



Notion of Dharma of Indian Philosophy and the concept of religion of the West

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Abstract - If we look beyond myths, faiths, respective spiritual doctrines, and the practice of rituals, we shall see that the referent of Religion and Dharma is the same. The same Dharma becomes religion when we dress it with the clothing of rituals. Outwardly, in religions, we see only practices and rituals, and when we do not look into the heart of religions, we differentiate them according to external practices. We do not analyse the religious writings. Even due to an unknown factor, we do not show any interest to find out what remains left as the moral standard of a religion. We must know in this context that in Indian philosophy (or say in Indian code of conduct), notion of “dharma” plays an important role to build up a human character. This is namely to achieve mental steadfastness along with physical stability. These teaching includes the training of “celibacy” (i.e., which in broader sense includes the learning of how to restore one’s vital energy force). Unfortunately, after the colonial influence of British Ruling we have started to know that Indian aspect of “dharma” and English notion of “religion” are similar. This mistake has lead us to ignore the value of dharma that underlies this fundamental aspect of human life, which those great ancient saints, thinkers had set as the first among our four basic needs – dharma (to know moral code of conducts, and other true conditions of a righteous life), Artha (refers to both – our “need” and “money”, significantly, we first know our need, then give righteous effort in all regards to earn money to fulfil our need), kama (kama refers to our earthly needs that include both – the physical and also psychological desire), and moksa (spiritual liberation, which means to renounce everything earthly and obtain complete freedom from suffering). In this paper, I shall discuss Indian aspect of dharma with reference to the religion of west to make it clear that, we should not take them as similar as what we actually understand about them at this juncture.

Keywords - dharma, mental steadfastness, celibacy, colonial, spiritual liberation.

I. Introduction

If we look beyond myths, faiths, respective spiritual doctrines, and the practice of rituals, we shall see that the referent of Religion and Dharma is the same. The same Dharma becomes religion when we dress it with the clothing of rituals. Outwardly, in religions, we see only practices and rituals, and when we do not look into the heart of religions, we differentiate them according to external practices. We do not analyse the religious writings. Even due to an unknown factor, we do not show any interest to find out what remains left as the moral standard of a religion. We must know in this context that in Indian philosophy (or say in Indian code of conduct), notion of “dharma” plays an important role to build up a human character. This is namely to achieve mental steadfastness along with physical stability. These teaching includes the training of “celibacy” (i.e., which in broader sense includes the learning of how to restore one’s



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This ‘reason’ is not what ‘understanding’ or buddhi means; it is something more than that – it is bichar buddhi. Understanding makes one’s own rationale, and what reason does is that, it automatically distinguishes right from the wrong. So, unknowingly a mistake can happen, but where the evil comes from is a kind of voluntary effort. So ‘to understand a religion’ is to ‘use the reason in us.’ The only task left for is that we do not need to hire it, but to derive it. Regarding Islam if we focus on its mere practices, there we find the diversity, but when we focus at its core then there remains nothing except a view on human duty and following acts. Ultimately, what a religion actually preaches is humanism. So, my aim is to show that – Dharma and Religion are not intrinsically different – whatever they say regarding human existence, human essence, human duty and human actions is the same. In short, their practical approach about viewing human life remains the same. There they do not differ in viewing those matters, and we shall discuss how, irrespective of their respective fields, one has no ethical conflict with the other.

Dharma

‘Dharma’ is a Sanskrit word and simply means what carries or bears something. Concept of Dharma is associated with the teachings of Buddha, as well as of Jain philosophy and also the notion is associated with four basic human needs (i.e., purusarthas). In four purusarthas it is enlisted first and it is the mark of importance too that Dharma is necessary for building up true human character. Dharma has been defined in dictionary of philosophy as the sphere of temporal (non-religious) duty and custom and from here it is extended to cover aspects of character that make up a personality. In the broad sense, Dharma is that which explores something’s basic character (i.e., by its dharma we are able to identify something). Dharma displays an object with its speciality (e.g., fire burns, water wets). If we take Dharma as ‘what carries’ then obviously it will have several features to identify several things as we have living and non-living beings in this world. Both living and non-living beings have their respective dharma-s, by which we identify them. But, in case of human beings we shall take ‘Dharma’ as having unique sense of it. It carries the essence of certain type of object and similarly in case of human beings it must carry the essence of it, but although we understand fire burns, water wets, we cannot understand only with a human face what an animal actually does. We do not know a man unless we recognise what



‘rationality’ really means or to what the term ‘rationality’ really refers. The dharma of a human is not open.

The task of human is to discover it using his reason. Unless we do so, we shall be confusing the dharma of an animal with the Dharma of a man. In this world, human beings alone have two essential properties. Scientifically they are a species, and theoretically, they are rational. Without the former, no human would exist (because it provides form and instincts). Human beings have something extra than an animal, which forces them to break the barrier within which an animal confines itself. After a proper analysis, we see that man is composed of two fundamentals – animality and humanity, which indeed is an exceptional composition for man. The term ‘humanity’ is an ideal outcome of the term ‘rationality’. Now a problem may arise regarding this issue that what we think of ‘humanity’ is really a rational factor; but it does not stand vice versa (i.e., not all rational acts are human in nature). Work of a thief from a particular point of view is human, and from another point of view, his work is not human. The thief may refer to rationale to justify his act, but it never becomes rational from a general perspective.

The same reason stands for the service of a butcher. Even when a strong political movement goes on against the existing emperor, the question of humanity does not arise. A revolutionist does not provoke any question relating to his activity – whether it was human or inhuman. A murderer’s deed can be said to be rational from a particular standard, but by this, his act does not become human. Unless we know the true meaning of rationality attached to our definition, we shall always be in such confusion regarding the action of a thief and the service of a teacher. We call both of them rational, but it is not so in the proper sense; in this case only what a teacher would say is rational. Therefore, it must be the case that, when we attach ‘rationality’ to our definition, it must bear a speciality, which none but a true teacher can reveal. This rationality really distinguishes man from an animal. This rationality is a general idea, and it has no distinctive senses that one can use in a particular case according to his choice. We know that, ‘we can steal’ can be a statement in support of rationality, but it is not a rational work for the society does not draw praise either for the doer or for the deed. The ultimate thing is that, human brain can think better, than now. It is the speciality. Thus, we can reach and apprehend the loftiness of ‘rationality.’ Until we have this reach, we shall be in confusion about what humanity and dharma really mean. At the same time, we shall be able to discover what rationality really is. In most of the cases, we misunderstand the concept. The same rationality delivers reason, and the freedom of choice. One can use his rationality to steal something and one can use his rationality to sacrifice for others. Each of these two aims at the same thing – to satisfy himself. Is it rationality, which forces man to make these choices?

A question may arise, in this connection, whether ‘rationality’ and ‘reason’ can be separated. The fact is that, we cannot divide such terms. These are basically notions, which we cannot split into parts. It is true that, when one steals money or one expends all of his savings – both may aim at the same goal (i.e., they do it for their dependents). But the rationale they made use to justify their actions are very much personal rather than open. They form their own ideas about their choice. Rationale (personal choices



and related arguments) does not come either from reason or rationality, it comes from understanding (i.e., buddhi) which is responsible to make one's own rationale.

In this connection, we may refer to Gotlob Frege's view about sense and conceptions (i.e., ideas). Frege says that, sense has an objective basis, whereas ideas have a subjective basis. Sense cannot change, but ideas can change. He says,

[T]he same sense is not always connected, even in the same man, with the same conception. The conception is subjective: One man's conception is not that of another. There result, as a matter of course, a variety of differences in the conceptions associated with the same sense. A painter, a horseman, and a zoologist will probably connect different conceptions with the name "Bucephalus." This constitutes an essential distinction between the conception and the sign's sense, which may be the common property of many and therefore is not a part or a mode of the individual mind. For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another.

Now what is to say is that, we cannot exclude our animal-hood from our being, for we are scientifically a species. But we have the speciality that we can control our animal-hood. This is possible only when we shall learn to practice and thereby realise the significance of those principles laid down in Scriptures in the form of Dharma. According to Max Müller, 'This dharma certainly means religion in one sense, but in one sense only. It means law, and a law-book therefore is called Dharma-Śāstra. The same word dharma may be used to express dogma or objective religion, but it cannot include the subjective disposition which we likewise comprehend under the name of religion...it has been used [in the scriptures] in the sense of the nature or essence of a thing, as we might say the law or character of a thing.'

Now, when in Sanskrit, 'Dharma' is introduced as 'the bearer'; it becomes the bearer of the essence of objects. It explores the actual nature of an object, by which we can identify it. Similarly, when we discuss the matter in connection with human beings, it becomes pithy, for it does not then refer to that dharma which we usually explore to maintain our animal existence, but indeed, it refers to those rational practices, which necessarily brings out the actual nature of human beings along with a rational purpose of living.

In Indian scriptures, (e.g., Manu Samhita) we see this 'Dharma' to be mentioned, and analyzed. Dharma is the central concern of every religion in different forms. Dharma comprises those principles that are fit for true human life. In religions, people have been advised to practice those principles in the name of Dharma for achieving humanity as well as divinity. In fact, practicing Dharma leads to humanity – it is the practical approach of Dharma. Consequently, the same Dharma through its practices can lead a man to reach divinity – it is the spiritual approach.

Dr. Mahanambroto Brahmachari has very well explained what dharma is in his book Fundamental Thoughts. He considered Dharma as the inner nature of beings. I agree with him that, nothing can persist without dharma. The whole universe moves because of dharma. An animal or an object is unable to produce or reveal anything except their



Dharma. When we talk about the Dharma of a man, we talk about ‘humanity’; here we talk about ‘Manava Dharma’ – in practice, which becomes the religion of every man. And the path, through which humanity is manifested is humanism. Man requires primary teachings to establish this humanism. Finally, it is that Dharma of man, which Rabindra Nath Tagore has talked about in his book – ‘The Religion of Man’.

In this connection, a question may arise that, if someone has no faith in God, and Scriptures then, how shall we convince him about this Dharma? About Dharma, we have discussed that, it is the basis, about which our scriptures agree. Now it becomes my duty to let a non-believer of scriptures understand what this Dharma is or what proof we can produce in favour of this Dharma.

In Buddhism, in Jainism, in Mahabharata and in the Gita, the philosophy of Dharma has been discussed. To give a clear idea about Islam, and what it preaches, this discussion is important. The Qur'an always confirmed by its statements that, this religion is not a new one, but it is that true religion of the past. Due to corruption in people, it was lost midway; after that in a moderated form, the revelation of the same came through Muhammad. This religion named Islam, which carries the same understanding, which Dharma refers to, although these two appeared as bearing different perspectives, from different territories and different languages.

In Buddhism, ‘Dharma’ for a human refers to the factor of his moral existence. The term ‘existence’, I think, refers only to our human (rational) existence. It cannot be the mere existence, which is found common in both – man and animal. Practicing this Dharma not only leads a man to achieve ‘Humanity’ or ‘Manusyatya,’ but also it leads to attain ‘nirvana’ in terms of Buddhism. we know that –

The ultimate foundation for Buddhist ethics is Dharma. Dharma has many meanings, but the underlying notion is of a universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe. Dharma can best be translated as ‘natural law’, a term that captures both its main senses, namely as the principle of order and regularity seen in the behaviour of natural phenomena ...

If we apply this notion of Dharma to the notion of ‘rationality’ to detect rational acts, and characteristics, then it would be those, namely – dāna (i.e., selfless act of giving some help to someone(generosity)), Ahimsā (‘no-harming’ or ‘non-violence’), karunā (compassion), and these can be known to be three cardinal virtues in Buddhist Ethics. It is as if these acts configure the essence of Rationality. There are five precepts (pancasila) namely, – ‘I undertake the precept to refrain from harming living creatures,’ ‘I undertake the precept to refrain from taking what has not been given,’ ‘I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual immorality,’ ‘I undertake the precept to refrain from speaking falsely,’ and ‘I undertake the precept to refrain from taking intoxicants.’ These precepts together make the ‘Dharma’ of a man for his earthly life. It is that Dharma, which helps man to become a Buddha or Buddhist. All of Buddha’s ethical disciplines have been arranged in the form of songs in Dhammapada. Dhammapada talks about what we ought to do, and what we ought not to do. ‘Buddha Barga’ (XIV: Awakened) is a chapter in Dhammapada. By its two-sentenced song it prays,
The non-doing of any evil



the performance of what's skilful,
the cleansing of one's own mind:
this is the teaching of the awakened. (183)

The song says – Let no evil be done, let all good deeds (including good thoughts) be done, let our heart be purified, these are the advice of Buddha-s.

Dharma in Jain Philosophy:

Dharma is the principle of motion. If this principle of motion never existed, it would not have been possible for a jiva or pudgala to move. Dharma is non-corporeal, devoid of all sense qualities and pervades of the universe where jiva and ajiva can exist. Beyond this loka is aloka or empty void. In aloka, as there is no principle of motion, nobody can go.

Philosophically, we can say that Dharma generates becomingness in human person, by which he enjoys the ability to achieve the highness of his being, i.e., humanity, which involves principles resulting in humanism. We can say that in Jainism the term 'Dharma' has been translated as the key, which insists that, people should move or work. In the absence of this key, a man is motionless.

An object in water, which has no motion or movement, catches moss. Even the water in pond becomes polluted if found stagnant for a long time. Similarly, when a man is motionless, he deteriorates. When Adharma is addressed as the principle of the rest, then it becomes clear that in Jainism, Dharma has been the primary factor for the movement of universe. What regulates us and our life, is Dharma. What makes the movements of Ajivas possible is Dharma. According to Dharma air blows, fire burns, earth smells. Accordingly, we human beings too have such Dharma, which sustains our rational existence. After we determine this primary factor of human life, a Jain suggests how we should work. Here he mentions principles of the manner of working. It should take place in a disciplined way. No Jiva or Ajiva, except man, has the ability to suppress its material existence. Man alone can do it. Why? The reason being, man alone has that property to know and realize the reality of a disciplined life, which we cannot expect either from Jiva or from Ajiva of inferior category other than man. The preacher of Jain philosophy theoretically tends to explore the basis of humanity, which simultaneously explores man's actual status in a society. It is a truism that, unless man practices such principles, his social categories will not be wholesome. Therefore, the anomalies of society must die sometime.

Concept of Dharma in India's Moral Philosophy

'Dharma' is the central concept of India's Moral Philosophy. It is mentioned first in the list of Puruṣārthas (Four Basic Human Needs) – Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Mokṣa.

A brief analysis:

In this series of Puruṣārthas, we see Mokṣa to come at the end, but it is not of least significance. It is the highest triumph of human life. While discussing the four human needs of human life (Puruṣārtha), we see that Dharma comes first in the list of Puruṣārthas. In this case, we shall discuss the concept of Dharma apart from Mokṣa



(which generally means complete freedom from suffering). In a sense, our Dharma is to desire Mokṣa. In another sense, those principles, which we should maintain to attain the goal are altogether called Dharma. Someone may call the state of Mokṣa as the state of complete happiness, or of peace; someone may consider it as the state in which we get complete freedom from earthly sufferings. Whatever it may be, the peculiarity of our act is that, although our acts are (knowingly or unknowingly) directed to get happiness, we get pleasure as a consequent, which is inextricably linked with pain. So, it is not the ideal happiness we strive for.

Therefore, it seems that, something is missing between our thinking and our action, which misleads on the way of getting peace. Finally, that missing link is discovered by the thinkers, which they name 'Dharma'. Here, 'Dharma' makes the bridge between our need and desire.

'Need' explains our 'desire' and our 'desire' follows our 'need.' Need refers to Dharma as means and also in another case, mokṣa. 'Desire' refers to kama, and 'artha' also may refer to our need for survival. Suppose, if we want to attach meaning to 'Artha', it would be money. We need money to fulfil our desire. Since money is not a natural resource, we can get it in exchange of something (e.g., labour). In such case, sense of earning is related to our action. As our action precedes anything related to the matter of earning, there we can find a relevant attachment of the concept of Dharma to the motive of and practice of earning. When we are in action in matter of earning, we may have the chance to be corrupt. Thus, we hear the call for Dharma. If we do not follow that Dharma, we shall get no peace but pain. This is very easy to understand that, both – Artha and Kāma can bring peace and pain in human respectively. But, if we utilise them properly in accordance with Dharma, we shall get happiness. So, everything should occur according to what Dharma dictates. Abiding by Dharma refers to moral performances in all cases of dealings – relating to self and non-self. Dharma is the highest order and can be condensed into two attributes, namely – honesty and righteousness. Thus, Dharma becomes an indispensable part of human life and is enlisted first in the list of Puruṣārtha.

In this connection, some verses on Dharma, stated in Mahabharata, can be mentioned. It is said in Mahabharata, that, where, there is Dharma, there is the Win. If we pursue the right way and right actions, we must win – this is the main thesis of Mahābhārata. But, sometimes Dharma is seen to be identified with Mokṣa. For example, when it says that – having been in the state of complete respect and thanks to Vedas and Brahmins if we perform the duties mentioned in Vedas, as a result we shall achieve Dharma and complete freedom from all sufferings. It is rooted in Truth and is achieved by meditation etc. So, Dharma has been the End or Mokṣa of human being, which he achieves through actual practice of prescribed duties. Therefore, Dharma has been the most important part of India's Moral Philosophy. Practically, if we look for its constituent parts, we can find out three important factors – right thinking, right determination and right action. Right thinking, right determination and right action together become the support of that 'Duty Feeling'. We see that, Krishna encouraged Arjuna to be rightly determined about his duty. Arjuna lacked right determination due to the absence of right thinking, and Kṛṣṇa through his teachings, tried to bring Arjuna on the right track of thinking, so that he could realise and be certain about his duty. Determination changes with time and situation, but it becomes righteous after we are able to think right in all cases. These



three things together make up our honesty and righteousness. These are actually two sides of the same coin, and it is Dharma for human beings.

Religion

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'Religion' as The belief in and worship of a superpower, especially a personal God or gods. And in another sense, it is a particular system of faith and worships or it is a pursuit or interest followed with great devotion. It states that, it (religion) is such a '...Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship; the general mental and moral attitude resulting from this belief, with ref. to its effect upon the individual or the community; personal or general acceptance of this feeling as standard of spiritual and practical life.' The word 'religion' came from the Latin word *religio* (or *religionem*), which means – 'obligation, bond and reverence.'

These three together make up religion as a whole. Or it is said that it may come from Latin 'religare', which means 'to bind.' So, the term can describe a system as religion by saying that – religion is an obligatory bond between man and God with complete reverence to Him. Thus, the etymological meaning of 'religion' refers to a system consisting of particular beliefs and thoughts which binds man with divinity or supreme reality mentioning a set of disciplines, which followers are directed to perform. According to Talal Asad, before the word "religion" came into common usage, Christianity was a *disciplina*, a "rule." Christianity was then a power structure opposing and superseding human institutions, a literal Kingdom of Heaven. It was the discipline taught by one's family, school, church, and city authorities, rather than something calling one to be self-disciplined through symbols.

From his writings we can assume that, in his opinion the term 'religion' may include the notion of 'self-discipline.' As we see that self-discipline has been an important factor of 'dharma' in Indian Ethics, hence, we can say that, the concept of 'religion' must include the teachings, which may help a person to become self-disciplined on the path of righteousness. Unless we become righteous, we shall never become religious. It is the basis of all religions. Righteousness in actual refers to Dharma, which in other words make a person completely religious. Religions teach people – what righteousness is. The most important thing that plays the primary role to actualise these things – righteousness and religiousness, is Dharma in other words. All religions call for regularity, divinity and humanity. But, we are unable to focus on the common grounds of religions for whenever we are asked to discuss a particular religion we think of it at first as a 'community', separate from other religious communities. Such a style of viewing conceals the truth of every religion. But, the three factors, namely, regularity, divinity and humanity, have been the basic notions of every religion which a constructionist can assert as the means and also as the ends. In short, a religion is that, which tends to interpret reality and define human nature – finally all religions meet at this point.

After this analysis, we can say that if religion is the circle of human life, then dharma is that field on which the circle is drawn. Without a field nothing can be developed. So, if we want to be religious we need dharma as its basis, otherwise we shall fail to



understand what religion really preaches. Again, unless we realise what religion is we will not understand what Dharma is. We can realise 'Dharma' through the practice of religion. Nevertheless, without religion Dharma can persist, whereas, no religion can persist without Dharma.

The reason being that Dharma deals with that moral part of human life which no religion can avoid. In addition, when religion attaches some special feature of rituals, myths etc., it takes a distinguished form. Ethically both have the same goal of understanding human life and creation. Therefore, like that of Dharma, we can say that religion is closely linked to the concept of social constructionism. So far we have discussed, we found that, Dharma and religion are not identical. When Dharma is circumscribed by particular rituals and practices, then, it takes on the narrower form of religion. Although in English 'religion' refers to the meaning of the Sanskrit word 'Dharma', they are not identical. Religion refers to a particular way to attain divinity. When Dharma wears the suits of one's own opinion, it takes the form of religion. I admit Dr. Mahanambroto Brahamachari's view in this regard. He says, - 'According to English dictionary the English translation of 'Dharma' is Religion. It is a horrible mistake!' According to him

...Acharyas will help you in proceeding along those paths and will act as your guides. To do a research work in a university, you need a guide. Hence, while proceeding along the path to divinity too, you require a guide, a path finder, an Acharya or Guru ... for all the paths there are more than one doctrine, e.g., doctrine of Sankara, Buddha, Nanak, Chaitanya, and Tulsi. There are so many doctrines. These are called 'matam' in Sanskrit and in English it may be 'Religion.'

Religion is not Dharma. For better understanding, if we say Dharma of fire is to burn, it is understandable. Now, if we say religion of fire is to burn – it becomes ridiculous. So, Religion and Dharma do not bear similar senses.

II. Conclusion

In essence, the Indian notion of Dharma and the Western concept of religion differ fundamentally in scope and spirit. Dharma is a comprehensive and dynamic principle that integrates moral, spiritual, social, and cosmic order—it governs not only belief but right action and harmonious living. It is not confined to a specific creed or institutional framework, but represents a universal law sustaining both individual and collective well-being. In contrast, Western religion often centers on faith in a divine authority, organized worship, and doctrinal adherence, emphasizing belief as the basis of salvation. While Dharma stresses righteous conduct and harmony with cosmic law, Western religion highlights personal relationship with God and obedience to divine commandments. Thus, Dharma embodies a holistic philosophy of life, whereas Western religion generally denotes a system of faith and worship rooted in theology. Both, however, aim at guiding humanity toward truth, morality, and spiritual fulfillment.

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