speaking world today, is parochial in its orientation?

Perhaps if the word “Western” is substituted for the word “parochial” in the statement made above, then the implications of the proposition stand out in bolder relief. What is being claimed is that when the word religion is used by the Western academia and media, such use also implies a certain concept of what a religion is. It is not a neutral category. The point may be explained in terms of the pharmacological vacabularly as involving the difference between a brand name and the generic name of a substance. It is the difference between calling something aspirin and calling it Bayer’s. In more everyday terms it is like calling every car Ford. That one just can’t afford to do that could be illustrated with a simple example. If I begin to call all cars “Fords” then when I see a car which is not a Ford, but looks like a Ford such as a Chevrolet, I will call it Ford-like and one which does not look like it, such as a Mercedes, I will call unFord-like. The

proper procedure would be to employ the category car and not Ford ab initio in order to avoid falling into such cumbersome error, and to describe Ford, Chevrolet, and Mercedes as three types of cars rather than describe the last two by the extent they resemble, or do not resemble, a Ford. This means that the word Ford will have to be unprivileged if we want to move towards a neutral description of cars, if the vocabulary of describing all cars has already evolved on that basis of by owners of Fords. The paradigm- and word-shift go hand in hand here. What the Fordists did was to use a specimen as a criterion of description, instead of treating it as a specimen.

It might be objected at this point that the analogy is unsound. Modern West does not dub other religions of the world as Christianity-like or Christianity-unlike. Note that such a description is indeed possible from a Christianity-centric point of view. For instance, in accordance with such a mapping of the religious terrain, Judaism and Islam could be classified as Christianity-like and the religions of India, and perhaps China as well, as Christianity-unlike. It could then be claimed that our charge would hold if this is how modern West classified world religions. The example of the cars of various models cited above would apply if such were the case but modern West also refers to Christianity as a religion, just as it refers to Judaism, Islam and Hinduism as well as such. Hence the example does not fit the case.

The criticism is crucial and goes to the heart of the matter. The point to remember here is that in addressing the word religion and its provincial character, what we are dealing with at the moment is not so much the Christian West as the secular West, and it is on account of this difference that for the organising category of “Christianity,” one now substitutes the word “religion.” This is an important development whose significance has not gone unnoticed by scholars. I would like to substantiate this point

with the help of two citations which follow, each of which is a reflection on the “secular” movement within the Christian West.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) is well known for pointing out how the word “religion” became reified in the course of the intellectual evolution of the modern West.¹ It is not as often recognised that he also connects this development with the rise of secularism. He writes:

Another example of a tie between the process of conceptual reifying and a process of actual crystallizing in human history and society, is that of ‘religion’ as a generic abstract. The modern West’s adoption of this concept, though misleading for an interpretation of the religious life of the Aztecs, the classical Hindus, mediaeval Europe, contemporary Bushmen, and most other peoples, is nonetheless neither fortuitous nor absurd. Its

¹ His position in this respect may be summarized below: “In his important book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith challenges the familiar concept of ‘a religion,’ upon which much of the traditional problem of conflicting religious truth claims rests. He emphasizes that what we call a religion—an empirical entity that can be traced historically and mapped geographically—is a human phenomenon. Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and so on are human creations whose history is part of the wider history of human culture. Cantwell Smith traces the development of the concept of a religion as a clear and bounded historical phenomenon and shows that the notion, far from being universal and self-evident, is a distinctively western invention which has been exported to the rest of the world. ‘It is,’ he says, summarizing the outcome of his detailed historical argument, ‘a surprisingly modern aberration for anyone to think that Christianity is true or that Islam is—since the Enlightenment, basically, when Europe began to postulate religions as intellectualistic systems, patterns of doctrine, so that they could for the first time be labeled “Christianity” and “Buddhism,” and could be called true or false.’ The names by which we know the various ‘religions’ today were in fact (with the exception of ‘Islam’) invented in the eighteenth century, and before they were imposed by the influence of the West upon the peoples of the world no one had thought of himself or herself as belonging to one of a set of competing systems of belief concerning which it is possible to ask, ‘Which of these systems is the true one?’ This notion of religions as mutually exclusive entities with their own characteristics and histories—although it now tends to operate as a habitual category of our thinking—may well be an example of the illicit reification, the turning of good adjectives into bad substantives, to which the western mind is prone and against which contemporary philosophy has warned us. In this case a powerful but distorting conceptuality has helped to create phenomena answering to it, namely the religions of the world seeing themselves and each other as rival ideological communities” (John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* [Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1990] p. 110-111).

rise in recent centuries in the West has had to do with a great process of differentiation in those recent centuries in that area—a process whose diffusion around the world can be discerned in the present century. This is a process whereby the complexity and proliferating novelty of life have advanced relentlessly and spectacularly. A result has been that religious traditions that were once in practice and are still perhaps in ideal coterminous with human life in all its comprehensiveness, have actually found themselves supplemented more and more by considerations from other or newer sources, so that the religious seems to be one facet of a person's life alongside many others.

The rise of what is called secularism (the term was coined in Europe in 1851) and its spread throughout the world are indeed a symptom of an evolving sociological situation in which an earlier cohesiveness or integrity of man's social and personal life, once religiously expressed and religiously sanctified, has been fragmented. In this situation those who wish to preserve that quality of their existence to which their religious tradition nurtures their sensitivity, are often able to do so only as one item in an otherwise heterogeneous or distracted life. The concept 'religion' as designating, however vaguely, one aspect of life among others bears testimony to this differentiation.

One again, any new conceptualization must do at least equal justice to the modern situation that has arisen, as well as dealing more adequately with the perceptive religious man's unwillingness—or the

careful observer's inability—to segment off one area of his living to which he will confine, in theory or in practice, the relevance of his faith.

I do not contend, then, that the old concepts are meaningless; rather that they are imprecise and liable to distort what they are asked to represent.¹

This development in the intellectual sphere has its own counterpart in the academic sphere, which is identified by John H. Hick as follows:

In many universities and colleges there are departments devoted to studying the history and varieties of this phenomenon and the contribution that it has brought to our culture in general. Among the ideas treated in this connection, along with cult, priesthood, taboo, and many others, is the concept of God. For academic study, God is thus conceived as a subtopic within the larger subject of religion.

At a more popular level religion is widely regarded, in a psychological mode, as a human activity whose general function is to enable the individual to achieve harmony both internally and in relation to the environment. One of the distinctive ways in which religion fulfills this function is by preserving and promoting certain great ideas or symbols that possess the power to invigorate our finer aspirations. The most important and enduring of these symbols is God. Thus, at both academic

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963) pp.124-125.

and popular levels God is, in effect, defined in terms of religion, as one of the concepts with which religion works, rather than religion being defined in terms of God, as the field of people's varying responses to a real supernatural being.¹

He goes on to say:

This displacement of "God" by "Religion" as the focus of a wide realm of discourse has brought with it a change in the character of the questions that are most persistently asked in this area. Concerning God, the traditional question has naturally been whether God exists or is real. This is not a question that arises with regard to religion. It is obvious that religion exists; the important queries concern the purposes that it serves in human life, whether it ought to be cultivated, and if so, in what directions it may most profitably be developed. Under the pressure of these concerns, the question of the truth of religious beliefs has fallen into the background and the issue of their practical usefulness has come forward instead to occupy the center of attention.²

This intellectual and academic appropriation of the word religion tends to conceal the fact how Christian such a notion of religion is. In place of the Christian religion we

¹ John H. Hick, op. cit., p. 91.

² Ibid., p. 91-92.

are now, in fact, operating with a Christian conception of religion. S.N. Balagangadhara writes:

In the name of science and ethnology, the biblical themes have become our regular stock-in-trade: that God gave religion to humankind has become a cultural universal in the guise that all cultures have a religion; the theme that God gave one religion to humanity has taken the form and belief that all religions have something in common; that God implanted a sense of divinity is now a secular truth in the form of an anthropological, specifically human ability to have a religious experience...One has become a Christian precisely to the degree Christianity ceases being specifically Christian in the process of its secularization. We may not have had our baptisms or recognize Jesus as the saviour: but this is how we prosecute the Christians. The retribution for this is also in proportion: the pagans themselves do not know how pagan they really are. We have, it is true, no need for specifically Christian doctrines. But then, that is because all our dogmas are in fact Christian.¹

Scholars in the study of religion are beginning to display an increasing awareness of this fact. The entry under the item “religion”, in the Encyclopedia of Religion, which appeared in 1987 and has since become the standard reference work in the field,

¹ S.N. Balagangadhara, The Heathen in His Blindness: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994) p. 246-247.

illustrates the point well. The author of the entry is Winston L. King who starts out by saying:

RELIGION. The very attempt to define *religion*, to find some distinctive or possibly unique essence or set of qualities that distinguish the “religious” from the remainder of human life, is primarily a Western concern. The attempt is a natural consequence of the Western speculative, intellectualistic, and scientific disposition. It is also the product of the dominant western religious mode, what is called the Judeo-Christian climate or, more accurately, the theistic inheritance from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The theistic form of belief in this tradition, even when down-graded culturally, is formative of the dichotomous Western view of religion. That is, the basic structure of theism is essentially a distinction between a transcendent deity and all else, between the creator and his creation, between God and man.

Even Western thinkers who recognize their cultural bias find it hard to escape, because the assumptions of theism permeate the linguistic structures that shape their thought. For example, the term *holy* comes from linguistic roots signifying wholeness, perfection, well-being; the unholy, then, is the fragmentary, the imperfect, the ailing. Sacredness is the quality of being set apart from the usual or ordinary; its antonym, *profane*, literally means “outside the *fane*” (ME, “sacred place”). Thus every sanctuary—synagogue, church, mosque—is a concrete physical embodiment of this separation of the religious from all else. So too, in a

more general sense the sacred is what is specifically set apart for holy or religious use; the secular is what is left over, the world outside, the current age and its fashions and concerns. This thoroughgoing separation has been institutionalized in a multitude of forms: sacred rites including sacraments; sacred books and worship paraphernalia; holy days; sacred precincts and buildings; special modes of life and dress; religious fellowships and orders; and so on *ad infinitum*.¹

He goes on to say:

Many practical and conceptual difficulties arise when one attempts to apply such a dichotomous pattern across the board to all cultures. In primitive societies, for instance, what the West calls religious is such an integral part of the total ongoing way of life that it is never experienced or thought of as something separable or narrowly distinguishable from the rest of the pattern. Or if the dichotomy is applied to that multifaceted entity called Hinduism, it seems that almost everything can be and is given a religious significance by some sect. Indeed, in a real sense everything that is divine; existence *per se* appears to be sacred. It is only that the ultimately real manifests itself in a multitude of ways—in the set-apart and the ordinary, in god and so-called devil, in saint and sinner. The real is apprehended at many levels in accordance with the individual's capacity.

¹ Winston L. King, "Religion", in Mircea Eliade, editor in chief, The Encyclopedia of Religion (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) Vol. 12, p. 282.

The same difficulty arises in another form when considering Taoist, Confucian, and Shintō cultures. These cultures are characterized by what J.J.M. de Groot termed “universism”: a holiness, goodness, and perfection of the natural order that has been misunderstood, distorted, and falsified by shallow minds and errant cultural customs. The religious life here is one of harmony with both the natural and human orders, a submersion of individuality in an organic relationship and in an inwardly experienced oneness with them. And Buddhism in all its forms denies the existence of a transcendent creator-deity in favor of an indefinable, nonpersonal, absolute source or dimension that can be experienced as the depth of human inwardness. This, of course, is not to forget the multitudinous godlings, *bodhisattvas*, and spirits who are given ritual reverence in popular adaptations of the high religion to human need.¹

The concept of religion one would associate with Christianity would imply that religion is something (1) conclusive; (2) exclusionary and (3) separative. That is to say; to be a Christian means that you have the final truth (conclusive); that you belong to a community of Christians which shares in it and others don't (exclusionary) and that a religion constitutes a distinct component of culture and separable from it, so that anyone belonging to any culture could become a Christian (separative). As the word passes from Christian to secular usage, its first implication gets attenuated, in the sense that it is admitted that not just Christianity but other religions may also claim to possess the ultimate truth. Thus the description of Christianity as a religion converts its “truth” into a

¹ Ibid., p. 282-283.

“truth-claim”; we revert to the original Christian claim as soon as we call it the religion instead of a religion. Religion with a the is the Christian article of faith; with an a it is a secular article of faith.

III

In its secular usage, however, the word religion as triply understood in Christianity, has tended to retain its two other associations: that religion is exclusionary and that it is separative. This is most clear in its use in such a document as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 of this declaration is generally regarded as enshrining the right to religious freedom. It reads as follows:

Article 18

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.¹

It is worth noting that the right to change one’s religion is immediately recognized, but not the right to retain one’s religion in the same way. The question of the

¹ Tad Stahnke and J. Paul Martin, eds., Religion and Human Rights: Basic Documents (New York: Columbia University, Center for Study of Human Rights, 1998) p. 59.

right of changing religions only arises if they are exclusive, for change means that a border has to be crossed. And the idea that one can change one's religion arises from the fact of it being something separative. That is to say, I, as an individual can separate myself from the society around me and start believing in something else independently of other members of that society. Religion is thus separative in two senses: (1) it can be separated from other areas of life and (2) the individual professing it can separate himself or herself from the larger social unit to which her or she belongs. A third sense is also implied: that one religion is "separable" from another.

All these aspects hang together as constitutive of a concept of religion which holds true for a missionary religion, or denomination. It might be argued that such a position could not be called Western because while this may be true of Christianity and Islam, it is not true of Judaism. For Judaism is not a missionary religion in the sense that it does not seek proselytes the way Christianity and Islam do. Nevertheless Judaism is also exclusive and separative in the sense that it accepts converts and what is most important: that you cannot be a Jew and at the same time a Christian and/or a Muslim as well. In other words, the concept of religion as something exclusionary applies to Abrahamic religions across the board. The difference between Christianity and Islam on the one hand, and Judaism on the other, lies in the degree of enthusiasm with which this sense of exclusion is pursued, specially on the question of whether such exclusion also possesses soteriological implications.

We have so far tried to argue that the relationship between exclusion and separation is correlational—both go together. But the degree of freedom of belief permitted within Judaism allows one to venture the conclusion that the relationship between the two could also be inverse: that is to say, that the less sharp the distinction

between religion and culture within a community—that is, the less separative it is in this sense, the less exclusive it tends to be in terms of religion. But the less the separation between religion and culture in a community the greater the extent of the organic connection of the individual to the larger social unit—and the more severe the implication for that unit of the conversion of the individual to another faith-community. Significantly, this is a point often overlooked by Christian evangelism.

There is thus a distinct connection between the naturally organic association of the individual to the unit into which the individual is born and the degree of exclusiveness entertained in terms of faith-commitment: the less separative the situation in terms of religion and culture, the less exclusive it is in terms of faith-commitment. But this is only possible if entertaining a new faith or religion does not involve the denial of one's original faith or religion. If such denial is not involved, however, then there would be no need to spell out the right to change one's religion the way it is formulated in human rights documents.

Thus two distinct universes of discourse emerge in terms of whether a change of religion involves the negation of a previous allegiance or not. But if no such negation is required then the question of change hardly remains an issue and thus the right to it. In such a situation the right to religious freedom takes the opposite form—the right not to change one's religion, the right to continue to belong to a community that does not distinguish between religion and culture and within which faith-stances are not exclusionary.

Perhaps it is the individualistic orientation of human rights discourse which has obscured this dimension of the problem. It is worth noting that my right to freedom of religion even as an individual takes on a different form if I belong to such an open

religio-cultural community. My right to freedom of religion then assumes the following two additional forms: (1) my right to retain my religion rather than to change it and (2) my right to accept any other religion without having to change to it, in the sense of my having to sever links with any other culture or faith. Thus I should be able to claim that I am a Christian without having to say I am not a Hindu.

At this point another question arises: does this qualify as change? Do I need a special formulation to safeguard this right of mine, that I have the freedom to accept any religion—without having to “change” to it. The issue needs to be pursued further because two concepts of community seem to be involved—a fact which may have been overlooked by the framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with its tendency to emphasize individual rights.

Winston L. King points out how the so-called Western religions involve a distinct concept of community. He writes:

There is one other important result of the Western concept and practice of religion, here alluded to in passing: the religious community, distinct and more or less set apart from the environing society. This is not absolutely unique to Western religiosity, for in almost every culture there are those individuals believed to have unusual capacities and powers—the soothsayers, shamans, witch doctors, medicine men, and other specialists who are set apart from all others by their powers and who use them in a professional manner. Likewise in most cultures there are those temporary and voluntary groups of initiates into secret or occult fellowships who take

upon themselves prescribed special obligations, diets, psychosomatic disciplines, and the like.

But none of these achieves the form or distinctive qualities of the congregations of synagogue, church, or mosque. There is more and other here than the geographical togetherness of worshippers at a Hindu or Buddhist temple or the cultic togetherness of a tribal society. In one sense, a Western-style congregation is a “gathered people,” a group of persons who have been divinely called to and have consciously chosen to follow this particular faith rather than other possible faiths or nonfaith. (That geographical, historical, and social factors greatly modify the actuality of the factor of choice is to be understood, but being chosen and choosing remain the ideal model.) Such groups have their chosen leaders, carry on joint worship periodically as well as other corporate activities, and evangelize for their faith among others. Thus, being a member of a body of believers—a term that betrays the Western theistic emphasis on doctrine—separates individuals to some extent from others in the environing society. And the professional teachers and ritualists—rabbis, ministers, priests, and to some extent mullahs and imams—are by their dress and mode of life even more separated from “the world” than the devout laity are.¹

He goes on to say:

¹ Winston L. King, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

Again, this special type of grouping, though produced in part by many other factors as well, is a distinctive product of the Western theistic dichotomous conception of religion as a set of beliefs and practices that are different from surrounding beliefs and practices and that embody a special relation to deity, that transcendent other. The very term *religion* originally indicated a bond of scruple uniting those who shared it closely to each other. Hence *religion* suggests both separation and a separative fellowship. How, then, is religion to be conceptually handled for the purposes of thought and discussion, since the very term itself is so deeply ingrained with specifically Western cultural presuppositions?¹

This helps clarify why, in the Western concept of religion, exclusion and separation go together, which makes freedom to change one's religion the primary metaphor of religious freedom. It is not enough for one to say that one is a Jew or a Christian or a Muslim; it also means that one must be part of mutually exclusive social groupings associated with the synagogue, the church and the mosque respectively. It is not possible for one to claim to be a Christian while standing in a synagogue; or a Muslim while standing in a church. When one visualizes this happening then one gets close to the heart of the problem, for an analogous situation, so abnormal in terms of the Western concept of religion, is normal from the Indic point of view. Thus a Hindu could freely admit to being a believer in Buddha, and Mahāvīra and the Sikh gurus without formally being part of those respective communities and members of those communities could make the same claim in relation to the Hindu, without astonishing the Hindu.

¹ Ibid.

To pursue the point from an Indic standpoint then: the primary metaphor of religious freedom would be the right not to have to change one's religion or, to put it more positively, the right to retain it, and at another level the primary metaphor of religious freedom would be the freedom to accept another religion without having to formally convert to it.

The Indic word dharma, often used to translate the English word religion into Indian languages, helps in clarifying the situation. It is used at two levels in classical Hinduism—at the level of one's station or stage in life, or at the level of humanity in general. In the former sense it is known as varnāśrama dharma and in the latter sense as sādhāraṇa or sāmānya dharma. Thus in one sense it denotes very specific values—specific to one's profession or gender—which fall below the radar screen of the English word religion and in the other sense it denotes purely common human values like truth and non-violence, which lie above the radar screen constituted by the specificity of a religious tradition and rise to the level of universal religion or religion of humanity. In such a matrix once again changing dharma doesn't make much sense. One may change one's station in life, or pass through various stages of life. These changes would not count as changing one's "religion" in the English sense. At the other level also, changing one's "religion" makes little sense for one cannot change one's religion from one of truth to one of falsehood. The choice here is not among religions but between religion and irreligion. Hence the freedom to change one's religion in this sense does not resonate with such a matrix.

But even at the new "Western" level which has now been introduced in India, the idea of changing religion fails to impress because of the neo-Hindu doctrine of the validity of all approaches to the divine.

We set out by describing the Christian concept of religion as conclusive, exclusionary and separative, and we noted that in its secular adaptation the “conclusive” component became somewhat eroded in this transition but the other two— exclusionary and separative—were retained. We then noted that while the exclusionary and separative components are correlated in the Western religions, this need not necessarily be so. Judaism showed the crack through which light from the East came in. In this light it became clear that in the case of modern Hinduism even the exclusive element does not work. The concept of change must involve either a change from one exclusivity to another, or from exclusivity to non-exclusivity. Note, however, that for one already in a state of non-exclusivity such change makes little sense, unless one wishes to abandon such non-exclusivity.

The Indic perspective thus introduces another understanding of religious freedom of which the two components are (1) that such freedom means my freedom to retain my religion and (2) my freedom to accept another religion without having to convert to it.

IV

It could be claimed however that the discussion so far only provides an Indic perspective on the understanding of the word religion. To the extent that it is Indo-centric, it therefore possesses only a regional rather than a global significance.

Let us therefore call the Indic position the dharmic position in contrast to the religionist position to move the argument along. If, however, non-exclusiveness in terms of affiliation to a religion is the essence of the dharmic situation then the religious reality of the Far East could be considered dharmic.

The case is best presented in the words of Julia Ching. She writes:

A major difference between East Asian religious life and that of India and the West is that its communities are not completely separate. If you ask a Japanese, for instance, whether he or she is a believer in a particular religion, you may get the answer 'no' (even the Japanese word for 'no' is not a tightly defined denial as is 'no' in English). However, if you ask whether he or she adheres to Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism, you may get the answer 'yes' (albeit again a bit noncommittal compared with the English 'yes'). Many Japanese follow more than one religion, even though they do not consider themselves very religious.

Much the same can be said of the Chinese, the Koreans, or the Vietnamese. At issue is the inseparability between religion and culture in East Asia, as well as the syncretism or combination that characterizes all the major religions there. East Asians all assert the importance of cosmic and social harmony. Since harmony is highly valued, each of the religious traditions tends to meet some of the needs of the people. In spite of occasional religious conflicts, all tend to work together in a larger cultural and social context.

Some scholars go so far as to say that the Chinese and Japanese have no religion, since their 'religions' do not make the exclusive claims to truth and dogma so characteristic of Western religions. Others claim that China and Japan have no religion because their civilization is basically areligious and this-worldly. Still others, while granting that religion is present in East Asian civilization, find it so entwined in the

culture itself that the two have become inseparable; they hold therefore that speaking about religion in such places as China is a useless exercise. Others are not always sure whether they should speak of 'religion' in the singular or the plural.¹

She goes on to say:

We should make our own position clear. There is ground for confusion, we grant, because of the close ties between religion and culture. It is not easy to separate religion and culture in our discussion. This does not mean, however, that East Asian civilizations are areligious. Some people dismiss customs and rituals as superstitious, but others in the same culture see them as practical means of securing benefit in life. We should be aware that definitions of these traditions in the region are fluid, as distinct from the roles of religions of West Asian origin, like Christianity or Islam. Moreover, we think that the word 'religion' need not be defined in exclusivist terms, in theist terms, or even in doctrinal terms.

We consider as religion all forces and institutions that function in East Asian society as does 'religion' in Western society. That is why we include Confucianism and rival teachings in our discussions, while acknowledging that some regard them more as philosophy than as religion. We also call this section 'East Asian Religions' in the plural

¹ Julia Ching, "Eastern Asian Religions", in Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., World Religions: Eastern Tradition (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 348.

because traditions exercising certain roles of ‘religion’ can be identified as distinct and cohesive, despite intertwined origins and historical interactions. This is the case especially with Confucianism and Taoism.¹

The reader will notice, on going back to the first line of the previous citation, that Julia Ching contrasts East Asian religious life with that of “India and the West.” The bracketing is instructive, and argues against our point that the Indian religious reality is different from the Western. How is then these two positions to be reconciled?

To effect such a reconciliation one must first distinguish between the religions of Indian origin and religions of non-Indian origin found in India. The religions of Indian origin found in India are Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which are sometimes called the Indic (as distinguished from Indian religions) or collectively called the Indic religious tradition. The major religions of non-Indian origin found in India are Christianity and Islam. The concept of “separate communities” would then primarily apply to the separation between the Indic religious tradition and these religions and between these two religions themselves.

The point we have been making applies to these Indic religions. In this respect the situation is described by Wilfred Cantwell Smith as follows, through his discussion of the word Hindu:

¹ Ibid., p. 248-249. This final paragraph is also of interest: “Is there anything called East Asian religion in the singular? The answer is, strangely, yes. And what is this religion? Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese religions include variations on the well-known ancestor cult as well as a dimension of nature worship. There is as well some collaboration between Confucianism and Taoism in China, and between Buddhism and Shinto in Japan. Age-old traditions were incorporated into each system in a different way. To see these, we must go back to the remote past to examine the status of ancient religion before the other traditions developed.”

So far as my retaining the term 'Hindu' is concerned even when it cannot with precision be operationally defined, I use it as a proper (rather than generic) noun connoting, in accord with its original usage, all indigenous religious traditions of India (I would not care to exclude Jains or Indian Buddhists). I would be willing to venture a prediction that before long it will be widely recognized that such a question as "Is a Jain (*or*, a Sikh) a Hindu?" is not well put. By this I do not mean that the separation of these minority communities, at both the self-conscious and the sociological levels, may not be valid and may not remain and even grow. This is partly a political matter, and indeed the rise of conceptual separateness in modern times has been due not only to Western ideological influence but also very significantly to the development of modern (Western-derived, and in part of course British-imposed) political situations. It is rather that the term 'Hindu' will not adequately serve to designate those non-Jain non-Sikh non-Christian non-Muslim non-Scheduled-Caste non-animist persons in India whom it would have to cover if this particular development proceeded. 'Hindu' is a term without much serviceable function within India, at any level of precision (statistics, government, theology, etc.). Its chief usefulness, one might hazard, will be in the future what it originally was and has throughout primarily been, namely with a basically geographical orientation to refer in the worldwide conspectus of man's religiousness in a rough and ready way to those persons whose

religious and social life is related to specifically Indian traditions. Where more precision is required, other terms will be necessary.¹

It is possible to confirm the point regarding the non-exclusive adherence to religions statistically in the case of Japan, rather than advance it just theoretically, as in the Indian case. For the year 1985, for instance, the figures for religious affiliation in Japan were as follows:

| | | |
|---------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Buddhist | 92,000,000 Persons | 76% of population |
| Shinto | 115,000,000 Persons | 95% |
| Christian | 1,000,000 | |
| New Religions | 14,000,000 | |
| TOTAL | 223,000,000 Persons | |

Total population of Japan in 1985 was 121,000,000.²

The indigenous religions also seem to be basically dharmic than religionist in their attitudes. This seems to be the implication of the following passage:

While these peoples exhibit a vast diversity of characteristics, some commonalties of religious expression can be noted. For example, such tribal, indigenous peoples often have a strong sense of the presence of the

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, op. cit., p. 258 note 55.

² Ian Reader, Religion in Contemporary Japan (London: Macmillan, 1991) p. 6.

sacred in various forms, sometimes as spirits, ancestors, and gods, sometimes as a diffuse, impersonal power. Their myths and rituals are closely related to their life in hunting, farming, or herding, having to do with the fertility and vitality of the animals or plants that are necessary for existence. The tribe itself is the central social reality, and no distinction is made between “religion” and the traditional way of life in the tribe.¹

Not seeking proselytes thus brings together the religions of Indian origin, the religions of the Far East and the indigenous peoples under the dharmic umbrella, specially in the sense that membership does not entail severing links with past allegiance for either party if they come together.

This is almost half the world. And in this half of the world the word “religious freedom” has a very different meaning because the word “religion” has a very different meaning. The Indic civilization became a theatre of confrontation with the Western notion of religion in a way it never happened in East Asia; and it also happened in India in a very different way than what happened in the case of the indigenous religions who were almost pushed into oblivion by the West—a fate they barely escaped. It is perhaps on account of this historical circumstance that the articulation of the alternative concept of religious freedom through the identification of an alternative concept of religion among the various constituents of the dharmic constituency is being made the way it is being made now: in the context of Indic civilization.

¹ Theodore M. Ludwig, The Sacred Paths: Understanding the Religions of the World (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 2001) p. 31.

Perhaps a consideration of how the same word “universal” leads to two different understandings of it respectively in a religionist and dharmic perspective will help clarify the point further. It is helpful to start with the category of “universal religion” which is explained in a text of world religions as follows:

Some religions understand themselves as addressed to all men; their aim is to embrace all of mankind and they actively desire converts. These are sometimes called universal religion. This is not meant to imply that they actually do embrace the whole human race, which would obviously not be true, but that that is their ideal. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are universal religions in this sense.¹

Let us for the moment focus on Christianity and Islam as universal religions, saving Buddhism for consideration later. Now what does it mean to say precisely that they are universal religions? What it means is that if you are not a Christian you can become one; or if you are not a Muslim you can become one. But why should you wish to become a Christian or a Muslim? Because by doing so you will be saved, a state of grace you are not in if you do not belong to them. From this point of view, one can say that Christianity and Islam are universal religions because they offer salvation to all. They promise universal salvation.

But so do many other religions—and on less stringent conditions: without your having to join them. This is where Buddhism becomes significant for it also offers

¹ T. Patrick Burke, The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) p. 6.

salvation to all—but to achieve such salvation one does not necessarily have to be formally a Buddhist; perhaps it is preferable in some ways to be formally a Buddhist but while it is helpful, it is not necessary. In the classical orthodox formulations of Christianity and Islam, membership of these religions is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the sake of “salvation,” while in the case of Buddhism it is a sufficient but not a necessary condition. Further down the road lies the neo-Hindu position—that universal salvation is accessible to a person wherever one might be—without the need to convert to Hinduism in any way.

A subtle fact needs to be noted here—that Christianity and Islam first deny one salvation because one is not in them and then offer it to all who would join them. This is one kind of universalism. But according to the Hindu position salvation is yours as you are—and without having to become a Hindu. Thus it too offers universal salvation—without making itself the intermediary of it. So I ask you: Which of these two universalism is more universal—the conditional one (“join us”) or the unconditional one?

Now contrast this with two conceptions of rights—human rights and citizen’s right. Which of the two are more universal? You have citizen’s right if you are a citizen of a state, but even a stateless human being possesses human rights—merely by virtue of being a human being. This is the whole point in calling them universal. It is worth noting that up to a point in the deliberations at the U.N.O. the document which ultimately became the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was referred to as the International Declaration of Human Rights. The significance of ultimately designating them as universal rather than international should not be overlooked.¹ The situation is analogous

¹ Mary Ann Glendon, A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (New York: Random House, 2001) p. 121.

to the Indic position on religious salvation—that a human being has access to it not by virtue of belonging to this or that religion—but by the mere fact of being a human being. This, I submit to you, is also the dharmic position—the position of much of Asia and of the indigenous world. It is also the more universal of the two.

V

Conclusion

It is therefore ironical that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not accord explicit recognition to this position. In advocating the dharmic position the Indic tradition is perhaps poised to make a crucial contribution to both contemporary religious discourse and contemporary human rights discourse.

An Indic Contribution Towards an Understanding of the Word “Religion”

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Summary

The word religion is now part of global discourse specially as it is carried out through the medium of English. The word, however, is Western in origin which raises the question: Does a Western word, when used in global discourse, reflect the global religious reality or does it in the process of reflecting it, also distort it?

It is contended in the paper that such in fact is the case—that when the word is used to represent the religions of Indian origin, the religions of the Far East and the indigenous religions—it in fact distorts reality. The basis for making such a claim is the following.

The word “religion” came into secular use in the nineteenth century and has since been freely used in the public sphere as if it were a neutral word, which could be impartially applied to all the religions of the world. However, the word embodies a certain concept of what religion is and this concept is rooted in its Christian background. In such a context the concept of religion implies that a religion is something (1) conclusive; (2) exclusionary and (3) separative. In other words, a religion, in order to qualify as such must hold that it has the final truth (conclusive); that in order to obtain it one must belong to it alone (exclusionary) and that in order to do so one must separate oneself from any other, specially prior, affiliation (separative). It is also separative in

another sense: that religion constitutes a part of life, separate from the rest of it—a sense particularly pronounced in Christianity.

When this word was adopted in secular discourse these orientations of the word were retained, with some modifications. The claim to possessing the final truth by Christianity was extended to each religion on its own, this process giving rise to the expression “truth claim.” The idea that the membership of a religion excluded that of any other was retained, while the third constituent of the concept, that of separation (between the sacred and the profane or the secular and the religious) came to characterise one religion’s separateness from another more than anything else.

All the three orientations of the word religion as conclusive, as exclusionary and as separative are in effect exclusivist in nature, a word to be carefully distinguished from the word exclusionary which has been used above in the sense of indicating the fact that the formal membership of one religion must exclude such membership of another. The conclusive element is exclusivist in the sense that only the religion’s own truth-claim is considered final, thereby excluding such claims of other religions; the exclusionary element is obviously exclusivistic and the claim that religions must be treated as separate entities by themselves is also obviously exclusivistic.

Such an exclusivistic orientation however does not characterise the Indic religious tradition or what we might also call the dharmic tradition. The word Indic in this context needs to be carefully distinguished from the word Indian. All religions found to exist in India may be called Indian religions. Those religions among these which are Indian in origin in their self-perception, namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism alone may be called Indic.

This Indic religious tradition tends to be non-exclusivistic. Each component of it—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism—tends to view one's membership of it as a sufficient but not a necessary condition for liberation. This attitude finds further expression in the fact that these traditions tend to be non-proselytizing even when they become missionary.

Such a non-exclusivistic attitude in terms of religion is not confined to Indic religions but is shared by religions of the Far East. In pre-Communist China it was common for people to view themselves as both Confucian and Taoist in terms of religious commitment. The example of present-day Japan is also relevant here. According to the 1985 census, 95% of the Japanese population declared itself as followers of Shinto. Seventy-six per cent of the same population, however, also simultaneously declared itself to be Buddhist.

The indigenous religions of the world—the American-Indian, the African and so on—are also non-exclusivistic in their attitude to religion.

The use of the word religion, which carries exclusivistic overtones, in these three contexts—of Indic religions, of the religions of the Far East and of the indigenous religions, distorts their reality, because it means that a word with an exclusivistic orientation is being employed to describe “religious” traditions which are non-exclusivistic.

One might still wonder, even if one accepts this point, as to how consequential a point it is. Is it merely of academic interest or of more than academic interest?

I would like to urge that the use of religion when applied as a blanket term to all the religions of the world—both exclusivistic as well as non-exclusivistic in nature—when the word itself has exclusivistic connotations, possesses significant policy

implications. For instance, it tilts the concept of religious freedom in human rights discourse in favour of freedom to proselytize which is more in keeping with an exclusivistic rather than a non-exclusivistic concept of religion, thereby depriving the non-exclusivistic religions of their religious freedom—which in their case would consist of not being made the object of proselytization. The formal recognition of such a right on their part would then constitute an Indic contribution toward a truly global understanding of the world religion.

Questions

(1) What difficulty do you have with the concept of freedom of religion as the freedom to change one's religion?

On the surface it does not seem to present any difficulty because change to and change from one religion and another seems to be on par—that is—impartial. This would indeed hold if both religions shared the same concept of religion.

If, however, the concept of religion itself differs in the two religions then the change is not symmetrical. When a Hindu becomes a Christian, the Hindu not only exchanges Christianity for Hinduism, the Hindu also exchanges an exclusivist concept of religion for a non-exclusivist one: the Hindu has also moved to a comparatively “narrow” concept of religion from a comparatively “broader” one. The reverse applies when the Christian becomes a Hindu, hence the move is not

symmetrical in this sense, although containing an element of mirror-imaging within it.

(2) You described Christianity as separative, but Hinduism, with its caste distinctions, is even more separative.

We are talking about two kinds of distinctions here—internal, that is, within one religion, and external, that is, between one religion and another. The comparative remark was made in relation to external distinctions. It is true that internal distinctions within Hinduism may be more pronounced on account of its pluralistic character.

(3) Where does the caste system fit into the discussion?

The Indian experience with the West has led to an accentuation of existing differences within it in terms of both religion and society. “Hinduism,” as it emerged during this period, was distinguished from Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism in a way not apparent earlier. Similarly, although varna and jāti are standard Hindu/Indic concepts, their formulation into a “caste system” perhaps occurred during British rule, as Nicholas B. Dirks has argued. Note that varna is a primarily Hindu category while jāti applies to all the four Indic religions.

(4) You seem to use the word “separative” in several senses. Could you clarify these?

The word is used in four different senses according to context:

(i) To indicate a separation between the secular and religious realms; (ii) to indicate separation between religion and culture; (iii) to indicate the separation of one “religion” as a set of beliefs and practices from another and (iv) to indicate the separation of one religious community from another.

The word integrative or integral could also be used to apply at all the four levels.

(5) In her quotation, Julia Ching contrasts the position of the religions of the Far East with “that of India and the West,” but you align the position of India with that of the Far East. How is this divergence to be accounted for?

One must begin by distinguishing between the words “Indian” and “Indic.” The case of India includes the interaction of the Indic religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism—with Islam and Christianity, which are also present in India and are therefore Indian but not Indic religions. The discussion in the paper pertains to Indic religions.

(6) Julia Ching says that Japanese do not consider themselves “religious.” How is that to be explained?

This is a good illustration of how the word religion implies a concept of religion. In its Western sense the use of the word religion often involves a sense of (1) separation

between sacred and profane; (2) separation between religion and culture; (3) separation between one religion and another. In the Far East these don't apply. So they may well describe as non-religious in these senses.

(7) Julia Ching describes all the religions of the Far East as indeed sharing one “religion”—that of ancestor worship. Is this also true of Indic religions?

No. Buddhism to a limited extent and Jainism and Sikhism in an even more pronounced manner do not subscribe to śrāddha. All four, however, converge on the sanctity of the Om symbol, with the possible exception of Theravāda Buddhism.

(7) Does the Dharmic position exclude the religionist?

Only its exclusiveness.