

## Rabindranath Tagore on a comparative study of religions

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### ABSTRACT

The study of religion describes, analyses and compares how certain human beings do in fact express their faith in terms of particular scriptures, religious figures, sacred rituals, community solidarity, *etc.* It also demonstrates how all these explicitly religious phenomena may relate to other aspects of people's lives. It also aspires to address the questions in a manner that is even-handed, objective and based on evidence that may be checked by any competent inquirer, and non-committal on claims to divine revelation and authority. It is in principle comparative, not in a judgmental evaluative sense, but in terms of describing and analysing comparable elements and or phenomena from various religious traditions, using the same criteria in each case. The paper begins with a brief report on the study of religion in the context of India and presents in detail Rabindranath Tagore's (1861–1941) views on the need, an objective and philosophy behind the comparative study of religion. As Tagore observes, when studying religion one usually chooses between two alternative approaches: to do research on the secret text or to study the rituals. Tagore accepts none of them fully. Instead, Tagore suggests rediscovering how human aspiration for transcendence works in practice, how it sustains the individual — often marginalised by the power of institutionalised religion — and society, and how it generates new cultural forms. For Tagore, the essence of religion lies in the will to transcend the limit of the self-centered being towards an ideal of perfection — which he calls divinity of Man. His understanding of the “religion of Man”, as he puts it, is discussed in the major part of the paper.

### KEYWORDS

Rabindranath Tagore; *The Religion of Man*; religious studies; religious pluralism; philosophy of religion; comparative studies; Hinduism; universal religion; divinity of Man

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion is certainly one of the most intriguing concepts a human mind can conceive. As it is a part of our history, we cannot wish to remove it even though we might have suffered much from religion of this or that type. Thus, the study of religion seems to be crucial and vital for many reasons. But the moment we try to form an idea of what it means to study religion, we come across a roadblock simply because of the fact that there are actually too many concepts of religion. So, any interesting idea of the “study of religion” must first come to terms with the vexing question: what is religion, after all? Due to the great diversity of the concepts of religion, the usual strategy is to focus one’s attention on a limited number of religions, or a particular type of religious belief, and then try to describe, analyse, and compare how a certain collection of human beings do in fact live and/or express their faith in terms of particular scriptures, religious figures, sacred rituals, community solidarity, *etc.*, and how all these explicitly religious phenomena may relate to other aspects of people’s lives. Granting that such a study may not be very successful, it aspires and addresses the questions of objectivity based on evidence that may be checked by any competent inquirer. The inquirer is supposed to remain non-committal on claims regarding divine revelation and authority. Such a study, comparative in principle, does not get into any judgment in the evaluative sense, but attempts to describe and, if possible, analyse the comparable elements of various religious traditions or some particular phenomena related to them, using the same set of criteria in each case. Even then, unanimity in the formulation of conclusions put forward by different scholars seems to be hard to reach. Alternatively, we can accept one out of numerous historical — and inevitably arbitrary — comparative methods in religious studies that we consider to be an example of a promising approach, although a remarkable one and, above all, representative of the Indian intellectual milieu. Such a notable methodological perspective is offered by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) who initiated a unique pedagogical experiment in Santiniketan.<sup>1</sup> In the following paragraphs, his concept of comparative study and the idea of religion itself — that went through a development reaching a final formulation in his book *The Religion of Man* (1931) — will be discussed.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in an atmosphere of reformed Vedānta, a nineteenth century religious movement. It was largely a product of two concerns: to free India from the ritual oriented repressive form of traditional religion, known as Hinduism, on the one hand, and on the other from the aggressive attitude of the Christian missionaries propagating their doctrine in India. Needless to say,

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<sup>1</sup> Santiniketan is a small town near Bolpur in the state of West Bengal, approximately 180 kilometres north of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) where Tagore established an open-air laboratory school in 1901, then in 1920s expanded into Visva-Bharati University, which sought a basis for a common fellowship between the cultures of East and West.

the British missionaries came to India under the command of the British colonial masters and their activities were a part of colonial politics. At the same time, there was a deep divide between Hindus and Muslims creating the impression that any unified conception of India as a nation was impossible. As Tagore rightly observes, the study of religion usually implies: (1) either to concentrate on the study of the book (like the Bible, the *Qurān*, *Tripitaka* or other Buddhist *sūtras*, and in the case of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism — *Prasthānatraya*, that is the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavadgītā* and *Brahmasūtra*), or (2) to study different rituals claimed to form the “core of religion” by each of them. But India is a pluralistic society where each of these religions is practiced and has its distinctive rituals and metaphysical claims. Therefore, Tagore was aware that if he combined these metaphysical claims and their associated rituals, deriving a definition of religion in any minimal sense would be impossible. Moreover, the biggest community, the Hindus, was further divided according to caste. So, the biggest question from a nationalistic point of view or even from cultural point of view was how to begin the study of religion. The claim that rituals are the essential aspect of the institution of religion is the root of all problems and must be oppressive in the ultimate analysis, as rituals, are often conflicting. Hence, Tagore would not accept rituals as the core of religious life nor would he accept reducing the concept of religion to its institutional dimension. But what is the rationale for such a view? Mere inconsistency cannot serve as sufficient justification.

What he tries to do is to urge us to study religion in the way one studies the religious movements in medieval India (like Bhakti or Sufi), to rediscover how human aspiration for transcendence worked in practice, how it sustains the individual — often marginalised by the power of the institutionalised religion — and the society, and how it generates new cultural forms. For Tagore, the essence of religion is “the will to transcend the limit of the self-centred being towards an ideal of perfection”, which he calls the divinity of Man (Tagore, 1993: 120).

## WHAT IS RELIGION AND WHAT IT OUGHT TO BE

Most of the religions of the world are book dependent. For Hinduism, the Vedas are the fundamental source (*Gītā*, *Smṛti*, etc., all to a large extent normative). Theravāda Buddhism also has *astāngikmarga* from *Tripitaka*, and Christianity has the Bible, and Islam has the *Qurān*. Each of these books determines the respective path as ultimate, leaving no place for reason or questioning. These systems are closed systems and hence there is not much room for reconciliation. Thus, Tagore felt the need to take a fresh look at religion. He questions the use of the word “religion” for describing some aspect of living, such as worshiping God in Indian context.

If that is the case, it is obvious that “religion” — having its roots in Christianity — would also shape the use of the term in modern discourse. Another example may be the term “church” used in sociology or a distinction between “sacred” and “profane”. In contra-distinction a Hindu may as well accept “a place / an idol” as “sacred” once some rituals are performed, which he had thought to be “profane” before.

As early as in 1883, Tagore argued along with some other Indian thinkers that the appropriate concept of religion in Indian context should be based on the concept of *dharmā*. Etymologically, it means “that which holds”.<sup>2</sup> In the human context it would mean “that which holds human beings together”. If we want to translate it in philosophical terms, it would mean “the essence of humanity or human being”. But we should also be clear this essence is not only metaphysical but also other-worldly transcendence. Tagore was at pains to point out that it is operational — it discloses itself through the action(s) man performs in the world. In the context of action, it must be translated as “to work selflessly” and never remain within the narrow boundary of one’s own individual need and aspiration. Later in 1913 he says:

The Sanskrit word *dharmā* which is usually translated into English as religion has a deeper meaning in our language. *Dharma* is the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all things. *Dharma* is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self. When any wrong is done we say that *dharmā* is violated, meaning that the lie has been given to our true nature (*Sadhana* in: Das, 2001: 308).

And again,

The higher nature in man always seeks for something which transcends itself and yet is its deepest truth; which claims all its sacrifice, yet makes this sacrifice its own recompense. This is man’s *dharmā*, man’s religion, and man’s self is the vessel which is to carry this sacrifice to the altar (*Sadhana* in: Das, 2001: 309).

Whether Hindu *dharmā* is religion is itself a matter of debate. There is a feeling that it is “a way of life” not a religion. Originally, it combines five major sects centred on the Sun/Sūrya, Ganeśa, Śiva, Śakti and Viṣṇu. In nineteenth century Bengal, basically two sects became powerful — Śakta and Vaiṣṇava. Tagore was born in a Brahmo Samaj family, supporting a reformist movement influenced by rationalism and initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), but very much along the lines of Advaita Vedānta being an influential tradition of Hinduism. It was therefore natural for Tagore to ask whether various religions and even sects within a religion like Hinduism — where different antagonistic tendencies ex-

<sup>2</sup> For more detail discussion of the etymological meaning of *dharmā* see in the present volume: Milewska, I. (2014). Dharma and religion in Tagore’s views. *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*, 4(1), 81–88.

ist — can be taken to represent *dharma*, as for him *dharma* must unite instead of creating any kind of antagonism. For an acceptable answer Tagore actually undertook a detail study of the main tenets of some of the influential religions.

Tagore's thought on religion starts with the Upaniṣads which he inherited, and then he takes a long root to finish with *The Religion of Man*. On the way he takes ideas from different religions and sects: from Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, including Śaiva tradition, Vaiṣṇava Bhakti, as well as the Sufi tradition, the Sant tradition of mediaeval India, Sahajjiya and Bauls of Bengal, getting inspiration from a variety of texts, such as *Gītā*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, etc. He was also a rationalist and revolutionist like Rammohan Roy — they both had an extreme concern for humanity and love for history. Tagore's ideas of religion are developed through his lifelong works. He wrote *Spreading religion (Dharma Prachar)*<sup>3</sup> in 1903 (Tagore, 1986–1987, Vol. 7: 475–480), *Jesus Christ (Jishu Charitra)* in 1910 (Tagore, 1986–1987, Vol. 14: 337–341), and his novel *Gora* was started in 1907 and completed in 1909.<sup>4</sup> Problems of institutionalised religion are presented in his play *Achalayatan* (1911). *Gora* deals with the problem of religion by birth, whereas the whole of *Gitanjali* consists of songs of divine love, which won him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913.

But, after this his reflections on religion take a new form and he starts searching for “the man of his heart” (*maner manus*) using a line from a Baul song asking: “where will I get him?” (*ami kothay pabo tare?*). He did not limit himself to any of the sects or traditions because he wanted to coin his own concept of religion where nothing is prohibited and there are no boundaries. Thus, in his Hilbert lecture he comes up with the idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal, which becomes the main subject. But what does he mean by Man the Eternal? Here we find an interesting insight of Tagore. As we have already mentioned, he did not believe in any religious idea that cannot be experienced in this world. Hence, if God exists, he has to be attainable in human experience. Therefore, he ultimately postulates the idea of God that is actually a human ideal of perfection. The ideal that man aspires to unite with thanks to his religious practice.

<sup>3</sup> Here and in the following examples the original titles of cited phrases in Bengali are given in brackets.

<sup>4</sup> Novel *Gora* starts with a Baul song: “How the unknown bird gets into the cage of glass and goes out, if I could catch it, I would have tied its legs with the rope of mind-body and soul” (*khanchar bhitare achin pakhi kamone aase jaye, dhorte parle manobedi ditem pakhir paye*) (Tagore, 1986–1987, Vol. 3: 379).

## THE UNION OF MAN WITH GOD

To explain how this union is possible Tagore refers to the meaning of *yoga* that is to enable the achievement of this aim. The union of man with God owes its significance not from the attitude of the individual that wants “to have” but of the one that searches for the best way “to be”. To say that man achieves the truth is to admit that man is separate from the truth, whereas “to be true” is “to become one with the truth”. Some religions which emphasise the relation of man with God also give the reason to pursue the prescribed path, for instance to be one with Nārāyaṇa, in union, the supreme reality of man, which is divine. Our use of the mind cannot lead to a union with Spirit as it involves transcending the limits of mind. Once we transcend the limits of mind “our inner self is filled with joy, which indicates that through such freedom we come into touch with the Reality that is an end in itself and therefore is bliss” (Tagore, 1993: 41).

The essence of religion is spiritual unity that is “man’s religion in Man” as against “man’s religion in God”, religion through a process of growth and not by inheritance or importation. And he puts it: “religions are never about a God of cosmic force, but rather about the God of human personality” (Tagore, 1993: 120). Religion is the liberation of our individual personality in the universal Person who cannot be other than human. Tagore talks of Man’s perfection as opposed to God’s perfection in his “being” and in his “doing”; he himself is a traveller (*pathik*) and God is a friend, a fellow traveller, and we all are travellers in religion. He addresses God by saying: “Hey! Fellow Traveller, I bow down to you again and again!” (*pather sathi nami barambar*; Tagore, 1986–1987, Vol. 4: 172). Tagore admits that often the path of religion is that which takes us to God, the path is perhaps filled up with godliness. However, there is no one path but many; if there was only one path then to proceed on that path would always take us towards destination. But Tagore does not accept the concept of “achievable religious destination”. As approaching God is like approaching infinity it is a new path again and again which does not have any destination but only sustains the hope to get us closer to the goal.

Tagore’s project presented in *The Religion of Man* is not normative, it rather describes the nature or essence of man. This man is universal; it is man of all times, of all locations, the core of mankind. This perspective on religion of man is nourished much by the ideas taken from the folk tradition of the Bauls, which he calls a “well cultivated religion of man” (Roy, 1989: 75). So, in his conception of religion, Baulism is purified by the Upaniṣadic spirit, read in terms of his own original interpretation.

Tagore is not a monk; the world is concrete and real, far from being a mere illusion. He is a householder who enjoys the world of pleasure and pain, who accepts the need for union and separation, an artist of many talents with enormous capacity to create new forms using different media; he is a versatile man with

infinite love towards oneself and others. The concept of religion he promotes may be criticised by arguing that it is highly subjective — one cannot rely on such religion since its experience depends on the inner light of the self and also each person's experience of the inner self is different. Wouldn't such a concept of religion be different for each individual to collide with the universal religion of Man that Tagore presupposed? Tagore had to face this criticism from his critic Bipin Chandra Pal (1858–1932). No doubt, Tagore's religion of man is subjective because it is not ritualistic and it depends on the individual — a person. But, the religions which are institutionalised easily take the form of politics and become the weapons of power that has nothing to do with spiritual matters. The history of wars carried out on behalf of religions is quite well known, let us mention Catholic–Protestant or Hindu–Muslim riots. Noteworthy, all are due to mixing religion with politics and due to the institutionalised nature of religions and not due to subjective nature of religion. The institutional aspect is objective in a sense and leaves hardly any room for rational scrutiny. On the other hand, the subjective form of religion proposed by Tagore can provide enough space for rational scrutiny and freedom for creativity. Tagore was concerned that if the institution of religion becomes stronger in a particular society every individual belonging to this society has to accept all socially and culturally constructed beliefs it implies, for instance, the conviction that *śudra*<sup>5</sup> is eligible only to become bonded labour. Such religion leaves no place for reasoning and questioning by the individual. Whereas, for Tagore justice and morality are above the grasp of any institution and need no practical justification, they are categorical to use Kant's phrase.

The crucial feature of religion is that it inspires us to transcend limits and to support an ever-widening individuality, which makes our life a spiritual work of art. Tagore gathers his religious experience from intimacy with nature, and feeling in perfect harmony with nature comprehending all the things that are human — knowledge, will, and action. Tagore refers to Indian transcendentalism that conceives religion not to be the ultimate goal, but rather the means to a further end that consists in the perfect liberation of individual spirit in universal spirit as the limit of humanity itself. As he believes, man finds in his spiritual life the sense of union and the will that culminates in love and can get him beyond all worldly boundaries.

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<sup>5</sup> *Śudra* is the fourth *varṇa*, as prescribed in the *Puruṣasūkta* of the *R̥gveda*, one of the sacred texts of Hinduism. This is a low prestige social strata in Hindu society, and the *śudras* are traditionally expected to perform functions of serving the upper three *varṇas*.

## REDEFINITIONS OF THE KEY CONCEPTS: SIN, PERFECTION, LIBERATION, AND TEMPLE

There are some factors, however, which may disturb the harmony between the spirit of the individual and the spirit of Universal Man. We usually name these factors “sin”. Although the Upaniṣads explain when and how the truth is “revealed”, for Tagore the truth is never “revealed” but one stands face to face and experiences it directly. As he argues, liberation or *mukti* is not what the most of the religions of Indian origin suggest. Although Tagore’s notion of *mukti* is largely rooted in *dharmic* traditions, it is different in the sense that he talks about revelation of facts which are expressed through emotions or imagination. We can enjoy a special kind of realisation — which is delightful — without feeling attached to the means that arouses it; *e.g.*, we love to feel even fear or sorrow if we are detached from it, like enjoying the tragic dramas at the theatre. Man as a dreamer must have firm faith in life that creates and not in machine that is a construct (man has the power to create a beautiful world around him but he can also construct arms to destroy the world around him; machines are good only when they help us to sustain life instead of exploiting it). Just dreaming is not enough, one must also try to realise the dreams. Therefore, the essence of religion is “the will to transcend the limit of the self” and to realise the divinity of Man. In this sense, a religious man is a man without any religion. Nevertheless, Tagore decides to establish a sort of the living temple for his divinity which cannot be captured by any institutionalised religion. This living temple is Santiniketan, which manifests divinity through the search for knowledge, the willingness to serve others, enjoyment of sharing knowledge, and stimulating creative work.

The individual finds one’s meaning in a fundamental reality comprehending all individuals; a reality that is the moral and spiritual basis of the realm of human values. This belongs to the Tagorian concept of religion. As science can liberate one from one’s ignorance and any particular human knowledge can be overcome thanks to the universal reason, as Kant would put it, religion can liberate us from our individual personality and let us unite with the universal Person who cannot be other than the perfect human. Perfection has two aspects in man, which can be separated as “perfection in being” and “perfection in doing”. “Perfection in doing” is a question of moral perfection when an individual should be “true in his goodness”. The inner perfection of one’s personality is valuable as spiritual freedom and for humanity. The goodness requires detachment of our spirit from egoism, and we need to identify ourselves with universal humanity. It is not only beneficial for our fellow beings but it is valuable as truth itself:

through which we realize within us that man is not merely animal, bound by his individual passions and appetites, but a spirit that has its unfettered perfection. [...] Goodness is the freedom of our self in the world of man, as is love (Tagore, 1993: 121).



Tagore advocates for spiritual perfection as opposed to mechanical perfection. In order to realise unity with the universal, the individual must live one's perfect life which alone gives him or her freedom to transcend it. We know that nothing lasts forever and that all our moral relationships have their end, but we cannot neglect bonds that are real, even when they are temporary. Referring to the Upaniṣads and the parable of the two birds sitting on the same bough, one of which feeds and the other looks on, he explains the relationship between the finite being and the infinite being in man. And he is of the opinion that the delight of the bird which looks on is great, as it is a pure and free delight. "There are both of these birds in man himself, the objective one with its business of life, the subjective one with its disinterested joy of vision" (Tagore, 1993: 86). For Tagore, truth is a living experience in which pragmatic or practical, the logical or rational, and the ontological are not differentiated moments — truth is not a point but a polygon. None of the three aspects is eliminated in an accurate description of the nature of truth.

In Tagore's view, the meaning of transcendence for freedom is "breaking through the shells of one's limitations". This shell of one's limitation is at two levels: at the individual level and at the deeper level. At the deeper level, man's pursuits to achieve truth go beyond his needs — "this proves to him his infinity and makes his religion real to him by his own manifestations in truth and goodness" (Tagore, 1993: 127). Like Kant, Tagore would admit that the limits of freedom lie in transcending the limits of reason. The universal law of causality may be accepted in the realm of natural phenomena accessible for the human mind. But the mind of man, Tagore adds, has its immediate consciousness of will and freedom within oneself. It is the freedom of will in man that helps in transcending, both for Tagore and Kant, therefore they advocate for freedom in transcending and detachment. Tagore says:

When a child is detached from its mother's womb and it finds its mother in a real relationship whose truth is in freedom. Man in his detachment has realized himself in a wider and deeper relationship with the universe. In his moral life he has the sense of obligation and his freedom at the same time, and this is goodness. In his spiritual life his sense of the union and the will which is free has its culmination in love. The freedom of opportunity he wins for himself in Nature's region by uniting his power with Nature's forces. The freedom of social relationship he attains through owning responsibility to his community, thus gaining its collective power for his own welfare. In freedom of consciousness he realizes the sense of his unity with larger being, finding fulfilment in the dedicated life of an ever-progressive truth and ever-active love (Tagore, 1993: 27–28).

Tagore, like Kant, throughout his *Religion of Man* lays a great emphasis on individual man's being "disinterested" (in German *Uneigennützigkeit*). Says Tagore:

the individual man must exist for Man the great, and must express him in disinterested works, in science and philosophy, in literature and arts, in service and worship. This is his religion in various names and forms. [...] He realizes his own truth where it is perfect and this finds his fulfilment (Tagore, 1993: 11).

As seeking the ultimate truth or greater truth in religion of man, detachment is the necessary requirement. To explain detachment, Tagore gives an example of a doctor who treats his own son and, thus, reaches a greater truth as a doctor than he does as a father.

But in his intimate feeling for his son he also touches an ultimate truth, the truth of relationship, the truth of a harmony in the universe, the fundamental principle of creation as a mystery of their relationship which cannot be analyzed. It is the love that is higher truth being the most perfect relationship (Tagore, 1993: 62).

What is important, is that there is another sense of freedom. Obligation towards the other is tied with the freedom of the individual. In a society, one lives in relationship with others. One cannot have freedom by disassociating oneself from his or her fellow beings as all ties of relationship demand obligation to others. Tagore argues that “in the human world only a perfect arrangement of interdependence gives rise to freedom” (Tagore, 1993: 116), which may sound paradoxical, but it is true. Freedom is only possible for those who have the power to cultivate mutual understanding and cooperation with other individuals. The history of growth of freedom is a history of the perfection of the human relationship. Tagore says: “all broken truths are evils”, and “death does not hurt us, but disease does, because disease constantly reminds us of health and yet withholds it from us” (Tagore, 1993: 117). Freedom is the inward process of losing oneself that leads to it. Influenced by the Baul sect, Tagore accepts the eternal bond of union between the infinite and the finite soul, which leads to liberation (*mukti*) through love, which is the ultimate, and it is this interrelation that makes truth complete. Thus, truth cannot be absolute independence or absolute freedom; rather it is the harmonious interdependence that leads to freedom.

Can religion be studied in the Tagorian sense? This question is similar to the question: can art be taught or studied in the sense Tagore meant? Of course, the answer to both these questions is negative. But one should then ask: what was the objective to establish Visva-Bharati, a school so distinctive from the rest of the schools in India, if the religion of man cannot be taught, and what might have been the idea behind opening a Department of Comparative Religion there if religion cannot be studied? The answer lies in Tagore’s acceptance that Hindu *dharmā* — or for that matter any other religion such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, or Zoroastrianism — is a religion in the sense that it is a way of life which sustains humanity, and that is why it cannot be inherited by birth or simply preached, which is commonly believed. Religion

can only be learnt through the life one lives, and there is no other way to know it. We should study the religions of the world not because we think any particular path preached by any religious community is ultimate but because we need to systematically deconstruct its preaching to lay bare the institutional aspect, which, inevitably, would act as repressive and undermine the freedom of Man. It is through the systematic deconstruction of the preaching of different religions that one can distinguish between their external and internal aspects — that is the institutionalised *versus* spiritual dimension — and comparing various religions allows one to appreciate the underlying freedom a human being has. It also helps to gain an unorthodox understanding of transcendence. Surely, the approach demonstrated and recommended by Tagore to study and compare religions cannot be considered as another academic method, marked by the ideal of objectivity typical of an uncommitted researcher. His purpose, however, is not even close to that. It is, in fact, a strictly religious or humane goal. Namely, he aims to rediscover man and to redefine the way man boosts one's own spiritual and creative potential, which then manifests in all aspects of culture.

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