

THE CENTRAL TRUTH OF HINDUISM

A Restatement vis-à-vis Current Controversies over Hindutva

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The closing quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of numerous forms of religious fundamentalism in Asia, in general, and in the Indian subcontinent, in particular. In consequence, the commencement of the twenty-first century had to be characterised by a re-initiation of public debate on the nature, significance and function of religion. As of today, the debate is being carried out as much within India as it is in quite a few other countries of the subcontinent. The contemporary scenario of the debate in India is with reference to so-called Hindutva as the sheet anchor of Hinduism. In view of this, it is quite in place to attempt a re-examination of the current concept of religion, in general, and of the Indian religion, in particular.

In global terms, religion in the social situation of today is being viewed from the perspective of western social scientists. Therefore, religion is related to the structure and process of human societies. After all, social scientists seek to know how religion affects the course of social change. Moreover, major dimensions of religious belief and practice are part of a larger social order today. Even political behaviour is being increasingly influenced by religious group membership, religious belief and religious behaviour.¹ The Indian situation of the last two decades, in particular, bears out that religion has started emphasising beliefs and practices instead of studies of sacred texts and philosophy as used to be undertaken in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. By means of that, each religious group chooses to designate its deepest problems of suffering and injustice, and to specify its most fundamental ways and means of

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¹*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1987, vol. 26, 538-39.

seeking to resolve the problems. Unfortunately, however, all such efforts made by such religious groups in the contemporary situation are becoming responsible for further increase in suffering and injustice to the respective religious group as also to the global community.² Thus, religion has become responsible for all manner of undesirable developments taking place in the Indian subcontinent today.

In the present overall global situation, there is, no doubt, dispute over any acceptable definition of religion. Yet, there is a consensus regarding the need to strive for objectivity with regard to the essential and the typical in religious life or faith, and not with the accidental and the insignificant dimensions. Accordingly, it is being insisted that a good assessment of a given faith must concern itself with the fundamentals of religion. This is specially needed in the case of Hinduism as the major religion of India in view of the latter's identity as a country with a very ancient egalitarian religio-cultural conscience.

In this regard, fortunately, there are already certain ideas and views formed and presented by leading Indian scholars and thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They are worthy of consideration especially because of their abiding influence on, and acceptability to, a large majority of sub-continental Indians. Besides, they are considered as not too much influenced by the western discourse on religion. By and large, they have their own original ideas and constitute the Indianness of their discourse. Above all, their proponents are as diverse as Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sri Aurobindo, S. Radhakrishnan, and Hiriyanna.

Religion in India, according to Swami Vivekananda, is visualised as the awakening of spirituality in man for the purpose of achieving the realization of Divinity. Hinduism, he holds, provides a secure foundation and an ultimate sanction to morality.³ As such, true Hinduism is different from institutional religions by virtue of being free from all unnecessary limits imposed on it by sects and organised religions.⁴ It is above all manner of separatist and disruptive tendencies and universal in all its

²*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 26, 540.

³B. K. Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, 41.

⁴Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, 42.

contents. In it there is no struggle and attempt to believe exclusively in a certain doctrine or dogma since its goal is realisation of the Divine through constant endeavour.⁵ It inspires man to become perfect, to become divine, to reach God and to become perfect as God.

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of religion stem from his conviction that truth itself is God and, therefore, sincere pursuit of truth is itself religion. According to him, religion is ordinarily defined as devotion to some higher power or principle. Gandhi considers religion also as the expression of the permanent nature of man. Its permanent aspect is the aspect of Divinity, i.e., the element of essential goodness present in every man. It has, besides, the character of purifying and elevating one's nature. It arouses in man a sense to the right and the good. It inspires him to have a cognitive urge to know "the beyond."⁶ In Gandhi's view, Hinduism is an ethical religion and stresses the regard for other religions.⁷

Religion, according to Jawaharlal Nehru, has given to human life a set of values, which provides the foundation of morality and ethics. Some form of the religious belief is, therefore, necessary for the generality of mankind.⁸ After all, Nehru opines that religion consists of the inner development of the individual, and the evolution of his consciousness in a direction considered good.⁹ Therefore, a true religion is spiritual in nature. By virtue of being spiritual, religion can be the only cure for social evils such as superstition. In its outward form, however, religion is not the same as it is in its inner spirituality. As a result, religions have also tried to imprison truth in set forms and dogmas, and encouraged ceremonials and practices which have become mere routine and, sometimes, redundant. They have preached a philosophy of submission to established structures of religion, and to the prevailing social order. Yet, religions have brought comfort to innumerable human beings and stabilised society by their values. Organised religions, however, are an obstacle in the progress of civilization because they help the exploiters against the exploited.

⁵T. M. P. Mahadevan and G. V. Saroja, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1983, 109.

⁶Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, 126.

⁷Mahadevan and Saroja, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, 130.

⁸S. Mathur and S. Goyal eds., *Spectrum of Nehru's Thought*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1994, 172.

⁹Mathur and Goyal eds., *Spectrum of Nehru's Thought*, 161ff.

Emphasis on the external forms of religion and neglect of its inner spirit causes much of dishonesty and hypocrisy in the religious life of man. Religion, no doubt, breeds both good and bad. The bad in it, however, encourages reactions like fundamentalism.

Religion in its true form, according to S. Radhakrishnan, is the one thing that strengthens the deeper bonds of ideas and ideals of a civilization's social organization.¹⁰ Recognizing the need of mutual understanding among various religions as an inherent part of Indian religiosity, he writes:

A religion that is based on the central truth of a comprehensive universal spirit cannot support an inflexible dogmatism. It adopts an attitude of toleration not as a matter of policy or expediency but as a principle of spiritual life. Toleration is a duty, not a mere concession. In the pursuance of this duty Hinduism has accepted within its fold almost all varieties of belief and doctrine and treated them as authentic expressions of the spiritual endeavour... Hinduism warns us that each of us should be modest enough to realise that we may perhaps be mistaken in our views and what others hold with equal sincerity is not a matter of ridicule.¹¹

Religion, thus, ensures a strong and stable unity within the organization. It plays an important role in rebuilding the human household as much as science and technology do. Hinduism, for one, glides into love of beauty and order as well as into a spirit of pragmatism. It stands for the perception of the oneness of man with the spirit of truth, love and beauty in the universe. Hinduism recognizes every form of faith as a possessor of some form of truth. It believes in learning the truth not by criticism and discussion but by deepening life and by changing the level of human consciousness. It maintains that God is not merely the highest form to be known but also the highest being to be realized. In India religion is not, as in the West, a mere social phenomenon or a matter of ecclesia. On the contrary, it is the attainment of spiritual freedom as the private achievement of the individual. In general, Hinduism and other Indian

¹⁰S. Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967, 44ff.

¹¹A. L. Basham ed., *A Cultural History Of India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975, 70.

religions have a tendency to other-worldliness while this-worldliness is a characteristic of western religions. The Indian religions provide an insight into reality. They promote a way of life, a scheme of metaphysics, not a creed, not a code or a set of dogmas. They tell everyone to worship God according to one's own faith or *dharma*.¹² Radhakrishnan maintains further that the Indian religious discipline consists in turning inwards, deepening one's awareness and developing a more meaningful attitude to life.¹³ He concludes that Hinduism, in general, represents the soul of the Indian people, its particular spirit, and its thought and temperament.

According to Hiriyanna, religion may become a yearning of the human spirit for union with God, a reaching forward to an ideal without resting in mere belief or outward observances. It promotes and furthers right living.¹⁴ In Hiriyanna's view, therefore, religion should put an end to every form of hate. It should emphasize the necessity for toleration. It must also see that there is, in what it teaches, nothing that makes for intolerance even indirectly.¹⁵

As against these explanations and pronouncements on what constitutes the central truth of the Indian religions, the views of Sri Aurobindo form an uncommon and unique discourse. Rightly so because they are based on such variously relevant branches of knowledge as sociology, psychology, evolution of human consciousness and the history of spirituality, and not in anyway on western ideas of religion. Western views are fractional whereas Sri Aurobindo's views are holistic and comprehensive. He says, for example: "Religion is the spiritual and ethical life of the individual, the relations of his soul with God and the intimate dealings of his will and character with other individuals."¹⁶ He further adds that it is that instinct, idea, activity, or discipline in man, which aims

¹²S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion in a Changing World*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967, 129.

¹³Mahadevan and Saroja, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, 247.

¹⁴M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967, 17-18.

¹⁵M. Hiriyanna, *The Mission of Philosophy*, Mysore: Kayvalaya Publishers, 1960, 39.

¹⁶Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 25, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997, 458.

directly at the Divine.¹⁷ For Sri Aurobindo, thus, the spiritual essence of religion is alone supremely needful. Spirituality is, in fact, religion's own chief business and true aim as "also the common element and the common bond of all religions."¹⁸ In view of this Sri Aurobindo says that the modern economic man is particularly in need of rediscovering the truth that religion is the spiritual and ethical life of the individual.¹⁹ This aspect of his concept of religion represents the central truth of the Indian religions. With spirituality as its core element, the Indian religions have existed in the Indian subcontinent since the Vedic times. As such, they persuade their believers to follow the path of spiritual consciousness. They also set before all human beings the Divine as the ultimate goal and the aim of their being, together with the aim of the holistic development of the individual and the collectivity.

In tracing the "evolution of the spiritual man," says Sri Aurobindo, Hinduism has always leaned upon spiritual thinking. It has continued to retain spiritual experience as its final aim and achievement.²⁰ No doubt, it has sometimes pushed away the philosophical element and leaned on creed and dogma, pietistic emotion and fervour, or moral conduct. Nevertheless, its spiritual philosophy has very uniquely been predominant. By highlighting spiritual experience, Hinduism has sought only the pure truth of spirit even to the extent of giving up all religious creed and worship along with ritual practices.

By unravelling the nature and extent of the spirit-oriented nature of the Indian religions, Sri Aurobindo proves that they are holistic and universal in their world-view and God-view unlike the other religions. In his view, it came to be given the name of Hindu religion largely by foreigners. But as a matter of fact, Sri Aurobindo declares that the spirit-oriented religion of India which is *Sanatan Dharma* in the Vedic sense, is the proper religion of India.

But what is the Hindu religion, ... this religion, which we call *Sanatan*, eternal? It is the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it ... in this peninsula... But it is not circumscribed by

¹⁷Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 25, 173.

¹⁸Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 25, 551.

¹⁹Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 25, 458.

²⁰Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970, 860-61.

the confines of a single country... That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion, because it is the universal religion which embraces all others. If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal.²¹

Employing the term in that broad, non-creedal sense, Sri Aurobindo explicates:

It is the one religion which impresses on mankind the closeness of God to us and embraces in its compass all the possible means by which man can approach God. It is the one religion which insists every moment on the truth which all religions acknowledge, that He is in all men and all things and that in Him we move and have our being. It is the one religion which enables us not only to understand and believe this truth but to realize it with every part of our being. It is the one religion which shows the world ... that it is the *lila* of Vasudeva... It is the one religion which does not separate life in any smallest detail from religion, which knows what immortality is and has utterly removed from us the reality of death.²²

It is obvious from such utterances of Sri Aurobindo that for him Hinduism is nothing but the religious culture of humankind as a whole since it seeks to turn the whole of life towards spirituality.²³ In view of this, it makes itself relevant to the changing spirit of the present times too. For, according to Sri Aurobindo, the true Hinduism makes all creedal or dogmatic characteristics irrelevant. In their place it imposes upon the mind of its followers a belief in the highest consciousness or state of existence. Next, it lays upon the individual life the need of self-preparation till man is ready for an effort to grow consciously into the truth of this greater existence. Thirdly, it provides a well-founded way of knowledge as well as a way of spiritual or religious discipline. Lastly, it provides an organisation of the individual and collective life. It lays out, besides, a framework of personal and social discipline and conduct, a system of mental, moral and vital development of the individual by which each individual can become eventually ready for the greater existence. No wonder, therefore, that Sri Aurobindo declares that Hinduism is well qualified to grow into what he

²¹Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 8, 11.

²²Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 8, 11-12.

²³Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 20, 178ff.

conceives as the “spiritual religion of humanity” since it posits and believes in one secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one and declares that the human race and the human being are the means by which the One Reality will progressively reveal itself in this world.

The religious views of Sri Aurobindo imply, above all, a growing attempt to live out this knowledge of the Divine and to bring about a kingdom of this Divine Spirit upon earth.²⁴ These views of the great Rishi and Yogi need to be borne in mind in the present Indian situation so that the openness and universal outlook that are its hallmarks shall be retained and positively cherished and cultivated for posterity.

²⁴Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 25, 577.