

RELIGION: A SUBSET OF *DHARMA*

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Introduction:

Religion has been central to human life since prehistoric times. A large number of great and noble acts came to be performed under the inspiration of religions. So it is undeniable that religions occupy a remarkable place in our society. ‘We should not be far wrong in saying with Max Müller that the true history of man is the history of religion’ (Edwards, 1924 p. 9). We have many theories as to the origin of religions, but what looks prominent among them is that religion is originated by the man himself to content his own spiritual aspiration. But today’s society, under the banner of religions, is going through many man-made tragedies that pull down our mutual trust. Similarly, although *dharma* is the greatest and the most valuable contribution of India to humanity, yet it is sometimes understood as merely a theological category, a closed system of faiths composed of divinity and dogmatism. Moreover, many people conflate religion with *dharma* and use the two in the same sense. So, the following questions that come to our mind are quite natural: What is *dharma*? What sense *dharma* is synonymous with religion? What basic differences are there between *dharma* and religion? And how consistent is it to use ‘religion’ as a synonym of ‘*dharma*’? This article aims to seek answers to those questions so that we can recognize *dharma* and religion in their true sense.

I

The Sanskrit term ‘*dharma*’ is so unique that no other term of any language can render it. Of course, ‘*dharma*’ usually refers to many things, such as religion, principle, and so on; but none of these terms can provide an adequate meaning of it. However, we could recognize *dharma* in its true sense in the context of Hinduism since it is inextricably engaged in the long tradition of Hinduism. Here, we need first to expend few words about the origin of the word ‘Hindu’. As per its lexical meaning, Hindu is ‘a native of Hindustan or India’. But as far as history is concerned, the word ‘Hindu’ was first used by the Persian king Darius-I to referring the people inhabiting the entire land around both sides of the Indus river. Their lives did govern by a particular way or principle, which got recognition as their *dharma* over time. And later, this *dharma* came to be known gloriously as the *Sanātanadharmā* since it has been prevalent in Hindustan for a long time (Tiwari, 2009, p. xi). Now turn to the

question: What is *dharma*? It is very challenging to provide an answer to it because ‘*dharma*’ has acquired a wide variety of meanings in its uses as in the sacred text of Hinduism, the *R̥gveda*. It has appeared in the hymns of the *R̥gveda* either as an adjective or a noun (in the form *dharman*) a minimum fifty-six times (Kane, 1930, p.1). This indicates that the exact sense in which it is used is very difficult to be grasped. However, by etymological explication, we can find ‘*dharma*’ deriving from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, which means “to uphold, to support, to nourish” (p.1). And on the basis of this root meaning, ‘*dharma*’ is found to be used in very few passages of the *R̥gveda*, such as *R̥g. I.187.1*.⁶² In this connection, even we may cite an exposition from Mahābhārata that seems to be quite adequate here. Therein Yudhiṣṭhira asked Bhīṣma to explain the meaning and scope of *dharma*, and Bhīṣma replied:

It is most difficult to define Dharma. Dharma has been explained to be that which helps the upliftment of living beings. Therefore, that which ensures the welfare of living beings is surely *dharma*. The learned *rishis* have declared that what sustains is Dharma. (*Shanti Parva.109. 9-11*)

So we can say that *dharma* is ‘that which upholds’ or ‘that without which nothing can stand’, or ‘that which maintains the stability and harmony of the whole universe’. Apart from this meaning, in the *R̥gveda*, ‘*dharma*’ would mostly mean religious rites or sacrifices (*yajña*)⁶³ to gods that are instrumental to happiness and are enjoyed by the Vedic adoration. Even the Vedas have accorded profound value on *yajña* for the description of this world. “The world comes to be through *yajña*, is maintained by *yajña*, and man's well-being in the world is ensured by *yajña*” (Koller, 1972, p. 134). Consequently, during that period, people felt the obligation to performing rites to attain their desired goals that Vedic injunctive passages indicate. Thus *yajña* came up as people’s duties or *dharma*. Here *yajña* and *dharma* may be seemed identical, but it is not the case. Because, *yajña* does merely mean the effects of *yajña* i.e. maintenance of order, while *dharma* adds something more to its concept as it causes desired change in the structure and sequence of the universe through conformation with the highest law (*ṛta*) of the ultimate reality. That’s why we may understand the concept of *dharma* more sharply with relation to *ṛta*.

pitum nu stoṣaṃ maho dharmāṇaṃ taviṣīm |

⁶³*samidhānaḥsahasraḥrajidagnedharmāṇipuṣyasi | (R̥g. V.26.6.)*

Literally, *ṛta* means “the course of things”. But in the context of the *Ṛgveda*, it means the highest, the immutable order of the highest reality which has issued this manifest reality. In this sense, *ṛta* is ‘the actual coursing of the highest reality’, the supreme order, concerning it any other order or rule is subordinate. Moreover, it is not the subject of the violation; even *devas* abide by it. The whole universe is being nourished, sustained, and ordered according to it. Not only that, but it also regulates human conduct as a moral order. It illuminates the right way to move on from evil to good. And this becomes evident in so prayer to Indra: “O Indra, lead us on the path of *ṛta* on the right path over all evils”⁶⁴. So, *ṛta* is regarded as the all-pervading cosmic order which maintains harmony in the natural and moral world and society.

In connection to *ṛta*, *dharma* is the law of function for an individual to participate in the highest reality of which it is a manifestation. This participation becomes substantial through the essential property of things, without which things do not sustain. Therefore, both the aspects of a thing –‘essential nature’ and ‘function of participating’- may be considered *dharma*. For example, attraction is the essential property of a magnet since a magnet cannot be a magnet without having the property of attracting. Thus, this property becomes an upholder to its being. On such understanding, we can say attraction is the *dharma* of a magnet through which it participates in the ultimate reality. Now we can formulate a relation between *yajña*, *ṛta*, and *dharma*. The effect of *yajña* is the desired change in the order of reality, the function of *yajña* (*dharma*) is the changing of the order of reality, and *ṛta* is the ultimate order of reality. So these are very closely related to each other and are normative as well as ontological. The being (*sat*) of reality and its function (*ṛta*) do not carry bear any difference. *Sat* or being is the manifestation of the highest reality, while *ṛta* promotes the security and stability of the *sat*. *Satya*, ‘the principle of conformity to the *sat*’ as an abstract substantive, is fundamental as a principle to the reality (*ṛta*). These are treated identically in the Vedas and *Upaniṣads*.

⁶⁴*vayam indra tvāyavaḥ sakhitvam ā rabhāmahe |*

ṛtasya naḥ pathā nayāti viśvāni dūritā nabhantām anyakeṣāṃ jyākā adhi dhamvasu ||

(Rg. X.133.6)

Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad (I.4.14) has shown the identity between *ṛta* and *dharma* thus: “That righteousness is verily truth. Therefore they say about a person speaking of truth, ‘He speaks of righteousness’, or about a person speaking of righteousness, ‘He speaks of truth’, for both these are but righteousness” (Madhavānanda, 1950, p. 178). This discussion, to some extent, makes it decisive that the term ‘dharma’ is used basically in the sense of duty, obligation, and righteousness.

Thereafter, some duties were imprinted in scriptures for people to maintain social stability, harmony, and to sustain the structure of society. These duties are divided into two heads: universal (*sādhāraṇa*) and specific (*Varṇāśrama*). The Universal duties comprise such “obligations which are binding on every one” (Prasad, 1981, p. 57). For example, faith in virtue, non-injury, devotion to the good of all creatures, etc. And the specific duties are “obligations relative to one's caste and stage of life” (p. 57). There are the four different castes or varṇas - *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra*, and four different stages of life - *Brahmacarya*, *Gārhastha*, *Vānaprastha*, and *Sannyāsa* in Indian traditional culture. So, the duties prescribed for different stages of life of a man belonging to a particular caste are called *Varṇāśramadharmā*.

The term ‘*dharma*’ is also used to refer to an object of human desire in the Indian traditional concept of *puruṣārtha*, wherein *dharma* is the foremost *puruṣārtha* and the ensuing two *puruṣārthas*, i.e. *artha* and *kāma*, are described to be enjoyed under the surveillance of *dharma*. Even it was thought that the ultimate *puruṣārtha*, viz. *mokṣa* remains unattainable if we fail to perform *dharma*. In this regard, T. M. P. Mahadevan (1962) said: “While it is admitted that *mokṣa*, and not *dharma*, is the supreme end, the sole intrinsic value, it is clearly and undoubtedly taught by all Indian thinkers that, without *dharma*, *mokṣa* cannot be gained” (p. 479). So *dharma* is not only the regulating principle of the remaining three *puruṣārthas*, but it has an intrinsic value also. However, there is debate on the priority between *dharma* and *mokṣa*. In Indian tradition, we find two types of theory concerning *puruṣārthas*, namely, *trivarga* and *caturvarga*. The theory of *caturvarga* holds that the ultimate end and the highest value of human life is *mokṣa*, and as the theory of *trivarga* has skipped this truth it is unsystematic. As opposed to this, the theory of *trivarga* argues

that *mokṣa* cannot be an object of desire since in that case it would be ceased to *kāma*; thus incurring *mokṣa* in the concept of *puruṣārthas* does not make *caturvarga* really systematic. In this regard, Prasad (1981) remarked that the theory of *trivarga* presents a functional scheme of human values because it seems to have been inspired by an insight that all *puruṣārthas* are meaningful only in relational human complex “obligating them to perform various functions so that society and the individuals composing it may live a life which they not only like to live but is also worth living” (p. 56). Since *mokṣa* is not functional but an individualistic value, *dharma* may be considered as the highest or supreme value of human life. So we can say the pursuit of the trio (*artha, kāma, and dharma*) together is not only quantitatively richer but qualitatively better than the quad (*artha, kāma, and dharma, mokṣa*) from the perspective of social welfare and harmony.

II

Now, we should turn to see what the meaning of religion is to grasp the relationship between dharma and religion. Throughout the ages, religion has been an inspirational power in the life of many people. All religions, like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. that we find throughout the world are denotations of the word ‘religion’. But the question is, what makes all these traditions coming under the same term ‘religion’? This question leads us to find the “essence” of all religions to understand the connotation through which we can reach the heart of religion. But the problem here is to identify one common characteristic feature for all religions. Because the religions of Middle-East origin, like Christianity, Judaism, Islam have faith in the existence of a single God, while so-called religions of Indian origin either involve polytheism or are reluctant to believe in God, as are Buddhism and Jainism. That there are differences regarding the acceptance and nature of Supreme Authority, the rituals, the practices, and all that sort of things between every two religions as well as groups of religion. That’s why it is very difficult to find any connotative definition of ‘religion’. However, we can initiate our endeavour by undergoing its etymological meaning. Etymologically the word ‘religion’ is derived from Latin words, first ‘*religio*’ which means ‘respect for the sacred’ and, and secondly, ‘*religāre*’ which means ‘to bind together’ in the sense of obligation. So, from this origin, religion may be understood as a set of beliefs and practices that

helps humans to have an experience of kinship under some sort of sacred or spiritual integrity amidst a human group. However, historically the word 'religion' carries multiple meanings according to the different stages religion has passed through. At the primitive age, it was identified with magic which was something mystical performance did to control unexplained natural phenomena, such as lightning, rain, floods, and the like. During that period people who had denied the power of magic were called 'irreligious'. At the next stage, it was understood as a divine power that causes all those phenomena, and rituals, practices, etc. were arranged to have the intervention of that power to control the phenomena. After then, that divine power gradually came to be known as gods, or the God, and the concept of religion involves faith in many goddesses or a single God, worship, salvation, morality, etc. In consonance with this history, the Oxford Dictionary holds that religion involves 'the belief in the worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods'. We experience that Abrahamic religions, viz. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are predominately accepted here as organized religions and by finding out their common characteristics religion is defined for general. These religions share the common characteristics of "belief in one God (Yahweh/God/Allah), one prophet (Moses/Jesus/Mohammad), one scripture (the Torah/the Bible/ the Quran), one Day of Judgement (*Yom HaDin/al-Qiyāmah*)" (Paranjpe, 2013, p. 9) and a unified method of worship. So the conception of religion involves "a belief in God as the creator of the universe, a central revelation of God, a messenger of that revelation, a central book containing the life and the sayings of that messenger of God, a central code of commandments" (Chaturvedi, 1993, p. 39). There are many interpretations regarding religion on which the prevalence of those common characteristics is noticeable at the academic level. We can say, for instance, of James Martineau (1889) who thinks religion is the "belief in an Ever-living God, that is, a Divine Mind and Will ruling the Universe and holding Moral relations with mankind"(p. 1). Religion, in E.B. Tylor's words cited in *Encyclopaedia of Religion & Ethics* (1919), is "the belief in spiritual beings"(p. 663).For Emile Durkheim (1912/2001), "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions-beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a Church" (p. 46). Well, such interpretations give us an idea of religion, which is identified with a form of belief either in God, in sacred

things, or in spiritual beings. Now we step onto our next section to understand the relationship between dharma and religion.

III

To understand the relationship between religion and *dharma* accurately, it is important to know the differences between them. But we first need to know the particular sense of *dharma* being used as a synonym of religion. In this regard, I like to recall the view of K.N. Tiwari. In his book *Comparative Religion*, he said that every traditional religion has two essential features- (1) each one carries certain specific convictions or beliefs concerning the world-and-life situation as a whole, and (2) under these convictions, each one ascertains a specific way of life for its adherents. We have already noticed that even dharma fulfils these two basic conditions of religion while discussing the first section of this article. A like accredited religions, dharma also asks for a way of life based on some specific, spiritualistic convictions for the sake of setting the world and life in unison for a meaning. In this specific sense, *dharma* can be understood as a synonym of religion. But this does not mean that dharma is equivalent to religion. Actually, all the apparent similarities we think and perceive between *dharma* and religion are just the tip of the iceberg; a huge dissimilarity remains unperceived between them just like the unperceived mass beneath the surface of the water. Let's see what differences are there between them.

- 1) Almost every religion of the world has a specific history of origin with a specific founder. But *dharma* came down to people through eternity. It has no specific date of origin. Although it is associated with the names of many sages and saints, none of them is regarded as the founder of it. Actually, all they have done is just trying to make the whole thing apprehensible to all in their own particular ways. Thus, they have added their contribution to the evolution of *dharma*. Similarly, most religions have a definite text such as the Bible for Christian, the Quran for Islam. But dharma emerges from many different kinds of literature, such as the *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣadas*, the *Dharmaśūtras*, *Dharmaśāstras*, etc., none of which can claim the exclusive authority of *dharma*.

- 2) Dharma is more liberal and less rigid compared to religions. Any person can follow the way of *dharma*: a polytheist, as well as a monotheist, a believer in a personal God, or a non-believer; all may lead their lives somehow on the way of *dharma*. *Dharma* is understood to unite every being of this universe with a universal principle, while religion can hardly avoid making some differences between sects as per their own beliefs and practices.
- 3) Religion is different from *dharma* in view of salvation too. Every religion has some definite rules and practices regarding salvation, and each believer must follow the instructions of his own religion for salvation. But *dharma* does not prescribe only one means for *moksha*. There are several ways of salvation, in our understanding of *dharma*, and one can choose according to his belief, temperament, and inherent quality. That is to say, we say, the persons who are pursuer of knowledge follow the *jñānmārga* for salvation, while those who are industrious and always energetic in performing actions and they have the quality of achievement may follow the *karmamārga*. And those whose heart contains devotion to God may follow *bhaktimārga* etc.

Conclusion:

The differences between *dharma* and religion we noted above are no doubt significant, but these differential chords do not always imply that they are contradictory as such. One is deeply connected with the other in terms of our spiritual development. *Dharma* aims at establishing society on a profound moral basis, and religions, too, aim at performing the same end. But many people fail to grasp the true meanings of these two, and as a result, we often experience moral decay in our society. For example, if we look at *Varnāśramadharmā*, we would see that it was maintained duly on the basis of merit and deeds at the Vedic age; but its glory got faded when it had passed aside of its original goal somewhere in its long journey due to perhaps socio-economic and political changes and came to be admitted on the basis of birth. And from all this, casteism (*jāti-prathā*) has evolved and started indulging people towards the idea of caste segregation, which we are sometimes experiencing with so insensitivity. However, if we encourage the meaning *dharma* is as an inherent human quality, we may bring all humans under one fold with the sense of humanity irrespective of caste, class, gender, and all that, and declare “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*”. Hence, following Rabindranath Tagore, we may say that worshipping

in the temple, lightening the candles, or praying five times in a mosque is not something that *dharma* is. *Dharma* is the quality or attribute of something that holds the thing and being in all its aspects. And, if the *dharma* of fire is burn, if the *dharma* of the sword is sharpness, then the *dharma* of all humans is humanity. Hence the scope of *dharma* is much wider than that of religion, and it is inaccurate to say that *dharma* and religion are synonymous rather religion may be considered as a subset of *dharma*.

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