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Pluralism and Universalism within Hinduism

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Hinduism has always traditionally referred to itself as Sanatana Dharma or the Eternal Dharma. Sanatana implies however not simply eternity but perpetual renewal and by implication universality.

Followers of Sanatana Dharma did not need to define themselves relative to another religious group, as they did not see religion and spirituality as something divisive, which needed to be placed in competing camps.

This background universalism of Sanatana Dharma affords Hinduism a synthetic tendency, an ability to incorporate within itself a diversity of views and approaches, including at times those from groups outside of Hinduism or even opposed to Hinduism.

The Hindu tradition also contains a lively tradition of free debate on all aspects of theology, philosophy and metaphysics, showing differences as well as similarities, and not simply equating all teachings as they are. A good example of this is the debates between the dualistic and non-dualistic schools of Vedantic philosophy, but many other examples exist as well. The different sects within Hinduism have always been free to disagree, though each sect has its particular guidelines and there is an overall respect for Dharma.

Universalism implies pluralism, a diversity of views, not mere uniformity or one view or belief for all.

What makes a culture great is a rich diversity of deep thought and free creativity, which is not anarchy, but embracing the entire human potential to transcend, whether through religion, art, science, mysticism or other disciplines. This allows each individual to find his or her path that will likely have some uniqueness about it, which will be based upon inner discovery, not upon outer dictates alone.

This diffuse, inclusive and universal nature of Hinduism can be different than the more singularistic orientation of Abrahamic religions, though it is a view generally shared by pagan traditions. It has caused some followers of Abrahamic religions to view Hinduism not as a religion, which to them implies One God, One Book and One savior or prophet, but as a collection of cults with little in common, much as the early Christians viewed the pagan world around them.

Yet what may be regarded by outsiders as Hindu polytheism, much like pagan polytheism, is not a belief in separate and warring Gods but a form of pluralism, with a background recognition of One Divinity, truth or reality, Ishvara, Atman or Brahman.

The ultimate goal of religion is to know the Divine, which is to know one's Self. This means that religious conversion is only an outer phenomenon and may be of no value at all. We are all inherently one with the Divine. Spirituality is a self-discovery, which is a shedding of outer attachments. This at least has been the Hindu approach through history, which has never embraced any aggressive form of conversion.

If a particular religious teaching does not honor that universal spirituality, we should note, it can lose its ability to benefit our inner being or to unite humanity. Religion as competing beliefs and identities tends to remove us from our natural inclinations and can distort them. Hopefully their era is coming to an end and humanity can once more return to a universal sense of spirituality and the diversity of approaches that it can honor.

Dharma is a universal principle like the law of gravity. It is not a matter of one faith or another and remains in operation for everyone whether they believe in it or not. A particular faith, we should note, cannot be universal, whatever value it may have. There can be no final name, form or personality, book or historical revelation as universal or as representing the supreme. There can be no one such faith for all humanity, whether it is a faith in Jesus, Buddha or Krishna, or in any name or formulation of divinity.

This is not to say that faith is not important. While faith in truth or divinity can be helpful and can take us very far, faith in a particular formulation of truth or divinity is an affair of one community and cannot be for all, however much it may be able to inspire certain groups or individuals.

Hindu thought, notably, the Bhagavad Gita, discusses faith or shraddha as threefold like all of nature as sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic, enlightened, egoistic, or destructive. There is the famous English statement about the danger of blind faith. Just because something is someone's faith does not make it necessarily true, good or beyond question. This is particularly true when the faith is not in some universal principle but in a localized or divisive belief. We must be discriminating relative to faith as we are to all aspects of life.

Different faiths belong to different communities and may help them approach dharma, truth or divinity. But the higher truth is beyond all names, forms and personalities.

Hinduism moreover is a sadhana or spiritual practice tradition and emphasizes individual spiritual experience through Yoga and meditation. All doctrines are to be put to the test of inner practice and made our own, or their real value cannot be realized. In Hinduism, belief is not enough for union with the Divine or for Self-realization. Religion in the outer sense of belief is meant to take us to that place of inner practice, in which the divisions of belief pass away. Our true spiritual work is on ourselves. While we should seek to improve the outer world as well, we should do so from a position of an inner change of consciousness, not through imposing our personal ideas or emotions on others.

Hinduism in its broader formulation as Sanatana Dharma is not meant to be one religion among others, but a synthetic approach to religion, spirituality, science and culture, that can encompass many religions or sampradayas, as well as many different cultural forms and ways of knowledge.

Of course there are inequalities and ignorance in Hindu society that need to be addressed and corrected. But there are teachings within the Hindu tradition that do address these and can correct them if implemented properly. These reform movements within Hinduism need to be strengthened for Hinduism to reclaim the universality it was originally based upon.

Reflecting pluralism in religious and spiritual teachings, we must at a social level respect freedom of religion, extending even to atheism. We should be willing to grant freedom of views even to those whose theology we may not agree with. Note that in Hindu philosophy, even the views of the atheistic Charavaka School were examined with care, and there was not any attempt to suppress them.

Yet while recognizing that there are important doctrinal differences between various religions and spiritual paths, we should also strive to create common ethical values for all humanity. These universal values consist of truthfulness, non-violence, compassion, respect, tolerance and kindness. Such values should be acceptable to all religious or non-religious groups based upon a common human courtesy, regardless of theology or philosophy.

In this regard, Hindu universalism promotes a dharmic pluralism, a freedom of religious beliefs and spiritual practices on all levels, even for teachings that Hindus may not agree with, as long as such teachings do not violate the common ethical foundation of human society and human values. To accept pluralism and universalism is not to encourage conflict or competition, but rather to promote tolerance and a freedom for all to approach or discover the truth according to their own angle of approach.

The world as a whole needs a new universal and pluralistic spiritual tradition that can embrace what is valuable and beautiful in all spiritual traditions, including native and indigenous approaches, without having them lose their unique forms and practices in the process. Hinduism and its tradition of Sanatana Dharma offers a good foundation to do this. It does not seek to convert or conquer the world. Rather it aims at helping us understand that already the entire universe dwells within our own hearts. We are all part of one family but a family in consciousness that includes all existence.

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