



Comparative religion as an academic study in contemporary India*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to argue that the different forms of ‘academic study of religion’ in the West hardly have core characteristics on which there is a consensus of scholars. Moreover, it may not be the only way of doing Academic Study of Religion. In Indian tradition, in its own way there have been religious studies. Religion is a way of living. The presence of a large diverse religious population constitutes myriad human exemplars of and witnesses to what it means to be religious and to act religiously. It furnishes a diversity of backgrounds, sensitivities and language competences on the part of Indians who choose to be trained as scholars in the field. Typically for an Indian, ‘living religion’ is more important than studying, describing, or knowing religion. One does not have the time or money for such ‘luxuries’; religion is a ‘bracketed existence’ in normal circumstances, but in crises it is the basic or fundamental identity of an individual. Further, in the Indian context only the serious academic study ‘comparative religion’ has relevance, and this brings an interesting methodology to the study. Contemporary attempts and distinctive contributions on comparative methodology of study of religion would be discussed as well as how far its application in the Asian context would be possible. The paper concludes by answering what it means to do ‘comparative religion’ of an authentic sort among diverse pressures, expectations, challenges and opportunities.

KEYWORDS

study of religion; Indian religions; philosophy of religion; religious studies

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INTRODUCTION

My association with the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, India, has existed for thirty years now but primarily in the form of a student of philosophy and being a part of the comparative religion studies program (B.A., M.A., Ph.D., research and teaching). I always felt that religion has always been the last choice for Indian students, perhaps less so for philosophy students. Mainly because philosophy may still have some prospects, religion has almost none. Our attempt has been how to attract students. There were times we hardly had any students, and it is one of the first departments having religion as an academic study. Over the years, as the number of rejected students from other disciplines increased, the number of students in our department also started to increase. To make it more attractive and encouraging for students, people also tried over marking. This made the department quite popular, but the quality of teaching and research has been going down. This has been a serious concern for us. On the other hand, we hardly have trained teachers in religion. Most of us have philosophy training and have a basic degree in philosophy but have been studying and teaching comparative religion. In short, this is the state of affairs of a department that was perhaps the first department of the country where a B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. were awarded in comparative religion. But when all is said and done, there has been at least a full department since 1929 where interdisciplinary study and research is being done in religion, and we have had exchanges with many western scholars of religion including John Hick.

In the West, around 1900, roughly speaking, religion started becoming a matter of study and academic discussion. The age of science also affected religion and gave rise to critical study. Since then, it has come a long way. It is recognized by different names as an independent field of study similar to religious studies, world religions, history of religions, Asian studies, Islamic studies, Buddhist studies, cultural studies, *etc.* Almost every university in the West has a department of religious studies under one name or another. In all cases it is recognized as an interdisciplinary study in which philosophy, history, sociology, language, literature, art, dance, music, poetry, *etc.*, relate in one place and come together. What is meant by 'academic study of religion'? Joe O'Connell has discussed it in detail in his paper on Bangladesh. What does he mean by saying it is opposed to 'confessional study'? Broadly speaking, any person who is interested in the study of a religion from critical, analytical, or objective point of view (to some extent), and is not dogmatic or does not 'confesses', would be eligible for academic study. I am aware that there are many loose ends in such a formulation, and I agree that all the forms of academic study of religion as carried out in West hardly have core characteristics on which they have consensus.

It is important to note that in the Western context 'philosophy of religion' is understood as the philosophy of Abrahamic, or Judeo-Christian, religious tradition. All the discussions and conclusions around religion are limited in scope. If we focus our attention on Hinduism or Buddhism instead, we would find different dimensions and considerations, and the whole question of philosophy's relation with religion would appear in a rather different light. It is a totally different range of religious phenomena. Ninian Smart (Smart, 1969; Smart, 1998) and others have pointed out that philosophy of religion in the West has, for the most part, been an extremely myopic one.

ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION IN INDIA

It is more or less recognized by the scholars during the last century that the relation between philosophy and religion is extremely important in the eastern religions. Religion in an Indian sense would depend on its concept of transcendence discussed in terms of liberation (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*), the law of *karman* and rebirth defined in various religions, such as Hindu religion — Vedantin philosophy, Buddhism — Buddhist philosophy, Jainism — Jaina philosophy, *etc.* Philosophy is system oriented and religion is philosophy oriented; they are mutually determined. In Western tradition, especially in the twentieth century, theology and philosophy were separated or even opposed. Various philosophical methods have been used to separate the two. But if we concentrate on Indian tradition, we hardly can think of separating the two. For example, in the *Advaita* system of thought, 'we cannot think *advaita* and speak *advaita* without living *advaita*' (Gandhi, 1984: 241). *Brahman* and *māyā* are two sides of the same coin. The empirical world is called *māyā* and the spiritual world is designated as *brahman*. Whether *brahman* exists or not is a subject of inquiry for religious language and deserves the same treatment as whether God exists or not. What is the meaning of '*sarvam khaluidam brahma*'? How do we understand the statement in *Bhagavadgītā*: 'leave everything and come under my guidance'? When Arjuna asks Śrī Kṛṣṇa after the battle of Kurukṣetra, after all that slaughter and agony and loss, what it all comes to, what it all means, and says can we imagine Acyuta declaring that all says just this, inconceivably economically, that 'I [Vasudeva] am all'?

In modern times, it was Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) who first emphasized the study of comparative religion and theology and realized that the great religions of the world had some essential truths, including the oneness of supreme power and the commonness of humanity. His greatest contribution as reformer was his emphasis on education for all as the gateway to a fuller life. There was a fusion of religion and nationalism, so that the nationalist feelings had a pronounced Hindu complexion. It is important to note that

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), Vivekananda (1863–1902), Śrī Aurobindo (1872–1950) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) all practiced religious politics in pre-independent India. Muslim religious politics was also there by Mohammed Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), Mohammed Iqbal (1877–1938), etc. Most of them thought secularism was a Western notion, which could not be applied in the East. They also thought *Khilafat* was the most essential institution of the Muslim community throughout the world. And the sympathy with Turkey was neither political nor territorial but religious. For Indian Muslims, nationalism implies leaving aside their faith. Earlier Jinnah did not approve of the mixing of religion and politics. He believed that this would result in confusion and would do more harm than good to India in general and Mussalmans in particular. He warned Gandhi not to encourage the religious fanaticism of Muslims priests and their equally ignorant, illiterate and superstitious followers. The unity of religion and politics introduced the element of irrationalism and mysticism in the political life of the country. *Swaraj* meant that Hindu rule and national government was by implication, Hindu Government. Gandhi's ideal was to revive Hindu religion and to establish 'Hindu raj' in the country. Jinnah opposed and joined Two-Nation Theory. This was due to the historical and spiritual differences that existed between the Hindus and Muslims. The history of 1000 years could not unite them as one nation. They neither inter-marry nor inter-dine. Two-Nation Theory was the logical corollary of this situation.

Other religions, such as Jain, Buddhist and Sikh, were encompassed by Hinduism because those who subscribed to them believed that India was not only a fatherland but also a holy land. Hindu converts to Christianity and Islam who shared with Hindus a common culture and common homeland were excluded from the Hindu fold, as it was not a holy land for them. Their holy land is far off in either Arabia or Palestine. Their love was divided. The Hindus included groups of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The Santals, Bhils, Panchamas, Namashudras and all other tribes and classes are Hindus, so they inherit Hindu blood and Hindu culture. Later, the same religious politics in India nurtured and was nourished by caste politics. Every state in India, every national party and every regional party is based on caste alliances and coalitions. The caste factor precedes elections, operates during the elections, and persists with vengeance in cabinets, legislatures, and bureaucracies. Crucial public policy decisions are based on caste considerations and caste calculations. The politics of the Mandal Commission are more relevant than the so-called goals of social justice and equity for the poor. All that has flown from the river since 1951 has contributed to the present state of affairs and is something most unfortunate. Reservations and privileges designed to assist the handicapped sections in the otherwise unequal race for equity and justice soon became instruments of political privilege and manoeuvre which proved too convenient and attractive

to be given up by either side. Politicians cultivate greed, selfishness, secrecy, deception, cunning, fomenting of quarrels, exploitation of difference and ruling by division. A poor country like India not only needs bread, good sanitation and the minimum amenities of civilized life, but it also needs education for development, possessed with a right kind of attitude, understanding and value commitment.

We live a double life. We profess ourselves to be religious while in practice we find brute lawless violence. Our divided existence issues an utterly different conflicting morality, such as back as in 1940 when Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) observed:

We have today to fight against not nature's death but man-made death. [...] Religion has to fight against wars, military and economic, even though it may mean loss of dividends to a few individuals. [...] Hate is spreading like a vast black cloud. Terror has become the technique of states. Freedom won by centuries of effort is lightly surrendered. Fear is over the world, and our hearts are failing us. We protest a little too much our desire for peace, while preparing for war. It is like professing vegetarianism while running a butcher's shop (Radhakrishnan, 1940: 110–113).

The situation has not changed much. Morality is the worst casualty. If it should remain relevant, rethinking religion in India is an imperative. From a purely historical perspective one should not think of religion in isolationist terms. Most standard religious texts devote distinct chapters to individual religions, their histories, personal beliefs, and practices. We cannot ignore the similarities among the practices, rituals and beliefs of the various religions, for example, the use of candles and incense, offerings of various sorts to gods, *etc.* But there are notable differences as well. We could go on listing the differences. The point is that various religions make both similar and different truth claims. This raises a fundamental question: How should an advocate of one religion approach the truth claims of another religion? We are not asking how an advocate of one religion should approach an advocate of another religion but how one should approach what another person advocates. That is, we are asking how to understand sympathetically other persons' religious claims to interpret what they mean and what significance they have for believers' lives and to evaluate critically the alleged truth. How we should approach another person is also a moral question. Advocates of other religions are 'persons'. The ethics of our religion demand that they should be treated as persons. Words like tolerance, openness to understanding, caring and compassion dominate such discussions. But we do not often distinguish between 'evaluating persons' truth claims' and 'relating to persons morally'. Religious truth can also be evaluated inter-subjectively and inter-culturally. We should not ignore the wrongs that believers have done in the name of their religion; they were and are deplorable, whether committed in Amritsar, America, Beirut, Jerusalem, Kashmir,

Ayodhya or Gujrat. Tolerance of and openness to others does not mean that we must agree with what they believe or think. A rational discussion of disagreements is what is desired. Most academic study of religion has been a kind of compiling lists of different faiths and religions rather than understanding. We need to discuss critically and examine our own individual performances as a group of actors of religion play.

PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

One strong argument against the study of religion as a course is proposed. If it is in the context of liberal education then it is redundant. If it is referring to certain aspects of the knowledge component alone, then it is not sufficient to justify the label 'course' or 'educated'. In response to this argument I would say that we might not aim to get a 'religiously educated' person. Instead, we may aim for a religiously well-informed person having better understanding of religions who would think and act more critically than the one who is not so 'educated' or who has not studied religion as a course (Mukherjee, 2015: 83–103).

The majority of books on religious education are written by those who themselves adhere to a particular religious belief and obviously reflect the author's inclinations. This is hardly surprising. A critical look at certain key aspects in the study of religion from a secular point of view is long overdue. Religion as a subject needs to be as 'secular' as history or literature. 'Being religious' as a life instance on the part of the student and/or on the part of the teacher is not essential in the teaching and learning of religion as a subject.

One faces the problem of choice. For most religions there exist hundreds of books and much published material to help. The main problem is what items of information or what topical issues shall I use for this particular course and how to proceed? Philosophical issues related to religious knowledge and belief justification and its meaning are quite a philosophical debate. As there are no final answers, it is better to introduce this debate and leave them to find out their own answers. Thus, the result as claimed by the subject teaching is dependent on the nature of religion itself. It offers some new information on the subject, but it plays no less an important role of providing classroom teachers with the tools whereby they may engage themselves in constructive critique, which is commonly discussed in the study of religion.

If the study of religion can be justified as a curriculum on rational grounds, similar to other subjects, what would a 'religiously educated' person look like? What skills, qualities, and attitudes and so on would he or she have to exhibit? Could we say that a practicing Muslim or Hindu who had never had formal education in their religion was not in some way 'religiously educated'? It would seem unreasonable on the face of it. It would also seem unreasonable to regard

such a person 'educated' in a more general sense. A religiously educated person means someone whose education has included a study of religion. Scholarly understanding is one part, but it requires additional intellectual dimension of religious understanding, finding the 'truth' by them if there is any. The study of religion is also a search for the student's own personality, as some would assert. It is proposed that the study of religion ought to be interpreted as study 'about' religion.

The centre of religion for Hick is not theological doctrine but personal transformation. We would be more concerned with the existential or life-changing aspects of religion and less concerned with theological truths and dogmas (Hick, 1963; Hick, 1989). Thus, any attempt by the exclusivist 'to convert or sweep all people into one religion's kingdom fails to capture the essence of religion' (Peterson *et al.*, 1991: 266).

In India, the academic study of religion often takes the form of either 'philosophy of religion' or 'comparative religion'. In my view, both forms would serve the purpose depending on the type of students we are addressing. If we are addressing I.I.T. first year students, 'comparative religion' would be more appropriate. If we are addressing social sciences students in general at the university level, 'philosophy of religion' could be appropriate. We often tend to study various religions independently, one by one. Yet in the end hardly any real comparison is done. It is with this idealized condition in mind that after more than 30 years we have recently revised our syllabus of comparative religion. Before concluding, perhaps a word about comparative religion is required. The intention of an authentic comparative study of religion and the actual comparative study are two different things. With India being secular state and with so many religions being lived side by side, perhaps the best way to study religion would be to have more and more independent comparative religion departments with adjunct faculty or substantial faculty if we could afford to. By way of concluding the discussion, I would think that Wittgenstein has really provided us a key to understand, analyse, get meaning and remove the ambiguities to a certain extent of religious phenomena and religious language. The key is 'forms of life' applied to both Indian philosophy and religion, if at all this distinction can be made meaningfully in this context.

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