



The role of philosophy in the academic study of religion in India

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ABSTRACT

Joseph T. O'Connell drew attention to the relative scarcity of academic work on religion in South Asia, and offered as a plausible explanation for this state of affairs the tension between secular and religio-political communal interests. This paper explores the potential role of philosophy as an established academic discipline within this situation, in the context of India. It argues that objective study, including evaluation, of the truth claims of various religious traditions is an important aspect of academic as opposed to confessional engagement with religion, and that philosophy in India is especially well suited to undertake such reflection and to provide corresponding education. Unlike Western countries, philosophy and religion were never clearly separated in India and did not evolve in tension with one another. The history of Indian philosophy therefore includes and is included within the history of its 'religions', in a way that makes philosophical examination of the truth claims of Indian religions internal to those religions themselves. By tracing this history, the discipline of philosophy can help to unsettle the idea of religion as a matter of fixed dogma. It can also continue the procedure of interpreting and evaluating metaphysical and epistemological theses that has been an intrinsic component of Indian religious thought for most of its history.

KEYWORDS

Joseph T. O'Connell; philosophy of religion; religious pluralism; diversity of faith; religion and ideology; Hinduism; comparative study of religion

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PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY IN RELIGION

At the start of a lecture he gave in 2001 at the University of Oxford (O'Connell, 2001), Joseph T. O'Connell drew attention to 'a troubling anomaly', namely, 'the striking disparity between the prominence of religion, or religious factors, in the personal and collective life of so much of the population of South Asia, and the extreme rarity of study, teaching and research on religion in the universities of the same countries' (O'Connell, 2001). India is a prime example. While there are religious institutions in South Asia where particular religions are studied, these belong to specific religious communities, and offer religious instruction as distinguished from the academic study of religion. O'Connell describes the latter in the following terms: 'by academic I mean impartial enquiry, based on evidence that any competent observer can recognize, inquiry that is in principle comparative, but in a descriptive not in an evaluative ranking kind of sense' (O'Connell, 2001). He contrasts such enquiry with a 'confessional' approach to religion, which takes place 'from the perspective of a particular faith commitment' (O'Connell, 2001). Reflecting on the reasons for the scarcity of academic research and teaching on religion in South Asia, O'Connell identifies a number of possible factors, but sees as most important the problem of tensions between 'secularist and religio-communal political' perspectives and interests.

India is one country in which projects for establishing departments or programs for the academic study of religion at universities encounter resistance from secularists and face the danger of being highjacked by religious actors who favour the establishment of departments and programs slanted towards confessional or sectarian perspectives. In addition, there is the considerable risk of agitation by such actors when perspectives challenging their viewpoints or goals are presented. As O'Connell notes, there is considerable study of religion in discipline-specific contexts at existing university departments in India, such as history, philosophy and the social sciences. At times, work on religious topics in courses and publications within these fields has garnered hostile reactions from members of religious communities, issuing in disruptive protests and even legal actions. Cases include the University of Delhi's decision to drop A.K. Ramanujan's essay, *Three hundred Ramayanas*, from the history syllabus after protests by fundamentalist Hindu students, and the filing of a lawsuit to censor Wendy Doniger's book, *The Hindus: An alternative history* (Doniger, 2009), by a member of the RSS, a prominent right wing Hindutva organization. Reactions like these raise legitimate worries about the feasibility of establishing departments and programs dedicated to the objective study of religion at universities in India. Such worries can only be increased by the vilification of academic works on Indian religion in other countries, led by religious actors and organizations belonging to the Indian diaspora. The reaction

by members of the Sikh community in Canada to Harjot Oberoi's *The construction of religious boundaries* is an instructive and disturbing example.

In this essay, I do not address the question of how or whether departments and programs specifically dedicated to the academic study of religion should be established at Indian universities in light of these difficulties. Answering that question requires a close familiarity with the social circumstances and internal dynamics of particular educational institutions, and this is, moreover, a pragmatic and political question rather than a scholarly one.¹ In the meanwhile, however, religion already is the object of academic study in a variety of existing social sciences and humanities disciplines at universities within India. I want to focus on the role of one of these, philosophy, in advancing the 'academic' study of religion in India. The discipline of philosophy, as an available program of study at Indian colleges and universities, has been historically, and remains, a prominent site for academic engagement with religion. Indeed, of programs for the study of religion that do exist in India, many have been established under the auspices of departments of philosophy.² Notice, however, that philosophical approaches to religion, or to subject matters commonly classified as religious, do not properly fit O'Connell's distinction between 'confessional' and 'academic' study. The self-understanding of the Western discipline of 'Religious Studies', relies heavily on this distinction, especially among those who have struggled to separate Religious Studies from Theology.³ And yet philosophy, a primary locus in India for the study of religion, is neither 'confessional', in the sense of speaking 'from the perspective of a particular faith commitment' (O'Connell, 2001) nor does it aim at description and comparison while eschewing evaluation.

How, then, should one define a 'philosophical' approach to religion, and how does this approach stand in relation to the academic study of religion?

¹ That said, conversations with faculty members over many years of visiting Indian universities incline me to agree with David Lorenzen's statement that 'certainly religion should be more and better studied in Indian universities, but a strong case can be made that this study is best left where it is: namely, dispersed among history, social science, literature and philosophy departments' (Lorenzen, 2010: 28). David N. Lorenzen makes this observation in view of the BJP's attempts to promote Hindu nationalism through educational institutions in the past. This concern remains highly pertinent, as do other considerations about who would control the design of religious studies curricula and what their content and approach would likely be as a result.

² Examples are the recently revamped programs of Comparative Religion at Visva-Bharati (Department of Philosophy and Comparative Religion); degrees in Indian Philosophy and Religion offered by Benares Hindu University (Department of Philosophy and Religion); and diplomas in Jainology, Vedānta and Yoga awarded by the University of Mumbai (Department of Philosophy).

³ That includes authors contending that this separation has not been adequately achieved; see McCutcheon, 2001; McKinnon, 2003; Wiebe, 2006, for examples. However, one needs also to be wary of the unexamined presuppositions of such arguments for a more 'scientific' approach to religion (see Sikka, 2015).

One way of answering this question is through an orientation towards philosophy of religion. The subject of this philosophical area is of course religion, but not every aspect of it. The concept of 'religion' is a complex one, and not easy to unpack. It includes worldviews, symbols, practices, rituals, and patterns of belonging, among other characteristics. Some have even argued that there is no such thing as 'religion', because the phenomena that have been grouped under this moniker are too multiple, diverse and historically dissimilar to be included within a single category (Fitzgerald, 2000; McKinnon, 2002; Nongbri, 2013). I believe this position is too extreme (Sikka, 2015), but do agree that no single set of properties defines 'religion' clearly and distinguishes it from neighbouring aspects of culture. Nonetheless, one facet of religion surely involves the advancement of truth claims⁴ about the world and the place of human beings within it: about a God or gods or transcendent reality, about the nature of the self and its relation to the divine or the ultimately real, about the possibility of an afterlife, appropriate behaviour in light of these facts, and so forth. Philosophy of religion, as a subfield of the Western discipline of philosophy, has traditionally involved a reasoned evaluation of such truth claims. It then conforms to part of O'Connell's definition of the 'academic' study of religion, in that it aims to be an 'impartial enquiry, based on evidence that any competent observer can recognize' (O'Connell, 2001). It does not, on the other hand, abstain from critical assessment, although it should be emphasized that this is assessment of particular claims, not of 'religions' as whole complexes of belief and practice. I contend that such an approach should be included as a component within the 'academic' study of religion. It constitutes one legitimate form of objective inquiry, and is helpful in keeping alive a spirit of questioning and

⁴ This term simply means a claim that something is true. In stating that religion involves 'truth claims', I do not of course mean that it involves analyses of the concept of truth, or debates about the means of right cognition, such as those one finds in Indian epistemological discussions about the *pramānas*. There are scholars who claim that Indian religion is not about 'truth' at all, or involves some special notion of 'truth', but these claims are in my view problematic. Matilal, for instance, argues that certain types of Indian religious propositions, such as the doctrine that life is *duḥkha*, 'are non-factual in the sense of being evaluative and relative to each doctrinal scheme' (Matilal, 2004: 31). Yet he also speaks of Nyāya, Buddhism and Jainism as based on 'rival ontologies' (Matilal, 1990: viii), which are certainly subjects of philosophical disputation, and says of India's speculative metaphysical systems that they 'fall in the area of overlap between religion and philosophy' (Matilal, 1971: 11). Since the paths prescribed by different schools of Indian thought are linked to their ontological and metaphysical assertions, though, one wonders how the latter could involve truth claims while the former do not. Cf. also my critique Balagangadhara's view of Indian religion as indifferent to truth in Sikka, 2012: 297–298. Analyses like those of Matilal and Balagangadhara are based on attention to the pluralistic nature of Indian religious traditions, and an understandable wish to preserve and promote such pluralism. Pluralism does not, however, require a strange notion of truth (Sikka, 2012: 298), nor should its existence in India be overestimated. The rival schools *are* rivals, and disagree with one another.

reflection in an age where 'religion' is too often defined as dogmatic adherence to a fixed body of belief and practice, and 'religions' as rigidly demarcated systems of such belief and practice.

In the Indian context, however, this orientation towards philosophy *of* religion, which has taken shape within the Western practice of philosophy, does not properly capture the historical relation between what Europeans call 'philosophy' and what they call 'religion', where neither of these terms, it should be underlined, has a precise equivalent in Indian languages. As Asha Mukherjee writes:

It is important to note that the 'philosophy of religion' in the West has its roots in and has been shaped by Judaic-Christianity [...]. In Hinduism or Buddhism, we would find different dimensions and considerations and the question of philosophy's relation with religion would appear in a different light (Mukherjee, 2015: 93).

Authors attempting to explain Indian philosophy to a Western readership, or who are themselves thinking about the relation between Indian and Western philosophy, have very often broached this latter issue. Radhakrishnan, in the introduction to his by now classic work on Indian philosophy, writes that 'philosophy in India is essentially spiritual' and that 'religion in India is not dogmatic [...]. It is a rational synthesis which goes on gathering into itself new conceptions as philosophy progresses' (Radhakrishnan, 1999: 25). The texts to which he alludes in making these remarks are the *Gītā* and the *Upanishads*, which he names as 'great works of Indian philosophy' that yet, he claims 'are not remote from popular belief' (Radhakrishnan, 1999: 25). G.R. Malkani, in a 1949 address to the Indian Philosophical Congress, of which he was then president, expresses the point by saying that 'the philosophy of ancient India was tied to religion [...]. It was part of religion, and a necessary part' (Malkani, 2011: 556). Scholars today attempting to introduce Indian philosophy to a Western readership make similar observations, pointing out that the Western categories of 'religion' and 'philosophy', understood as mutually distinct and even opposed, do not accurately map the nature of Indian traditions (King, 1999; Hamilton, 2001). The difference is visible in the very terms used to describe the varieties and divisions of Indian philosophy. It is perfectly appropriate to speak of Buddhist logic, or Jain epistemology, or the metaphysics of Vedānta as a branch of Hinduism, and to study these in conversation with Western philosophical positions not similarly tied to schools of thought whose names are also the names of religious groupings. No modern Western philosopher speaks of 'Christian logic', on the other hand, or would discuss such a strange creature in a university course.

Why not? What characteristics distinguish philosophy so radically from religion in the West, but not in India? A central distinction in this regard is

that between revelation and reason, where in Western discourses these define religion and philosophy, respectively. Indian traditions, on the other hand, have not taken shape through a division between something called ‘religion’, based on faith in authoritative revelation, versus something called ‘philosophy’, involving independent reflection on questions about knowledge, reality and ethics. This is what Radhakrishnan means in saying that ‘religion in India is not dogmatic’ (Radhakrishnan, 1999: 25). Even if this claim is overstated, it remains true that discourses which, from a Western perspective, would be classified as philosophical analysis, speculation and debate have been internal to India’s ‘religious’ traditions. This is presumably what Michael Dummett has in mind in making the following observation, in an address commemorating B.K. Matilal:

the Indian religions at any rate — Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism — are, in their essence as religions closer to philosophy than the Western religions, which I take to be Judaism and its successors, Christianity and Islam. If you look at the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran, you will find in them very little, if anything, that could be called philosophical writing or in any philosophical style [...] whereas in the Indian scriptures there is much that is of a philosophical character or touches very directly upon a philosophical style of thought (Matilal, 2004: 5).⁵

Matilal’s own views on this point, to which Dummett is alluding, extended even to the idea of *dharmā*, the Sanskrit term with best claim (but still not a good claim) for translation as ‘religion’. Matilal notes that as a theory of moral behaviour, *dharmā* was actually a central subject of debate in India, and he adds:

This need not be very surprising, for neither in Buddhism nor in Jainism, or even in Hinduism was God cited as the authority on *dharmā*.⁶ Hence the search for a rational basis of *dharmā* is often compatible with these religious traditions. There were, of course, the Hindu scriptures. But these scriptures proved to be flexible, sometimes to the point that they seemed to have meant whatever their interpreters chose to make them mean. Furthermore, even when the literal text of the scriptures was taken seriously, the interpreters of the Mīmāṃsā school undertook to make a rational examination (*mīmāṃsā* means rational examination) of the meaning of the Vedic (scriptural) statements (Matilal, 2002: 51).

⁵ Cited by Heeraman Tiwari in his introduction to Matilal’s *Logical and ethical issues: An essay on Indian philosophy of religion* (Matilal, 2004).

⁶ Alf Hiltebeitel notes that Krishna in the *Bhagavadgītā* looks like an exception to this rule, but adds that Matilal’s point is nonetheless well taken, as ‘one finds the *Gītā* in a text with lots of other jostling teachings, where people often disagree with Krishna both directly and indirectly, and where what he says in the *Bhagavadgītā* is never cited anywhere else, at least in the *Mahābhārata*’ (Hiltebeitel, 2014: 22).

In fact, it is questionable whether 'faith', interpreted as belief in a divinely revealed doctrine, is an appropriate term for Indian 'religions' at all, given that such belief has never been a defining feature of Indian religiosity, and given that open-ended philosophical speculation and argumentation have been central to the formation of those traditions we now define as, for instance, 'Hindu', 'Jain', and 'Buddhist'. The curriculum of existing philosophy departments at universities and colleges in India reflects this historical reality, in that offerings in Indian philosophy focus on texts, individuals, teachings, and schools that are also part of the history of Indian religion(s): *Upanishads*, Vedānta, Nāgārjuna, Śāṅkara, Vasubandhu, *anekāntavāda*, *anatta* and so forth. This is not true of Western philosophy departments, given the different shape of Western religions as well as the configuration of the discipline of philosophy, due in no small measure to struggles between faith and reason in the course of European intellectual and political history.

Increasingly, however, Indian religion has conformed itself to the pattern of Western, and particularly Christian, 'faith', with religious communities seeing themselves as defined in distinction from one another through a set of sacred scriptures; a common core of belief, practices, and ritual; and one or more revered founding figures, such as a line of gurus or buddhas.⁷ The 'religio-political communal' perspectives to which O'Connell refers have played a crucial role in bringing this situation about. Actors on the communal side of the religious landscape in India have a powerful interest in maintaining a view of religion and religions as mutually distinct and settled bodies of belief, whose borders they seek to police. Within this situation, philosophy can help to represent more accurately the history and reflective character of Indian traditions of thought and wisdom, while fostering at the same time ongoing critical engagement with the content of these traditions.⁸ Because it is a long-established discipline with a content and methodology that can claim continuity with indigenous traditions, this kind of critical engagement by philosophy runs lesser

⁷ This concept of 'religion' has arguably been constructed in the Christian West as well, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith claimed in *The meaning and end of religion* (Smith, 1991; first published 1963). Cf. Rajeev Bhargava: 'this idea of separate religious systems to which each of us owe distinct allegiance is not a natural idea, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the great historian of comparative religions so brilliantly showed. Asian faiths, the great faiths of the East, are not and can become religions only with cataclysmic distortion' (Bhargava, 2010: 313). I would, however, resist the use of the term 'faith' as an adequate alternative to 'religion' in the case of Asian traditions, even though in Smith's usage the term does not mean adherence to a specific creed (see below).

⁸ Other academic disciplines in India also do this, of course, in different ways. Many Indian historians, for example, trace the ways in which religio-communal identities have been constructed, enforced and mobilized in opposition to one another, and/or draw attention to the fluidity and interpenetration of lived religious groupings that these processes have sought to erase (e.g. Oberoi, 1994; Mayaram, 1997; Dalmia, 1997, among many others).

risk, I believe, of provoking violently defensive reactions from religious fundamentalists than it might if conducted within programs of world religions or religious studies.

I now want to flesh out these claims more fully by examining the relation between faith, identity and truth in constituting the nature of religion, in orientation to the Indian context.

RELIGION AND THE CONCEPT OF FAITH

In much of both popular and academic discourse, 'religion' is closely associated with 'faith' and often taken to be synonymous with it, religions routinely being referred to as 'faiths'. 'Faith', understood as trusting belief of some form, is certainly the main target of 'new atheists' such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens, who have been highly influential in generating world-wide discussions about religion, whatever one may think of the quality of their knowledge and arguments. Dawkins sees all religions as grounded in faith, and an internet search finds these lines quoted time and again: 'Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is the belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence' (Dawkins)⁹. Sam Harris' most well-known book on the subject is called *The end of faith*, and like Dawkins his critique of religion construes it as belief in the absence of evidence. Christopher Hitchens claims that:

Faith is the surrender of the mind; it's the surrender of reason, it's the surrender of the only thing that makes us different from other mammals. It's our need to believe, and to surrender our skepticism and our reason, our yearning to discard that and put all our trust or faith in someone or something, that is the sinister thing to me (retrieved from: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Christopher_Hitchens).

These lines, too, are widely circulated via internet sources.¹⁰ On this understanding, 'faith' is opposed to 'reason', following the basic progressivist Enlightenment schema according to which immature submission to authority is, or should be, replaced by employment of our own cognitive powers guided honestly by the best available scientific evidence.

Scholarly engagement with the category of religion within Western philosophy tends also to connect it with faith, as a specific form of belief. This connection is starkly evident in discussions about the role of religion within public

⁹ Richard Dawkins, Untitled Lecture, Edinburgh Science Festival, 1992.

¹⁰ For example: <http://www.atheistpublic.com/gallery/christopher-hitchens-faith-surrender-mind>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbfEme4DZYk>; <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2011/12/hitchens-remembered-through-15-of-his-most-memorable-quotes/> (15.03.2015)

life, especially debates about whether religious arguments and statements can be permitted within political speech. The reason religious speech is considered to pose a problem for public reasoning by political philosophers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas is precisely that it relies on revelation and authority, thereby making argumentative moves that not all citizens will be able to recognize as valid. For example, in his recent work, Habermas argues for allowing religious discourse in 'informal' public spheres where opinions are formed because, he suggests, religion provides rich semantic resources for addressing modern problems. But he still disallows religious reasons from 'formal' public spheres such as parliaments and courts on the grounds that such reasons cannot be accepted by all citizens to whom coercive policies resulting from political deliberation would apply, and that is because religion involves faith (Habermas, 2008). To be sure, 'faith' can be interpreted in a variety of ways, and is certainly not always equivalent to the kind of crude belief without evidence that defines it in the minds of the new atheists. Insofar as it involves, at any level, recourse to revelation or authority as a basis for belief, however, faith is perceived as contrasting with the method of reason, and questions about its status are almost always engaged in Western discussions about religion. Habermas is typical in speaking of the 'certainties of faith' and 'the believer' (Habermas, 2013: 375) in the context of his analysis of religion.

Yet 'faith' as a form of belief is not central to all forms of religion. If it is supposed to rest on trust in divinely ordained authority, such as a sacred text or ecclesiastical office, then 'faith' is not a prominent feature of many Indian religious traditions and cannot be used to define them *as* religion. Interestingly, Habermas often uses Karl Jaspers' thesis of a shift in religious thinking during the 'Axial' period, naming Buddhism as one of the new religions that represents this shift, but without noticing that in its original Indian form, Buddhist thought did not accept the authority of any sacred text and did not call for 'faith'. At one point, he writes that

[...] without the appeal to revelation or to some form of contact of the believer with the divine, be it through prayer, ascetic practice, or meditation, 'faith' would lose its specific character, namely, its rootedness in religious modes of dealing with *Heil* and *Unheil* [weal and woe] (Habermas, 2013: 385).

This statement is attempting to be inclusive, but the attempt fuses together under the label of 'faith' what are actually quite disparate systems of thought and practice, assimilating them to a model of 'religion' based on Protestant Christianity.

Now, 'faith' can mean many different things, and there are certainly counterparts in Indian traditions to some of the senses this term has within Western discourses on religion. For instance, when Wilfred Cantwell Smith uses

the term ‘faith’ as an alternative to the modern idea of ‘religion’, which he criticizes, he does not mean belief in authoritative revelation, let alone creedal commitment to a set of doctrines defining ‘Christianity’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Hinduism’ or some other bounded community (Smith, 1991: 15, 176). He means, rather, ‘an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person; the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative or real’ (Smith, 1991: 156). In this sense of the term — where it denotes an openness to and correlative experience of the transcendent, or piety, or devotion, or, in a theistic context, ‘an act that *I* make, myself, naked before God’ (Smith, 1991: 191) — ‘faith’ can be seen as an important element in many varieties of Indian religion. There are also counterparts within Indian religion to the notion of faith as a kind of trust, whether in a teacher or indeed in the words of a text, such as within Brahminical traditions, including the orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, which respect the authority of the Vedas.

The term *śraddhā* is, in this context, the closest equivalent to ‘faith’, and there are many scholarly discussions of the multiple meanings of this term. In *The nature of faith in the Śāṅkaran Vedānta tradition*, Yoshitsugu Sawai examines the various senses of *śraddhā* in Sankara’s thought, where one of these is ‘a judgement that affirms Vedic teachings’ (Sawai, 1987: 20). Rubens Turci, in his study of *śraddhā* in the *Bhagavadgītā*, writes that it is ‘both intellectual and mental’, and ‘combines in itself the unflinching devotion and a deep-rooted and clear understanding’ (Turci, 2015: 11). Being a form of devotion that gives rise to trust, the term can in some contexts be defined as ‘trusting judgement, or affirmative conviction — *astikya-buddhi*, a Vedic ritualistic state of mind’, which is, however, Turci contends, ‘totally different from later theistic forms of “faith”’ (Turci, 2015: 4). Turci draws here on Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s analysis of the term in *Faith and belief* (1979), noting Smith’s divergence from Paul Hacker, who, in line with his own Catholic understanding of *fides*, interprets *śraddhā* as primarily the acceptance of a doctrine (Turci, 2015: 6–7). Bret Davis rightly points out that in Buddhist traditions, on the other hand, *śraddhā* and its translations in East Asian languages applies only to the beginning stages of practice, the expectation being that what is first held on trust will eventually be confirmed through the experiences to which the practice leads. The ‘faith’ required here is, moreover, a matter of trust in a teacher and teachings, not in the revelations of a transcendent being (Davis, 2006: 7–8). *Śraddhā* does involve an attitude of trust, then, and can include intellectual assent to the authority of teachers and teachings. But in none of these senses does *śraddhā* name belief in the creed of a particular religion (Rao, 1971: 186–187), nor is it opposed to rational reflection within a schema where it would define religion as such in contradistinction to philosophy. As Krishna Sharma points out, the Western separation of religion and philosophy that positions religion as ‘a matter of faith and emotion and not of knowledge and reason’ (Sharma, 1987: 9)

simply does not fit the landscape of Indian traditions. *Astika* schools are still schools of philosophy, and yet they are part of what we now call the religion of Hinduism. Conversely, *nāstika* schools are still religious, involving their own forms of trust, devotion, practice and experience.

Habermas, whom I cited above, is hardly alone in supposing that faith in the sense of belief in a special revelation is essential to the definition of religion. Indeed, the interpretation of religion as defined by faith in this sense is broadly operative within the ‘world religions’ paradigm.¹¹ This paradigm includes Asian traditions, but is sometimes insufficiently cognizant of the guiding assumptions about the nature of ‘religion’ that form the basis for identifying religions and understanding the differences between them. I make this point not in order to enter debates about whether or not there is such a thing as ‘religion’ — debates that can quickly become tedious and sterile — but in order to highlight one difference between indigenous Indian and Western traditions that gives the critical study of religious truth claims a different status in the two cases. Philosophical analysis and evaluation of its claims has been a central part of Christian theology, but has been conceived as separate from the mode of belief that is faith. ‘Philosophical theology’ and ‘natural theology’ have a relation to faith, and historically there are various positions on what this relation should be. They are not themselves a part of faith, though, and faith, understood in some fashion, has been considered essential to the definition of Christianity, its doctrinal content being fixed and enforced by ecclesiastical authority.

Western philosophers since the Middle Ages have generally worked with this distinction between faith and reason. When in 1793 Immanuel Kant writes *Religion within the limits of reason alone* (Kant, 1960), he is ‘translating’ the ethical content of Christianity into a form that he still calls ‘religion’, but which is distinguished from faith or revelation. Jürgen Habermas, on the other hand, describes such translation as secular precisely because it does not rely on revelation (Habermas, 2013). Martin Heidegger argues that ‘there is no such thing as a Christian philosophy’, because philosophy as metaphysics asks, most fundamentally, ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ whereas:

Anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth has the answer to the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ even before it is asked: everything that is, except God himself, has been created by Him. God himself, the increate creator, ‘is’. One who holds to such faith can in a way participate in the asking of our question, but he cannot really question without ceasing to be a believer and taking all the consequences of such a step (Heidegger, 1987: 6–7).

¹¹ For one account of the historical construction of this paradigm, see Masuzawa, 2005.

Heidegger's very sharp distinction between the spheres of faith and questioning may be debatable, but the distinction itself is perfectly intelligible within a Western context, and Heidegger's position is a possible one.

This is not the case in relation to Indian 'religious' traditions, whose very core contains 'philosophical' argumentation. As I suggested earlier, it makes perfect sense to, speak, for example, of Vedāntic or Jaina or Buddhist philosophy. I am not here just alluding to the fact that, as Amartya Sen has underlined (Sen, 2006), the history of Indian thought is characterized by debate and critical evaluation, contrary to some Western stereotypes. Rather, I am pointing out that Indian religion cannot be separated from philosophy through the distinction between faith and reason that has operated to separate these spheres of culture in the West. The *Upanishads* might be considered 'religious' texts, and they are so, but they contain reflections and arguments about the self, the universe, and God that are recognizably 'philosophical'. The same is true of Buddhist and Jain writings, which oppose themselves to what we now define as 'Hindu' positions in large measure through argumentative disagreement rather than a new revelation to which believers are called to adhere by faith. While Buddhism and Jainism do have founders and highly revered sages whose authority rests on special enlightenment — Gautama Buddha, Mahavira — following an enlightened teacher is not the same as faith in divinely revealed doctrine. Again, the central oral and literary traditions through which this enlightened message has been communicated have included 'philosophical' reflection. While a certain trust in authority is required to follow the path that leads to enlightenment or liberation or salvation, there is no religious duty of belief, or sanction for disbelief, of the sort that has been associated with the requirement of faith in the history of Christianity. The very phrase 'religious believer' thus seems misplaced in relation to these traditions.

At the same time, one of the features often thought to distinguish Western and Indian 'philosophy' is the latter's emphasis on varieties of transformative experience that do not fit Western models of 'reason'. This would include experiences of unification, emptiness, or bliss belonging to states like *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*. I will return to this point later, but I am in any case not claiming that the truth claims within Indian traditions offering wisdom or enlightenment or liberation are entirely amenable to rational argumentation or are the product of such argumentation. I am claiming that rational inquiry is an essential part of these traditions, and that faith, understood as a mode of belief opposed to rational inquiry, is not. The result is that 'philosophy' is 'internal' to 'religion' in India — using these ill-fitting terms for lack of a better option — a situation that cannot help but be reflected in the curriculum of philosophy departments at Indian universities.

This fact makes the critical evaluation of religious truth claims not only possible but unavoidable in the study of Indian philosophy, as there is no way

to understand the history of these traditions without rehearsing the debates between them, and those debates are internal to what have come to be constituted as 'religions'. This involves more than the claim that religious people can also be critical. In relation to the academic study of Hinduism, Maya Warrior, for instance, problematizes the binary between academic scholars positioned as 'outsiders' to the religious practitioners who are supposed to be 'insiders' to the critical gaze of academic study. 'The assumption that insiders are uncritical is the first problem', she notes, for 'it does not allow for the possibility of the critical insider who has the ability to achieve analytical distance from her or his own faith tradition in order to critique it' (Warrior, 2012: 47). She proposes further that 'it can readily be argued that religion or faith has its own rationality, every bit as valid as the rationality of academic scholarship' (Warrior, 2012: 47). These are fair points, but I am arguing that since Indian religious traditions include philosophical argumentation, even speaking in such terms is problematic. For it means that these traditions are not properly described as 'faiths' with their 'own rationality', and one does not necessarily need to 'achieve analytical distance' from them in order to engage critically with their claims. Their own traditions evolved in part through critical discourses, and engagement with this aspect of Indian religion cannot be conceived in terms of being outside or inside a 'faith'. Religion is of course much more than philosophy, even if one conceives 'philosophy' very broadly, and I am by no means suggesting that the philosophical interpretation and evaluation of claims advanced in various Indian traditions exhausts the study of religion in India. But it is an important component of that study, and can bring to bear critical perspectives on the subject that challenge the faith/reason binary.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

The discipline of philosophy can also play a role in countering the freezing of religious boundaries. It might be thought that the attempt to do so contravenes the principles of the academic study of religion, which is supposed to be neutral, examining religion rather than attempting to influence its development. Academic scholarship on religion often has a critical intent, however, which does not lessen its objectivity, and publication of such scholarship frequently constitutes, in its effects, an intervention in religion. For example, many scholars of religion in India have drawn attention to the fluidity of the boundaries between religious communities in India, underlining the fact that, historically, there has been much overlap, borrowing, and blurriness between religious identities and that such identities have not always been defined in exclusivist terms. They have also traced the construction of religious boundaries — the title of Harjot Oberoi's book (Oberoi, 1994) — since, especially, the beginning

of the nineteenth century, which has crystallized into communities whose content and borders are regulated in various ways. The backlash against Oberoi's study of the historical relation between Sikhs and Hindus, which claims that the division between these identity categories was not always as clear as it is today, illustrates one form of regulation. There is manifestly a strong desire, on the part of some members and leaders of Indian religious communities, to strengthen and maintain a definite and exclusivist identity for themselves, linked to narratives of historical unity and difference. These narratives work in tandem. The claim that Sikhs — or Buddhists or Jains or Hindus — have always had a particular identity defined by a firmly delineated set of texts, beliefs and practices, or a common culture, or a clear line of transmission or even ancestral lineage serves to buttress the claim that the community in question is a recognizably single entity, which in turn is deployed for various political purposes. Consequently, historical scholarship demonstrating the opposite is experienced as especially objectionable, provoking hostile reactions and attempts at suppression.

No religious community in India, moreover, has been immune to processes tending to construct, distinguish and freeze identity. This is true of majority as well as minority identities, an important example being the formation of 'Hinduism' as a religion, and the forging of the ideology of 'Hindutva' in the crucible of ethno-cultural nationalism. While this ideology seeks to position Muslims especially as 'other' to India, conservative reform movements within Indian Islam, such as the Deobandis and Barelwis, struggle to construct internally uniform, exclusionary identities for Muslims, discouraging eclecticism and mingling (Alam, 2014). A very different case is that of Ambedkar's successful efforts to revive (a highly modified form of) Buddhism in India as the religion of Dalits, which made use of a constructed historical narrative relating the ancient oppression of one group (Buddhist Dalits) by another (Hindu Brahmins). Such public representations of religious identity in India have often been guided by the goal of political recognition, as legislative measures designed to protect and ensure equality for minorities have the effect of incentivizing the construction of clear identities and boundaries. Consider the case of the Jain community in India, which has had to present itself as distinct from Hindus in order to obtain federal minority status, awarded to it in January of 2014 (Vallely, 2014). The motives for such representations of religious identity often include legitimate concerns about marginalization and assimilation on the part of minorities. But the fact remains, as Anthony Appiah remarks, that sometimes acts of recognition are like the gaze of the Medusa, turning to stone the identities that are their objects (Appiah, 2005: 110).

The result, in India, has been a gradual ossification of the once more dynamic and evolving content of religious thought and practice within various traditions, as well as the erection of barriers against the syncretism that has

been characteristic of religious life on the subcontinent. What emerges also from these processes is a concept of religion as primarily a matter of community identity, with religions neatly divided into packages of belief and practice that an individual inherits by birth. By exposing such processes, disciplines like history and sociology can and do play an important role in unsettling this picture of religion and religions in South Asia, precisely through objective research that demonstrates its historical, and to a lesser but still very substantial extent still current, falsity. Philosophy can participate in this demonstration through history of ideas, examining the debates and disagreements among various schools of thought, the complexity of their mutual entanglements, and the many shades of opinion across the so-called 'religions'. In doing so, it also, however, calls into question the very idea of 'religion' as constituted entirely by communal identity. Because the major indigenous wisdom traditions of South Asia did not distinguish between 'religion' and 'philosophy', the critical evaluation of their truth claims — about the self, the universe, knowledge and so forth — is internal to them, as I have noted, a fact that actually meshes uneasily with the notion of religion purely as identity.

In India, religious identity is established by birth to a much greater extent than in Western countries and is less firmly tied to belief. Having been born in Punjab, for instance, I am sometimes asked in India or by people of Indian origin whether my family is Hindu or Sikh. The correct answer, which I duly give, is that we are Hindu. It would make no sense to the questioner if I were to respond that I am an atheist, or that I am uncertain of this or that view associated with Hinduism, because the question has nothing to do with belief. The question is about identity, of a form that is not up to me unless I make a decision to move from one identity to another, through, for instance, conversion or marriage. To a certain extent, religion cannot help but be a matter of identity established initially by birth, given that it involves more than individual belief. Other central components of religion necessarily situate a person within forms of shared practice, such as worship, festivals, rites, and pilgrimages. These are necessarily the practices of a community, into which one is born or to which one converts. But religion does also involve belief, and unless the religious community to which one belongs embraces a doctrine of religious pluralism, a condition that is the exception rather than the norm, this means that individuals are also born into communities of belief. And there is something paradoxical, I would suggest, about the notion of believing, of holding for true, which is what it means to believe, on the basis of a community membership that is established by birth. The paradox is particularly acute in India, where religious membership is decidedly linked to a community identity determined by birth even for legal purposes, and yet many of the traditions on which religious communities are based arose and evolved at least partly through critical reflection, in dialogue with interlocutors holding contrary positions.

The policing of religious boundaries by communal actors in India reflects the paradox well. It is ostensibly focused on identity, rather than the truth of a set of beliefs, but beliefs are at play in defining identity. The case filed against Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus* (Doniger, 2009) appeals to a section of the Indian penal code that has to do with insulting religious feelings, and the agitation against Ramanujan's essay is about a perceived threat to the unity of a (constructed) Hindu identity. Those engaged in such forms of protest do seek to protect certain beliefs, but they do so by positioning those beliefs as markers of a 'Hindu' identity that is outraged when they are challenged. Yet these interventions take place in a context where, historically, indigenous religious traditions (and claims of indigeneity are central to Hindutva ideology) have not been shaped through an idea of faith that would define religious membership by acts of belief. Thus, belonging is not decided by belief in this case; rather, belief is supposed to be determined by belonging. We are Hindus, the account runs, and Hindus believe x, the implicit premises being that Hinduism is a religion and religions are systems of belief. At the same time, though, religion is also in India a matter of community identity, which is not chosen but inherited. Thus, an individual is supposed to be born into a system of belief held to be true on the basis of identity, although the logic of the concepts of belief and of identity are quite different, and although reflection and disagreement played crucial roles in giving rise to religious identities in the first place.

By tracing the history of reflection and disagreement within Indian traditions, the discipline of philosophy can help to expose and unsettle the 'belief by belonging' mode of interpreting religion. It can also provide an alternative to this problematic (in truth incoherent) mode of being religious, by continuing the tradition of interpreting and evaluating metaphysical and epistemological theses that has been part and parcel of Indian religious thought for so much of its history. This is still an objective enquiry because it involves not 'confession' but reflection and evaluation based on reason and experience. It is nonetheless normative, but as I have been arguing, the conception of academic study of religion as excluding critical evaluation is a questionable one, whose distinctions do not fit philosophy as it has existed in India or the West.

REASON AND TRUTH

One objection that might be posed to my argument as presented so far is that, while Indian religious traditions may not centre on faith, they do, as I have acknowledged, involve forms of experience not amenable to rational inquiry, in which case philosophical reflection can engage with only a very limited aspect of these traditions. Another equally serious objection is that Indian philosophy has been slanted towards the largely Sanskrit literary traditions that have now

become members of the 'world religions' group. It has left out the 'little traditions', the local village traditions followed by large numbers of people in India, or relegated these to the realm of custom and superstition, thereby reinforcing questionable hierarchies of truth. Furthermore, since a major portion of the Sanskrit traditions that form the canon of Indian philosophy are Brahminical ones, they may be viewed as the intellectual products of an oppressive elite, and even as nothing more than ideology serving the dominating interests of that elite.

Responding to these objections requires reflection on the nature of philosophical enquiry, as well as on the shape of philosophy curricula in India. It also requires that some decisions be made about these matters, for neither the methodology nor the subjects of philosophy are fixed in stone. Philosophy is usually thought to involve 'rational' analysis and evaluation, but the meaning of 'reason' is far from obvious and admits of considerable variation. To be sure, many of the analyses and arguments presented by the classical schools of thought in ancient and medieval India — orthodox, Jain, Buddhist — fit quite easily under even an unmodified modern Western understanding of philosophy and philosophical reasoning. This is also true of the writings of many modern Indian philosophers who engage with these schools of thought in dialogue with Western philosophy, such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, K.C. Bhattacharya and B.K. Matilal, not to mention the numerous contemporary scholars of Indian philosophy who have emphasized and examined its rational character: Jitendra Nath Mohanty, Johannes Bronkhorst, and Jonardon Ganeri, to name but a few eminent examples.

There are, however, other elements within Indian traditions that are less easily assimilated to a particular modern Western concept of philosophy. One of these is the fact that Indian philosophy has rarely been purely theoretical; it is usually linked in some fashion to existential and soteriological goals, with metaphysical and epistemological views having profound implications for life and liberation. In truth, though, it is only a narrow modern spectrum of Western philosophy that divorces concerns about the art of living from the idea of philosophy. Ancient Greek philosophy did not, and in this respect (as well as others) more closely resembles ancient Indian philosophy than either of these resemble, say, modern analytic philosophy. Much continental philosophy, moreover, has retained the link between reflection and life, as well as including a broader range of styles and methodologies in its understanding of what counts as 'philosophy'.

Indian thought has also sometimes been excluded from philosophy as a rational enterprise on the grounds that it involves a species of 'mysticism'. The underlying judgement is that the Indian discourses in question make truth claims based on extraordinary and essentially private experiences, which cannot be intersubjectively verified or subjected to rational scrutiny. Claiming insight

on the basis of such experiences might be different from having faith in revelation, but these modes of believing, it might be argued, have in common an appeal to a non-rational basis for belief. This places them outside the scope of philosophy, except as the special object of philosophy of religion, for which examination of religious or mystical experience is a topic.

Philosophy is useful for analyzing and assessing varieties of experience generally, but I would also challenge the interpretation of certain kinds of experience as ‘mystical’ in a way that opposes them to ‘reason’ and in so doing connects them with religion rather than philosophy. In truth, although I am the author of a book with the term ‘mystical’ in its title (Sikka, 1997), I have increasingly come to avoid this term because it covers far too many radically disparate phenomena, and because it is often deployed as a way of dismissing experiences deserving of closer analysis, including ones contained within both Indian and Western philosophy. I am referring here not to all experiences that might be termed ‘mystical’ — there is in my view no such coherent set — but to a particular type that is in fact slowly but increasingly being distinguished from the exclusive provenance of ‘religion’ in Western discourses. This type includes, but is not limited to, experiences of pure consciousness, or witness consciousness, or the dissolution of our usual sense of being a bounded self.¹² Describing these kinds of experiences as ‘mystical’, thereby positioning as non-rational and thus also extra-philosophical any discourse that might be connected to them, mischaracterizes the nature of Indian (and arguably not only Indian)¹³ ideas in which such experiences play a role.

Consider the debates within Indian philosophy about whether there exists a single, unified self. Figures such as Nāgārjuna and Śaṅkara articulate opposing positions on this issue and are identified, respectively, as ‘Buddhist’ and ‘Hindu’ on the world religions map. It is not true, however, that the positions which situate them differently on this map arise from ‘mystical’ intuition of a sort that is inaccessible to reason. After all, they present arguments, for and against the real existence of the self, a doctrinal difference that has been central to the distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism in India. Introspective examination, along with ascetic forms of life, are considered to be important components of the process that leads to insight into the truth of self or non-self within different schools. But their claims about this matter, which

¹² Such experiences have been confessed by no less militant an atheist than Sam Harris (Harris, 2014). Cf. Forman, 1990; Siderits, Thompson, & Zahavi, 2011.

¹³ I am thinking here of Western ‘mystical’ thinkers like Meister Eckhart, as well as, on some readings, contemporary philosophers such as Heidegger and even Husserl. There are also interpretations of Plato that highlight the religious and mystical dimensions of his thought, such as those of J.N. Mohanty and John Niemeyer Findlay, who also drew on Plato in developing his own position on the essential place of the ‘mystical’ in human understanding and experience (Findlay, 1966; Findlay, 1967).

actually form a complex range of views rather than dividing sharply into a self/no-self binary, are not based on appeal to an inaccessible experience about which there can be no reasoned dispute. There is still a difference between theoretical reflection and experience, but a distinction between experience and theory is something quite different from a distinction between reason and 'mysticism'.

Again, because of the character of these indigenous traditions, the discipline of philosophy in India is, I am suggesting, better situated than its Western counterpart to examine and assess the truth claims of at least some Indian religions in a manner that is continuous with their own reflective practices. The distinction between 'philosophy' and 'religion' is relatively new to the subcontinent, being a feature of its modern history in interaction with Western ideas. In the modern West, the distinction is a product of its specific history: of the interactions and tensions between its Greek and biblical sources and the political struggles between Church and state. The conceptual configurations resulting from that history, however, have shaped the course of intellectual and cultural life in many non-Western nations as well, and centrally determine the self-conception and methodology of academic disciplines. Thus, the discipline of philosophy in India also understands itself to be a 'rational' enterprise, and distinguishes itself from religion. But in comparison with philosophers trained exclusively in Western ideas and approaches, those conversant with Indian traditions are less likely immediately to interpret as 'religious' modes of thought that do not conform to a very specific and historically contingent shape of reason. The sympathetic and yet critical space for engagement with the claims of religion that this difference leaves open is valuable in a context where religions in India have themselves increasingly come to conform to Western models, a process embraced and fostered by the interests that O'Connell, for one, identifies as posing the most serious barrier to the academic study of religion in India generally.

Turning to the question of philosophy's curriculum, it is true that the discipline is by nature language-oriented and therefore unavoidably focused on literary traditions. Its orientation is consequently slanted towards the 'great' traditions, and the 'little' traditions in India may well be better represented through anthropological, sociological and literary studies. Many crucial aspects of religion lie outside the province of philosophy in any case, and I am not arguing for a privileged or exclusive role for philosophy in the academic study of religion. I am trying only to isolate what I believe are its specific merits as one among a group of disciplines within whose parameters such study can be undertaken, especially in the absence of Religious Studies departments that incorporate a variety of approaches. Concerns about the representation of little traditions in India tend to target more than issues of adequate coverage, though, and connect with critiques of intellectual discourses that, it is argued, reinforce

class and caste hierarchies. While the dividing line and relation between ‘little’ and ‘great’ traditions is not clear-cut (Padma, 2013: 30–45), sociological and historical studies have generally connected the former with lower castes, noting the divergences of their practices, gods and worship from ‘philosophical Hinduism’ (Padma, 2013: 33). Moreover, the blurred boundaries and syncretism that are often noted as salutary features of Indian religion, reflecting lived practices of peaceful co-existence, are often contrasted with upper caste literate forms of religion and the textual sources linked to them, particularly those of Brahminical Hinduism. If ‘Indian philosophy’ consists primarily of these texts, it might be objected, then it functions to reinforce, not challenge, both caste hierarchy and the divisions between communal groupings that have been a source of serious violence in modern India.

Uncritical and politically unselfconscious engagement with the Brahminical corpus of Indian philosophy is a danger, but that is of course not the only way of approaching this corpus. Philosophical approaches can and should be aware of the place of such texts within social hierarchies, highlighting rather than marginalizing their inegalitarian dimensions. Philosophy curricula also can and do include historical as well as modern perspectives critical of these hierarchies, from ancient Buddhist scriptures to the debates on caste between Ambedkar and Gandhi. In addition, ‘reason’ and ‘philosophy’ need not and generally are not construed as narrowly in India as they are in Western disciplinary practices of philosophy. Philosophy may be inescapably oriented towards literary traditions, but it can incorporate a wide range of reflective discourses. For instance, Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore are typically represented in the Indian canon of philosophy, although neither was an academic philosopher and isolating the philosophical content of their thought requires some reconstruction. Even Kabir’s poetic reflections on the true meanings of purity and pollution, which challenge Brahminical interpretations and expose them as hypocritical, can be counted as critical reasoning of a sort, for such reasoning does not have to go ‘all the way down’ to be valid; reasoning is always contextual, holding certain premises steady while challenging others. Kabir might not normally be considered a philosopher himself, but insofar as his ideas belong to a particular history of religious/philosophical (again, I conflate these terms deliberately) contestation, they can readily be examined within the discipline of philosophy as an academic subject.¹⁴

¹⁴ Challenging a modern Western schema that distinguishes between ‘religion’ as devotion to a personal deity from ‘philosophy’ as purely intellectual assent to positions like monism (Sharma, 1987: 8–9), Krishna Sharma describes Kabir as a *nirguṇa bhakta*, whose devotionalism is monistic and cannot be understood as ‘the antithesis of the Advaita Vedanta and as a path opposed to that of *jñāna*’ (Sharma, 1987: 162). She also notes that ‘although Kabir had scant regard for scholastic learning, he had a highly intellectual and rational approach to religious dogmas and conventions’ and that ‘Kabir’s concept of *jñāna* includes the intellectual faculty of discrimination or *viveka* which he regards as the chief guide in spiritual quest’ (Sharma, 1987: 169).

My central point, however, is that although religion is not only a set of beliefs, it does include beliefs and beliefs by their very nature assert truth claims.¹⁵ The assessment of such truth claims has been an important part of Indian religious traditions in their evolution and relation to one another, and, I am arguing, should continue as a component of intellectual engagement with religion. Philosophy can play a specific role within such engagement, assessing metaphysical and epistemological views in a way that it has in fact always done as a methodology internal to Indian 'religious' thought (a fact that, from the horizon of Western categories, problematizes the characterization of this thought as 'religious'). In the lecture by O'Connell to which I referred at the beginning of this paper, he commends programs emphasizing inter-faith dialogue and premised on the view that true religion promotes peace and toleration. But he also warns of 'a risk that students' and even teachers' perceptiveness of the complexities and ambiguities in religion may be dulled or inhibited' through such approaches, which may result in 'a tendency to rely on platitudes rather than reasoned evidence-based arguments and conclusions, to confuse research with edification and advocacy' (O'Connell, 2001). Interestingly, O'Connell's worry is echoed in an observation by researchers conducting a study of Religion Education programs in British schools, who note that many of the participants in their study

[...] expressed concerns which echo Stern's (2007) critique of a tolerance of 'nice' things: treating all religions as forms of civic order — drawing attention, for example,

¹⁵ It is often claimed that Indian religious traditions, especially Hinduism, have in the main emphasized 'orthopraxy' over 'orthodoxy', implying that right belief is not central to these traditions (*e.g.* Thapar, 2007). However, while it is true that holding 'right belief' is not emphasized within Indian religion in the way that it is within Christianity, as I have been arguing myself in this article, most practices are still based on beliefs of some sort. These may not be explicit, and those who participate in religious practices may not be able to give a sophisticated theological account of their beliefs. But that does not mean we should suppose they have no views at all about the point of their practices — about why it is obligatory or efficacious for them to perform a certain puja, for instance, or go on a pilgrimage to a particular shrine. Some have argued, on the other hand, that ritual is prior to belief, and Frits Staal goes so far as to claim that 'ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal' (Staal, 1996: 131). However, such interpretations, universally applied, fail to explain criticisms and abandonments of ritual on the grounds that they are ineffective superstitions or indeed meaningless. Yet rejections of ritual on such grounds are common enough within societies where the rituals at issue are being performed (India is as good an example as any), and presuppose that their performance is supposed to have a point. Such challenges are also not a product of modernity; witness the criticisms of sacrificial rites attributed to the Cārvakas in the *Prabodhacandrodaya* (Misra, 1988: 41). This is not to deny that rituals have an expressive and symbolic aspect that may in some cases exhaust their meaning, as when religious ceremonies marking important life stages are performed by individuals who do not possess any religious beliefs. And it is true that rituals may be performed in the absence of meaning — but 'empty ritual' is not the definition of ritual, nor is it, I believe, the norm.

to the presence of texts approximating to the Golden Rule in all major world faiths, while eliding the very different metaphysical and teleological bases from which they are derived, 'leaving public spaces free of truth but implacably tolerant' (Conroy *et al.*, 2013: 119).

These remarks are directed towards descriptive accounts of religion rather than the evaluation of truth claims on which I have been focusing. But accurate descriptions of the history and present condition of religion in India and elsewhere make it difficult to sustain the claim that 'true' religion is peaceful and tolerant. The core claims of many, perhaps most, religious traditions are not pluralistic. Religious pluralism is itself a substantive position, based on views that not everyone shares and that need to be elaborated and defended. Without such elaboration and defense, there is a risk of incoherence, for instance when attitudes of equality and mutual respect for all religions are promoted at the social level although such attitudes conflict with the core views of one or more of the religions involved. Social contracts founded on contradictions of this sort are inherently unstable.

In addition, strategies wanting to affirm the goodness of 'true' religion against its false distortions are often forced to compromise historical truth, downplaying or interpreting fancifully unsavoury elements that appear to belong to the central teachings of a given tradition. Caste hierarchy and gender inequality are obvious examples, and in many cases oppressive and unjustifiable practices like these are rooted in metaphysical and soteriological views legitimated by core religious texts and institutions. There is no alternative, in such cases, to engaging critically with the views themselves, and that means with the central tenets of religious traditions. I would argue that it is dangerous not to do so, and dangerous to establish a social habit of eschewing critical evaluation of religious views under a prescription to 'respect' all religions. Civility and respect for persons are important virtues of dialogue, but they should not lead to a general ban on forms of critique that are oriented towards truth. That orientation, if repressed, can return in the form of absolutistic claims that then feel no need to justify themselves in the face of disagreement (Sikka, 2010). Philosophical reasoning can in general help to foster this orientation in relation to religion. In India, I have been arguing, the academic discipline of philosophy has some advantages in doing so over its Western counterparts because of its cultural location within Indian traditions of thought and the shape 'philosophy' has assumed as a result.¹⁶

¹⁶ I have deliberately refrained from giving a prescriptive definition of 'philosophy' in this essay, preferring an open-ended conception that emerges from the examples I have presented. Based on these examples, one might tentatively propose that, among other characteristics, philosophy can be said to work primarily with concepts and arguments (rather than metaphors, images or poetic pronouncements), and is primarily based on experience and reasoning (rather

Traditions of philosophical reasoning are not separate or external to religious thought in India; the discipline works with a broader and more flexible conception of 'reason'; and it contains self-transformative practices aiming for illumination, wisdom and liberation. Philosophy in India is also a long-established indigenous tradition of reflection that can function in relative safety and independence from communal interests. As a result, the discipline can help to keep alive argumentative and truth-oriented discourses about the subject matters of religion, challenging the notion of religions as communities of fixed belief. In fact, philosophy can help individuals to negotiate intelligently social processes leading, on the one hand, to the ossification of religion in the form of exclusionary identities, and, on the other, to a relativism of consumerist preference which many find unsatisfying. Globally, it is striking how at the same time that religious identities are hardening in some places, they are breaking down in others. The latter trend is especially evident in Western countries as measured by phenomena like unchurched, the rise of 'spirituality', and new religious movements. We can all agree that in such climates encouraging tolerance and harmony is a valuable goal. The best way of achieving it, however, is not to bracket questions of truth, but to foster respectful, open-minded modes of critical reflection and dialogue.

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than authority or revelation). However, it is not easy, and perhaps one should not try, to give a precise definition of a discipline that includes, for instance, the *Upanishads*, Plato, Nāgārjuna, Śāṅkara, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Tagore, Heidegger, Matilal, Quine, and Foucault, to name only Indian and European thinkers.

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