



The Advancement of Dharma:

A Discussion Paper for Faith Leaders

Presented By:

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Religion.

It has become a word more likely to engender disrespect and fear than a sense of communion with the Divine, of a system of belief that works for the good of both individuals and society. For many, religion is no longer a way of life that provides moral values, encourages us to share peace with our neighbours and allows us to rest in the certain knowledge that God is watching over us, guiding our steps through life, waiting until that beautiful day when he will call us back home.

Instead, according to a survey released as I write, religion is seen as harmful by nearly half the population. This news comes in the wake of round-the-clock media coverage of 'religious' wars and a series of books attacking religion and the very idea of God. Indeed, in some sections of the media and for many in public life, attacking, ridiculing and demonising religion has become not just a new national sport but also a professional sport for many.

The result has been a backlash by faith communities who, feeling the heat of such attacks and knowing the strength and splendour and intrinsic good in their faiths, understandably fight back. Sadly, attacks from some more fundamentalist quarters have not been limited to secular authorities but have extended to other faith communities too. Instead of showing solidarity with other believers and working with them to counter the spectre of secular fundamentalism, they put each other under siege, re-doubling their missionary efforts to win as many converts as possible to their own particular brand of dogma.

Then the wheel turns full circle; far from increasing spiritual understanding and compassion in our world as must surely be our aim, new converts argue passionately that theirs alone is the 'true religion' and, in seeking to force their beliefs on others, intolerance and sometimes violence grows and they play into the secularists hands.

This is why I argue in this paper for exploring 'Dharma,' the Buddhist, Jain, Hindu and Sikh concept of 'righteous duty' to oneself, to others and to God. Dharma, when truly integrated into an individual's life, respects differences. This is a practice and attitude I feel there is an urgent need for right now. To this end, this paper calls for Dharma to be put back at the heart of the Indogenic faith traditions, and asks whether there is something the Abrahamic faiths can take from the idea.

It is not my wish to denigrate in any way the Abrahamic faiths, simply to speak from within my own faith tradition to explore a potential way forward that may bring us out of an era of religious conflict and intolerance and into a golden age in which we can all celebrate God on earth, in peace.

Exploring Dharma

Hinduism is a 'Dharma;' a word that all the religions emanating from the Indian subcontinent are familiar with and referred to by. Strictly speaking, Hinduism is not a 'religion' at all, but a Dharma, as are Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

The word 'Dharma' combines religion and philosophy. Although the word 'religion' has been used as a direct substitute for 'Dharma,' they are not one and the same. They mean different things. This is why our Swamis, Saints and Gurus dislike Hinduism being referred to as a religion, because it is much more than that.

The four Dharmas of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism differ from each other in many ways but agree Dharma is the righteous duty to oneself, to others and to God.

In Hinduism, God is the attributeless entity That (Tat or Brahman), or the Hindu Trinity of the same Almighty God in manifestations with attributes in the Male - Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma, and in the Female - Luxmi, Parvati and Saraswati.

In Jainism, God is the perfect entity and in Buddhism the indescribable non-entity or a non-theistic phenomenon reachable through the Middle Way. In Sikhism, God is V_higur_, a single, personal and transcendental creator.

Dharma respects all differences. This includes, in Hinduism, secularism and the non-believer. In Hinduism, respect for humanity or for the "other" is stretched to its limits in the practice of Dharma. It is not so in the practice of Religion.

Often, Dharma is used as shorthand for 'way of life.' However, I believe we need to understand and promote the word 'Dharma' as a word in its own right and accord it an independent place within the English language.

Professor B N Hebbar, a Hindu academic, has kindly provided the following etymology of the words 'religion' and 'philosophy,' for which I am grateful: -

People think that the word "religion" is English. Well, it has become a part of the English language. However, its origins lie in the Latin language. Latin is related to English in that they belong to the same general linguistic family though they belong to different sub-families.

The English language itself is a mixture of many languages. Its base is Old Anglo-Saxon, a Germanic tongue, and most of its vocabulary comes from here. The second layer of borrowing comes from Old Celtic with whom the Anglo-Saxons mixed coming from Northwestern Germany and the Jutland region of Denmark and entering the Celtic-occupied British Isles via Holland. The third layer of borrowing comes from Norman French. The fourth layer of borrowing [though not chronologically so] are from the classical languages of Europe, i.e. Greek and Latin. Like most European languages, Greek and Latin were used for sophisticated terminology.

The words "religion" and "philosophy" are examples of such borrowings.

Etymology of “religion”

“Religion” is a Latin term. This is how it can be broken down.

“re” [prefix] meaning “again”

“lig-” [stem] from “ligare” meaning “to bind”

“ion” [suffix] meaning “act of”

Therefore, the term “religion” literally means the “act of binding again”. There’s absolutely nothing spiritual about the term at all, etymologically. However, it became the chief word for signifying all that is spiritual in the English language, and it remains so to this day.

Etymology of “philosophy”

“philosophy” is a Greek term. This is how it can be broken down.

“Phil-” [stem] meaning “love”

“o” [connecting vowel] used purely for facilitating pronunciation

“sop-” [stem] meaning “wisdom”

“y” [suffix] meaning “quality of”

Therefore, the term “philosophy” literally means the “quality of the love of wisdom”. Thus, unlike the term “religion”, this one has some bearing to the topic content it is intended to signify.

Comments on the term “religion”

If religion literally means “to bind again”, then isn’t religion doing the opposite of what is supposed to, i.e. to liberate or to redeem?

The “binding again” refers to many things:

A) re-binding one to a community of committed believers

B) re-binding one to a set of beliefs and values

C) re-binding one to a spiritual awareness and experience

D) re-binding one to certain disciplines and exercises

In other words, religion binds one to ultimately liberate one. It’s not a paradox. The following words of Shakespeare comes to mind in trying to understand this: “I must be cruel, only to be kind.” [Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 4, line 194].

It also brings to mind the old Miasma axiom: “karma binds and karma liberates.” What is being said here [in the context of the Miasma system which regards Karma as the highest form of sedan] is that Karma when done selfishly, binds. And the same Karma done selflessly liberates.

This analysis is interesting and accords with my view that Dharma is a combination of religion and philosophy, both the ‘act of binding and ‘the quality of the love of wisdom,’ as Professor Hebbbar puts it.

It is commendable that Professor Hebbar, in his commentaries, sees religion as being binding to be ultimately liberating. However, while this might well be true for a few enlightened souls, I do not believe it is so for the vast majority of religious adherents.

The Difference Between Dharma and Religion

Dharma is sometimes referred to as 'righteous living' or 'a righteous way of life' and at other times it is referred to as 'one's duty towards righteousness.' Sometimes it is simply referred to as 'truth;' sometimes as 'the narrow path to salvation;' sometimes as 'right action' within the context of Karma and sometimes as 'justice.' Whatever understanding you choose, clearly it is much more than prayer or religious activity; it is a phenomenon interwoven into every moment of our living.

Personally, I see Dharma as the righteous duty to oneself, to others and to God at every moment of one's life. So, how we act in any given circumstance lies in weighing up one's duty to all three elements of Dharma – a trinity of choice requiring the most razor sharp faculty of reason coupled with a faith which goes beyond reason.

There are many practical differences between Dharma and Religion: -

1. Dharma does not seek to have the monopoly on God. Religion takes exclusive rights for God.

Although many enlightened and theologically educated believers think otherwise, too many adherents to Christianity, Judaism and Islam claim that theirs is the only path to salvation. This is a fundamental difference between Dharma and religion. Religion of itself does not owe a duty of care to 'the other' unless this is interpreted as an imperative to convert them to the 'truth' so they may have salvation or for humanity. Occasionally 'charity' is considered to be part of a religious duty to others, although questions may need to be asked as to whether charitable motives are intrinsically good acts or whether they are in fact simply a means to the end of conversion.

2. Religion may teach us to love our neighbours but rarely does it teach us to love our enemies.

Dharma teaches us to do just that for, in fulfilling our duty to ourselves, to others and to God, in respecting the inter-connectedness of life in the omnipresence of God (or in the case of Buddhism the entity unknowable) this becomes unavoidable.

Of course, the teaching of Jesus could in this regard extend to loving the enemy, if we accept our neighbours may be our enemies. Instead (notwithstanding the slight positive relaxation on this point in the Protestant tradition) the Church promoted a message that may imitate Dharma in saying God is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, but goes on to preach the idea of an eternal hell for its enemies where, by implication, God is not present and neither is he in control.

3. Dharma sees a divine spark in everything. In the Abrahamic faiths only humans have a soul.

The Dharmic faiths consider all life to be sacred and agree that all life has an atma or soul, including animal life. In Dharma, God is fully omnipresent in all living things, not just humanity. Dharma also believes in the inter-connectedness of all life whereas the Abrahamic religions appear to suggest that all non-human life was created for the benefit and pleasure of mankind alone. From a Hindu perspective, to discriminate against the 'lower' forms of life would suggest a lack of understanding of the nature of spirituality and an undue emphasis on the material world.

4. Dharma believes in the doctrine of reincarnation as the soul evolves through many incarnations in perhaps millions of species until it is born within humankind and can potentially receive the ultimate salvation of 'Moksha.' Religion is centred on one life only.

Although this difference of one or many lives does not directly contribute to this debate between Dharma and Religion, it is worth pointing out that the difference in approach highlights why some religions feel the need to condemn the adherents of other faiths to an eternal hell, again highlighting the difference between a binding religion and an accommodating Dharma.

Indeed the doctrine of Karma leaves the concept of morality as a gradual evolution into what becomes an instinct in humans at the human stage of birth and its sharpness further evolves through karmic experience alone. Religion on the other hand seems to take the role of dictating what it thinks should be the moral viewpoint. So while in Dharma the concept is quite fluid, it ends up becoming a dogma in Religion, perhaps due to a one life notion.

5. Dharma teaches responsibility for personal action through the doctrine of Karma. Religion offers salvation through confession and absolution alone.

As Professor Hebbbar noted, Karma, when performed selfishly, can bind. But, if done righteously liberates as God absolves the bondage of sin through any righteous action. In this context, Dharma also advocates repentance but only as a single stage towards God's ultimate grace while, in contrast, religion believes confession to be the central requirement for God's grace – consider early disagreements between St Paul and St James regarding 'faith' and 'works' and the arguments of the 16th Century Reformation.

6. Dharma teaches renunciation of the ego through free will. Religion requires submission to God.

Apostasy is a crime under Islam. Is this not forced submission? In which case, how can it be Godly?

In a recent case in Malaysia a Muslim woman who married a Hindu and converted to Hinduism

was put in jail for apostasy. “If we allow conversion from Islam then we are finished,” said a Muslim leader on Al-Jazeera television.

It is a little wonder that secularists call God a delusion. It seems to me that people who do not know the spirituality of their religion have become advocates of it and they are fighting on a dogmatic & materialistic front rather than a very natural & spiritual one.

Our wiser spiritual leaders need to speak up. I am angered by the fact that the more spiritual Imams keep silent. Even in 21st century Christianity, the battle between orthodoxy and heresy rages still and most Church leaders allow it to. Despite the power of the church and the size of the pool of believers, independence of thought is still suppressed and those who sit in the pews too often are fed a diet of orthodoxy that the learned in the faith have long since questioned (consider the case of the former Archbishop of Durham’s comments on Christ’s Resurrection). We need not be afraid of debate – God is far bigger than our arguments. The Times last year highlighted the case of a Christian Minister who worships both Jesus and Ganesh. This alone must surely raise questions for those of us interested in the ‘Truth.’

The Case for Dharma

The Religions of the middle-east, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam are called the ‘Religions of the Book, or the ‘Abrahamic’ faiths. Meanwhile, the religions of the Indian Subcontinent are not part of ‘The Book.’ Indeed, it is only recently that our religions have acquired the status of recognised ‘World Religions’ as opposed to the pagan irrelevancies they were once considered to be by Abrahamic missionaries.

Recently an eminent Christian Minister told me that a Muslim Imam had suggested to him that they ought to try and bring in Hinduism into ‘The Book’ of religions, given our own ancient scriptures. Perhaps I should be flattered, as the Imam proposed something positive for unity. I am certainly grateful for his kind comments. However, it would be unfair also to allow what I believe would be the denigration of Dharma into Religion until what I see as a predatory element in much religious activity is weeded out.

Nevertheless the Imam’s suggestion carries foresight and must be considered for the value it could bring to the overall unity of faith. For instance, many ignorant Muslims and Christians, particularly those on the predatory, missionary trail, liken Hinduism to idolatry. Such a fundamental misunderstanding of Hinduism and Hindu worship must be challenged; in any event, could not we Hindus argue that the fanatical devotion some followers show to one particular, limiting belief system is far more idolatrous and therefore of far more concern?

The Problem of Conversion

The expansion of Christianity and Islam, when done through the destruction of other world religions through missionary ‘persuasion’ is contrary to the Hindu Dharma. I also believe it is against God’s law

of love as all main faiths understand it. Instead, I believe such missionary activity is done only out of love for oneself, perhaps as part of some misguided theological duty to secure a place in Heaven, or in order to quell any actual doubt among believers that their own faith is misguided, or to prove to God that they are 'true' believers. Rarely, I believe, is missionary activity of this kind the result of a from the heart desire to love or exercise a loving duty to the other. Therefore, it does not pass the test of Dharma.

Dharma respects the spirituality of other faiths while Religion at best tolerates others and at worst condemns them. Dharma does not seek to persuade other God-loving people to convert to its own brand label. Religion proselytizes even to others within its own club!

I find it hard to comprehend why, in the 21st Century, Christian zealots still damage Hindu temples. Only two months ago, a group of vandals allegedly shouting: "we are the blood of Jesus, you are idols," desecrated a temple in Trinidad, damaging several deities.

Three months ago, Jihadists killed 11 Hindu pilgrims innocently visiting the Amar Nath Temple in Kashmir. Is this an act for God or Allah? If so, then let the Imams and Ayatollahs of this world declare it openly. If not, let them denounce the senseless killings of innocents as not the 'will' of any God.

I am saddened by the perversion of wise, ancient, spiritual teaching; the damage that is done when faith becomes religion.

Sufi Islam has followed the Vedic lineage of one God, Brahman, simply using the Arabic name of Allah long before Mohammedanism. Likewise the Vedic monks' chant of "Om, Shanti, Shanti, Shanti" – peace three times for oneself, for the other and for the paranormal (not God) – was preached by the Sufi saints. That was Dharma. In contrast, the talk of Jihad, a beautiful, wholesome idea of internal struggle to advance personal spirituality, has become an external fight to win land and converts. The fatwa too, originally an edict delivered only when Muslims had sought advice and a ruling, has since become a hammer to nail and silence those who threaten the expansion of Islam.

Because religion often speaks contemptuously to those whom it considers to be worshiping 'false gods' and does so without knowing anything of others' scripture, I believe it is time for us, as faith leaders, to re-appraise our teaching on missionary activity.

I believe that to seek to convert already God-loving people to another faith is a sin, an evil act done simply to advance one's own club. I believe it should be made a crime under international law. Last month in Northern Iraq the Zaheedis who do not believe in Islam and have an ancient system of belief in God were bombed for being non-believers, infidels. Surely this destruction of humanity cannot be what God wills.

Conversion and Politics

Dharma emphasises the need for spiritual leadership as distinct from political leadership.

In religion, such leadership seems to be mixed to the point of confusion. Here at the Hindu Council UK, we have had cause recently to express our concern about activities of the missionary organisation

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). It seems to us their 'work' in India – I would say their meddling – follows closely in the footsteps of our former Colonial oppressors.

It seems CSW aims to destroy Hinduism and convert the continent to Christianity. Part of the warped logic they use to justify this appalling action involves 'discrimination in the caste system.' They argue that by converting Dalits, or untouchables, to Christianity, they free them from the oppression of caste and from their poverty.

No one should be fooled by this. First, conversion does not alter one's caste. Second, discrimination on the grounds of caste has been illegal throughout India since the Constitution was formed in 1950. Third, while many Dalits in India do live, regrettably, in poverty, the Brahmins, who underpin and still represent the spiritual base of Hinduism in India, are now the largest group living below the poverty line, having sacrificed wealth and power to practice spirituality. .

Ignorant or disregarding of this fact, CSW has released a DVD attacking the Brahmins; their clear intention being to further diminish the Hindu spiritual base so it is then easier to convert the rest of India.

The spiritual leadership in all religions need to be mindful of such politically expansionist techniques and their hypocrisy. In converting other God loving people to its own club, CSW is effectively promoting its own kind of caste; an elitist Christian Caste; the only people who can have salvation. Apart from the evil of untouchability, which must be rooted out, the caste system is in fact quite benevolent clan system. But the imperialist castes of Christianity - and indeed its subdivisions - do more harm to the world than the effects of demeaning untouchability. Moreover, the CSW and other such groups create Christian Dalits who are then not allowed to worship in higher caste churches.

Dharma spiritualises politics through sacrifice of material gains; religion politicises spirituality through seeking the expansion of their labels, which are always material and can never be spiritual. This is the difference between Mahatma Gandhi's spiritualisation of politics through Dharma and the CSW's politicisation of spirituality through religion. Mahatma Gandhi said: "Religious conversion conducted by missionaries is the deadliest poison that ever sapped the fountain of truth; poverty does not justify conversion."

Protecting the Dharma

Dharma needs protection because it is an inner science of the advancement of spirituality whereas religion uses all outward forces, including politics, to advance itself. Perhaps this is one weakness of Dharma as it gives a greater weight to the word 'humbleness.' Recently, in certain states in India, anti-conversion laws have been passed to protect Dharma. In fact, a Christian Chief Minister has last month put 'anti-conversion zones' around some Hindu temples in Andhra State so that Hindus can be protected from evangelical Christian missionaries.

The beauty of Dharma as I see it, and why it needs protection, is because it respects all differences, even secularism and the non-believer. Respect for humanity is stretched to the limits in Dharma but not in religion. For instance, Dharma will not condemn Homosexuality even though the religious injunction

is to procreate in the second stage of one's life span (the family stage). The Dharma may not therefore promote homosexuality but it cannot discriminate against it, not ever. Dharma goes far beyond Religious injunction.

Conclusion

My purpose has been not to diminish the spiritual aspects of 'religion' in the Abrahamic faiths. I simply wish to ask that consideration is given to Dharma's rightful place within the Indogenic faiths and for the Abrahamic faiths to ask whether they can learn from Dharma and encourage their followers to become more accommodating to and respectful of the 'other'.

However, I confess my long term hope would be that all religions come to 'fit in with' the definition of Dharma; if and when they do so there will be no need for the distinction between Dharma and religion. Indeed, if some of the predatory elements were ironed out of most religions then there are so many spiritual similarities between Religion and Dharma that it could, as I said in my introduction, almost bring us to a Golden Age of God on earth.

I believe that, given sufficient will at the top of all our spiritual hierarchies, that if the predatory elements in all faiths could be weeded out, if 'the devil' can be weeded out of the Abrahamic faiths, a great service will be done for all humanity.

I am sure Jesus would have preached Dharma as we Hindus understand it. I believe it was the Emperor Constantine who turned Christianity into a religion. Constantine's Christianity is based on the death of Jesus, which is elevated to such prominence that the life of Jesus takes a secondary role in the religion. Jesus' Christianity, I dare say, would be "reversed". Hindus never talk of a similar "Resurrection" of Lord Ram but they highlight his life of living "ideals" on earth.

I also think that Zoroastrians and those of the Bahá'í faith would understand and embrace the concept of Dharma, given their respect for the 'other' point of view and the ability to see other faiths as valid.

I would welcome a debate on this issue and trust you will share your considered opinions and suggestions for change with me.

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