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Western Concepts and Indian Realities

by

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Western Concepts and Indian Realities*

I think it is fairly self-evident that we in India use Western words and therefore concepts to describe Indian reality. The reason why we do so is also fairly self-evident and can be traced to British rule over India which formally came to an end in 1947 and the continuing prevalence of English language as a medium of discourse in India. This is such a familiar fact that we lose sight of its significance. Here I attempt to explore the consequences of this fact at both the micro and macro levels through concrete examples.

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I

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I would like to begin by first examining the matter at the micro level. The concept of Dharma is central to Hinduism and I discuss this in detail at the macro level. At the micro level, I would like to refer to the sources of Dharma as described in Hindu literature. There is a standard scheme of four sources of Dharma mentioned in the Hindu scriptures, including the *Manusmrti*. In this context, the word Dharma obviously means figuring out the right thing to do in a particular context and the suggestion is that we could draw upon four sources for guidance in our effort to determine the proper course of action. The first of these is *Shruti* which represents the Vedas. So, one and perhaps the first source of determining right action is the Veda. The second item in this series is *Smrti* or the traditional works which deal with moral and spiritual issues such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the law books of Manu and others, and so on. If *Shruti* stands for Revelation, then *Smrti* stands for Tradition. The third factor referred to is *Sadacara*, or the example set by virtuous people, as, for instance, Mahatma Gandhi. And the final and fourth item is called *Atma-tusti*, or 'self-satisfaction'. This literal rendering conceals the significance of the word which is often translated as that which is pleasing to oneself, or what appeals to one's inner self.

My further remarks pertain to this last category of *Atma-tusti* which, as I hinted above, leaves us somewhat dissatisfied when translated into English literally. I would like to argue that its true import is best conveyed by the English word 'conscience'. So the recommendation is that in order to determine the proper course of action (i) one should consult *Shruti* or Revelation, (ii) *Smrti* or Tradition, (iii) *Sadacara* or the example of virtuous people and (iv) *Atma-tusti* or conscience.

In all fairness, I should add that Christopher Minkowski has expressed misgivings about using the word conscience to render *Atma-tusti*, although many scholars seem to have little difficulty with this rendering, a plausible position if we take another verse from the *Manusmrti* into account.

The point I wish to make here is that by rendering the word *Atma-tusti* as conscience, we may have clarified its meaning and may have even enriched it. We can now see how, when Mahatma Gandhi declared that he would reject any scriptural injunction which offended his reason or conscience, he was in effect saying that he would place *Atma-tusti* above *Shruti* and *Smrti* in his hierarchy of values, which indicates how Mahatma Gandhi brought about cardinal changes within Hinduism by making ordinal changes within it.

I offer this example as an illustration of the fact that sometimes the use of a Western word or concept might help us understand our own reality better than might otherwise be the case. I would like to emphasise this as I will later argue that the English word 'religion' actually distorts rather than clarifies Indian reality.Thus the impact of Western concepts and ideas

in relation to Indian reality can go either way, and we should not be dogmatic about it.

II

Before I take up the example of the word religion and the concept associated with it, I would like to make another point. This point will illustrate the need to be careful when we use European words to describe an Indian reality. Let us take the word Rajya as an example, which is usually translated as a kingdom or a principality governed by a ruler. When the word is used in the West, it carries the connotation of a group of people living in a stable manner within a fixed boundary ruled over by a king. In the Indian case, however, often the reality was that the subjects of the ruler felt free to move to another kingdom by way of protesting against excessive taxation or for some other reason. The idea associated in the West with the subjects being largely confined to the boundaries of a kingdom did not seem to apply. The Chinese traveller Faxian (circa 400 CE) marvelled at the fact that Indians did not need the permission of a magistrate to leave a district. The French monk, Abe Dubois, who travelled through south India in the 18th century, similarly marvelled at the fact that Indians could move even as a group from one part of the country to another freely, and that they could settle down in any part of the country without having to change their religion, language or lifestyle. Indian kingdoms did have borders, but these were open borders, perhaps somewhat like the borders of the countries comprising the European Union. This might explain the sense of outrage which Raja Ram Mohun Roy felt when he was asked by the French government to acquire a passport in order to visit France. In his letter of protest to the French government written in the early years of the 19th century, he expressed anguished surprise that he should be required to obtain a document to visit a country like France which gave this world the slogan, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!

III

Having momentarily lightened the burden of our theme, I move on now to analyse the consequences of using the word religion to refer to the religions of Indian origin—namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which prefer to call themselves Dharmas.

Some might find this move a little puzzling. After all, don't we use the word Dharma regularly as a synonym for the English word religion in the course of daily discourse in India? For instance, we use the word *dharma-nirapeksha* to translate the English word secular, where the word Dharma obviously means religion in the context of the disassociation of the state with religion. Or, when we use the word *sarva-dharma-sama-bhava* to represent an Indian understanding of secularism, as indicating equal respect for all religions. In both these understandings of the word secular in India, the word Dharma has been used to translate the English word religion. Similarly, when the Indian census collects data of the number of followers of a religion, these data are presented in Hindi translation as representing the various Dharmas of India. This easy rendering of the English word religion by the Indian word Dharma is not restricted to Hindi, but applies to virtually all the major languages of India, so that we use the word Dharma to render the English word religion not only at the regional level but also at the national level.

IV

It is my purpose here to indicate how much is lost in this translation. Indeed, a whole world of religious meaning is lost in this translation with serious consequences for our own understanding of our own concept of 'religion'.

The Western word religion carries with it the connotation it has in relation to the Abrahamic religions. Abrahamic religions is the term by which the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are referred to collectively. These three religions are

Abrahamic religions is the term by which the three religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are referred to collectively. These three religions are characterised by the following three features: they are conclusive, they are exclusive, and they are separative. They are conclusive in the sense that they constitute God's final revelation to human beings; they are exclusive in that by and large only those who belong to these religions will be saved; and they are separative in the sense that one can only belong to one of them by separating oneself from every other religion. Or, in other words, one cannot be a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim at the same time, although all these three religions believe in only one God.

The four religions of Indian origin, however, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, do not share these characteristics. They rarely insist that they are the final revelation of God to human beings, or that only those who follow them will be saved, or that one can only belong to one of them to the exclusion of the other. Moreover, these religions are non-proselytising. They accept followers but do not seek them. This last point requires some qualification. Judaism, although a member of the Abrahamic religious tradition, has been a non-

proselytising religion for most of its history, and Buddhism has been actively missionary. However, in order to become a Buddhist, one does not have to give up one's previous religious affiliation whereas this does not hold true of Abrahamic religions.

When the British introduced census operations in India from 1871 onwards, they gradually moved towards adopting the Western concept of religion in an Indian context according to which one could only subscribe to one religion at a time. The insistence that an Indian could belong to only one religion at a time had serious consequences for the religious reality of India in which the followers of religions of Indian origin did not always distinguish themselves from each other that sharply. The result of this census operation is dramatised by the fact that, whereas in India, Hinduism and Buddhism are treated as two different religions, the lived reality in Nepal continues to conform to an earlier reality in which the same person could be a follower of both these religions. As the German scholar Axel Michaels reports: 'A Nepali, asked if he was a Hindu or a Buddhist, answered: "Yes". All these answers maybe imagined with a typical Indian gesture: the head slightly bent and softly tilted, with eyelids shut, the mouth smiling' (Michaels, 2004: 6).

In other words, the Indian religious reality was not by and large adverse to dual or multiple religious identities but the census operations, by insisting on a singular religious identity, began to modify the Indian religious reality in such a way that the four religions of Indian origin began to acquire a fixed and separate identity in place of an earlier overlapping fluid identity. This overlapping fluid identity is dramatised by the fact that when Mahatma Gandhi went to London to study law at the age of 18, the three oaths of abstention from wine, meat and women as a precondition for his departure insisted on by his Hindu mother were administered to him by a Jain monk.

Is my conclusion that the use of the word religion in the Western sense of exclusive religious identity resulting in the distortion of the Indian religious reality overdrawn? Perhaps not, if we take the case of Japan into account. Japan does not insist on a Western notion of religion in its

census, in the sense that its citizens are free to identify themselves as followers of as many religions as they like. Its religious census appears as follows for the year 1985:

Buddhist	92,000,000 persons	76 % of population
Shinto	115,000,000 persons	95 % of population
Christian	1,000,000 persons	
New Religions	14,000,000 persons	
Total:	223,000,000 persons	

The total population of Japan in 1985 was 121,000,000(Reader, 1991: 6).

In other words, 95 per cent of the population of Japan declared themselves to be followers of Shinto, and 76 per cent of the same population also declared themselves to be followers of Buddhism. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the contours of the religious landscape of India would have been similar to that of Japan if Indians were allowed to indicate membership of more than one religion in the census.

V

Another consideration seems to suggest that we may be moving in the right direction in questioning the application of the Western concept of religion, if we extend our discussion beyond India to a larger Asian reality. This is suggested by the fact that four major culture zones—India, China, Korea and Japan—had trouble dealing with the European word religion. We noted above that India had to coin

a new *meaning* to accommodate the English word religion. What I mean by this statement is that the Indian word Dharma did not possess the meaning of exclusive religious identity implied by the English word religion, so that its meaning had to be *narrowed* to make it a synonym of the English word. While Indians had to coin a new meaning, so to say, the Japanese had to coin a new word, namely, Shu-kyo, and subsequently the Chinese coined the word Zong-jiao, and the Koreans Jong-gyo for the same reason.

What this seems to indicate is that the European word religion is a poor fit, is not suitable, for representing Asian religious reality. This is obvious in the case of India and Japan where a multiple religious

identity has often been the norm. China seems like an outlier but only in a superficial sense. For, the lived reality in pre-Communist China was very similar to that in India, inasmuch as the San-Jiao or the Three Teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese Buddhism were not considered mutually exclusive.

So I conclude with the suggestion that when Judaism, Christianity and Islam are described as *religions*, then the religions of Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism in India, Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese Buddhism in China, and Shinto and Japanese Buddhism in Japan—should be referred to as Dharmas, to avoid their conflation with the Western word religion and thereby preserve the integrity of the religious traditions of Asia.[1]

VI

Let us now analyse some of the long-term consequences of using the word religion in the Indian context.

- The four religions of Indian origin often exhibited overlapping identities. This was even recognised in the British census operations which allowed for the category of Hindu/Sikh for a short span of time early in the 20th century, thereby implying that a person could be both a Hindu and a Sikh at the same time. Now, after almost a century, however, many Sikhs take great pains to distinguish themselves from the Hindus. There could be several factors underlying this development but it is more than likely that insistence on an exclusive Sikh identity in the census had something to do with it. The difference in Hindu/Buddhist identity between Nepal and India has already been cited as one effect of the use of the word religion as implying exclusive religious identity. It is therefore difficult to avoid the conclusion that one long-term effect of the use of the Western concepts of religion in an Indian context has been the continuing fragmentation of the Dharmic traditions of India.

- The genesis of the idea of Hindutva may also be traceable to the imposition of this exclusive definition of religion on India. I was struck by the disproportionate space devoted to the discussion of the emerging separate Sikh identity in relation to the Hindu in V. D. Savarkar's slender but seminal work, *Hindutva*. A major concern of Savarkar seems to have been that the underlying unity of Indic religious tradition was sundered by the British census which introduced the Western exclusive definition of religion into the Indian body-politic. It could be argued that Savarkar devised the concept of Hindutva in order to emphasise the cultural unity of these traditions to counter their religious fragmentation. In other words, if a foreign word, religion, was being used to divide the tradition, then Savarkar chose to use a distinction foreign to the Indian ethos, namely the distinction between religion and culture, in order to counter it.

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- The question of minorities and majorities does not arise to the same extent in a world of overlapping religious identities as it does in a world of singular religious identities, for the obvious reason that the same person could belong to both a so-called majority and a so-called minority when one could be the follower of more than one religion at the same time. The fact is that the issue of majority versus minority, which has come to the fore in India in recent times, could also be perhaps traced in good measure to the imposition of the Western concept of religion on an Indian reality.

- The issue of conversion has been a major source of friction in India. Conversion, however, becomes a major issue primarily in a world of singular religious identities, where in order to convert to a religion, one must abandon one's allegiance to a prior religion. This issue of conversion, however, loses most of its force if one can follow two religions at the same time. In this case conversion is additive in nature rather than substitutive.

- This observation provides the basis for the next one. When we talk of conversion, we usually mean converting from one religion to another. However, if the concept of religion itself differs among the religions in the sense discussed above, then one has to acknowledge that conversion among religions can be of two kinds: one in which one converts to another religion which has the same concept of religion itself as the religion one is converting from, and another in which the religion one is converting to has a different concept of religion than the religion one is converting from. This then enables one to make the comment that when a Hindu converts to Islam or Christianity, one converts not only to another religion, but also to another concept of religion itself.

- The attempt to superimpose the Western concept of religion in Indian reality has had a major implication for the concept of religious freedom. In the Western frame of reference, religious freedom consists of the freedom to change one's religion, for that is how freedom will find its expression in a world of singular

religious identities. Such a view, however, is alien to a frame of reference characterised by multiple religious identities, for the issue of conversion fades away in such a context. Freedom then consists of freedom to pursue one's own religious beliefs and practices without interference from others. One major form of such interference by others is proselytisation. Thus religious freedom in a Western frame of reference means freedom *for* conversion; in an Indic frame of reference it would mean freedom *from* conversion.

- The imposition of the Western concept of religion on the Asian and Indian reality has serious intellectual consequences as well. Himanshu Prabha Ray has demonstrated how this belief, that religions require exclusive adherence, has actually affected archaeological work in the field. In order to understand this point, one needs to realise that Western intellectual tradition considers belonging to only one religion as more 'rational'; hence its abhorrence for syncretism. From its point of view, people who regard themselves as followers of more than one religion are simply confused and have to be rationalised.

- This has had some glaring consequences. When we think of Angkor Wat in Kampuchea (Cambodia), we think of it as a Hindu site; we do not realise that it was made in to a Hindu site by French archaeologists and that there was a functioning Buddhist monastic order on that site which was sent packing by the French in order to rationalise the arrangements. Another example is provided by Bodhgaya in India, which is largely considered a Buddhist site for similar reasons, overlooking the fact that it is a site where a major Hindu ritual is performed. The co-existence of Hindu, Buddhist, Tribal and other elements at the same site is not a problem for those who accept multiple religious identity as a feature of religious life; it becomes a problem for those who believe that one can only follow one religion at a time.

- Although this paper deals with the manner in which Western terms may affect or distort Indian reality, it is also possible to examine

how Indian terms are also prone to being distorted by Western reality. The word *Arya* (Aryan) provides a good illustration of this point. *Arya* has the meaning of noble in all the three classical religions of Indian origin: Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. In a Western context, however, it has been racialised to such an extent, both in Indology and by the Nazi experiment, that it is at the risk of losing the meaning of nobility associated with it.

● Similarly, the English word secularism has also acquired an Indian connotation on account of it being used to render the word Dharma.[2] This would be an example of the use of the word Dharma influencing the meaning of the word secularism, at least in India, when it is also used in public in English to refer to the idea of equal respect for all religions, or *sarva-dharma-sama-bhava*, an idea rarely associated with it in its European usage.

● The fact that the word secularism in India has acquired an Indian hue under the influence of religions of Indian origin, particularly Hinduism, suggests that Hinduism and secularism are not as much at odds as might appear at first sight, especially if secularism is understood to include pluralism in some sense. This has a surprising political implication. It narrows the distinction between a Hindu state and a secular state considerably, for then it makes it possible to claim that the real choice before the nation is between the secularism of Hinduism and the Hinduism of secularism.

● The issue of secularism and its embeddedness in Western culture can be nuanced even further. It could be argued, on the one hand, that the concept of secularism is itself 'Christian' inasmuch as it arose in its present form in the Christian West and harks back to Christian teachings, such as those of rendering unto Caeser what is Caeser's and to God what is God's and, on the other hand, that India's pluralism is interreligious inasmuch as it arose in a country characterised by the presence of many world religions whereas Western secularism is merely interdenominational (rather than interreligious) inasmuch as it arose in Western countries where the

conflict involved was not among world religions but among Christian sects.

● The experience of India with such words as 'religion' and 'secularism' seems to create room for making the suggestion that if words, which have evolved in a culture to deal with the problem peculiar to that culture, are introduced in another culture which did not possess that problem, then it might create the very problem in the host culture to solve what it was devised for in the original culture.

The foregoing analysis, if correct, also carries clear policy implications if one wishes to promote religious coexistence which used to be an Indian reality in classical India. It would involve modifying the mode of gathering data for the census in such a way that people are free to indicate, should they so wish, that they regard themselves as followers of more than one religion, as is the case of census operations in Japan. Moreover, given the fact that some Indians also regard themselves as followers of all the religions of the world simultaneously in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, a category of *Sarva-Dharmika* may also have to be introduced, along with the category of 'No Religion'.

I hope I have not indulged in overkill in making these points. In any case, at this stage in my general argument I must revert to the original thesis from which these points follow, namely, whether the use of the English word religion has been altering Indian reality. If I suggested that the reality of one country should be altered merely to conform to the semantic conventions of the language of another country then most of you, I dare say, would regard the suggestion as preposterous.

And yet this is precisely what has been happening in India for more than a century.

VII

Finally, what appears to me to be the most serious consequence of the use of the Western concept of religion in an Indian context could be that it may be robbing India of the proper role it might be destined to

play on the global theatre. One religion or ideology is arguably capable of establishing peace and harmony if, in a world of singular religious identities in the realm of religions or ideologies, it alone were to prevail, leaving no competing religions and ideologies to contend with. That is to say, if Christianity and Christianity alone were to envelop the world and everyone became a Christian, then such a Christian world could possibly be a world of unity and harmony. The same would be true if Islam were to prevail in a similar fashion, eliminating all competing religions. Similarly, if capitalism became the sole regnant doctrine of the economic world, then all of us could conceivably live in a capitalist utopia; the same would hold for communism. But we know now that this is not likely to be the case and that there are competing religions and competing ideologies to contend with. Thus, in the real world, we will have to find a model for negotiating their rival claims because we live in a plural and not a singular world. The Indian experience of religious and ideological coexistence therefore, is likely to become increasingly relevant for the modern world. The imposition of the Western concept of religion on Indian reality, and its continuing prevalence even after India achieved political freedom in 1947, has inhibited India from developing and offering its own model to the world as an option. This is what I mean when I say that the glib and uncritical acceptance of the Western concept of religion seems to be cheating India out of its global destiny.

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One way in which this has happened is through the use of the word secularism in Indian discourse. The desire to keep religion out of the public square is enshrined in this concept, and betrays a close association of this word with the Western concept of religion which, on account of its association with religious exclusivism, made the coexistence of different sects or religions virtually impossible in the public square if the state adopted a particular religion as the state religion.

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Most of us are familiar with accounts of the Buddhist empire of Asoka, the 'Hindu' empire of Samudragupta, the Jain kingdom of King Kumarapala in Gujarat, and the Sikh kingdom of Raja Ranjit Singh in the Punjab, which—following the principle of preference but no exclusion—flourished ecumenically in India at different times. If, therefore, statesmen wanted to emphasise the fact that India should have no state religion, this fact could as well have been asserted by using the word pluralism instead of secularism as a guiding principle of Indian polity. Both secularism and pluralism wish to avoid the domination of the public square by a single religion or ideology (especially an authoritarian one); they differ in how they wish to avoid such dominance.

The issue of secularism also allows one to make a final point before one closes. When we propose that a nation's polity should be characterised by secularism, we, intentionally or unintentionally, subscribe to the thesis that Europe's past is India's future. When we recognise the inevitability of pluralism in the modern world, and India's past experience with it, then it perhaps becomes possible to propose that India's past, or to be less chauvinistic, Asia's past, is the world's future.

Notes:

[1] Historically, the word Dharma has been used for each of the four religions of Indian origin which share a similar attitude to each other. Moreover, these traditions have also used the word Dharma for themselves at various points in time so we are on solid ground in suggesting that these religions of Indian origin should be referred to as Dharma and not as religion. You could refer to them as Dharma in the singular or as the Dharmic traditions to refer to them collectively. One could also use the word *Moksa-dharma* to refer to them when one wants to emphasise their underlying unity as all of them share the goal of *Moksa*; or if this description is considered too aggregated we can refer to them collectively as *chatur-dharmya* if one wants to emphasise their distinctiveness. What is original about this proposal is the suggestion that as Chinese and Japanese religions share a similar attitude toward each other, the word Dharma may be extended to refer to them as well, to prevent their heritage from being distorted by the Western word religion.

[2] When secularism is used to indicate equal respect for all religions or *Sarva-Dharma-Sama-Bhava.*

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