

THE MYTH OF UNITY OF ALL RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

It has been attempted by several religious thinkers to synthesize various religions in order to remove the conflict among them. It has been maintained by some that (i) all religions are basically the same, and there is a “rock bottom unity” among all religions [1, p 53]; (ii) that all religions are true [1, p 49], and (iii) that different religions are paths leading to the same goal [3, p 43-45], and so on. This view, though well intentioned, is a myth. I propose to call it “the myth of unity of all religions” and the purpose of my article is to explode this myth.

All the three statements mentioned above are factual statements. Therefore, it is possible to refute them by showing that they do not correspond with the reality, or, in other words, by pointing out facts that contradict them.

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism are the main living religions of the world. The myth of unity of all religions can easily be exploded by showing that these religions make conflicting truth-claims, which are incompatible with one another [2, p 118]. For instance, they have different views regarding the nature of this world or about the nature of “life” after death, or about the ultimate destiny of human beings. They also advocate different moral codes, different methods of worship and different rituals. Since they are not similar, it is not possible for all of them to be true at the same time. It is also not possible to regard them as different paths leading to the same goal, because they do not believe in a common goal.

If we analyze the contents of various religions, as expressed in their religious scriptures, we find that they mainly consist of (i) factual statements about the nature of reality, or the *descriptive* part, and (ii) normative statements or the *prescriptive* part. On further analysis, we find that the prescriptive part of these religions consists of, firstly, general views regarding what is right or wrong and how one ought to behave in different situations in his or her life; and secondly, prescriptions regarding the mode of worship and other associated rituals. In other words, apart from other things, different religions consist of (i) a world-view (ii) a moral code and (iii) methods of worship and other related rituals.

The differences between the mode of worship and other related rituals of various religions are so glaring, that even those who try to synthesize various religions do not claim that all religions have similar methods of worship and

similar rituals. They concentrate on what we may regard as the *philosophical* part of religion for demonstrating the supposed basic unity of all religions. Therefore, for exploding the myth of unity of all religions, I, too, will concentrate on the philosophical part of religion. Our aim is to show that different religions do not have *identical* views either on the nature of the universe or on the moral code to be followed. Besides, on many important issues they have diametrically opposed views that have been a source of perpetual conflict among them, both violent and non-violent.

God

Let us begin with the idea of God. It is widely believed that the concept of God is central to all religions. Many thinkers have treated God as the most central religious concept. So much so, that they have gone to the extent of defining “religion” in terms of “God”. For example, according to James Martineau, “Religion is the belief in an ever living God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the Universe and holding moral relations with mankind.” [8, p 140]

Martineau’s definition of religion appears plausible in the context of prophetic religions like Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All these religions are, broadly speaking, monotheistic — they believe in the existence of one God [4]. However, if we take into account the religions of Indian origin, namely, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, we find that the definition is too *narrow*, as it results in the exclusion of Jainism and Buddhism from the list of religions [4, p 284]. Even Hinduism does not fit in neatly into the monotheistic model of religion. In fact, among religions of Indian origin, Sikhism comes nearest to the monotheistic model [4, p 261]. In case of Hinduism; on the other hand, the situation is much more complex. In Hinduism anthropomorphism (nature-worship), polytheism, monotheism, monism and even atheism

appear to be existing side by side [8, p vol. 4, p 1-3]. In any case; Hinduism is not a strictly monotheistic religion. Finally, Buddhism and Jainism are religions without God [7, p 135-138]. Jain and Buddhist thinkers have given many arguments for refuting the existence of God [7, p 135-138]. Even the literature of Sankhya and Mimamsa, two orthodox schools of Hinduism, contains arguments against the existence of God [6, p 49-50]. In Shankara's *advaita vedanta*, theistic God is regarded as ultimately unreal. *Nirguna brahma* alone is regarded as the only reality [5, p 63-65].

Even religions, which believe in the existence of God, do not have *identical* conception of God [4, p 284]. For example, in Zoroastrianism we find, along with the concept of *ahura mazda* (God), the concept of *ahriman*, who introduces evil in this world. However, it is maintained that, in the struggle between good and evil, *ahriman* and his associated will ultimately be defeated [4, p17]. Again, in Christianity we find the doctrine of *trinity*, according to which “the father, the son and the holy ghost” are three persons in one [4, p 79]. In Sikhism God is regarded as both attributed (*saguna*) and non-attributed (*nirguna*) [4, p 255]. In Hinduism there are different conceptions of God existing side by side. Incidentally, the concept of *avatar* (incarnation of God) is found in Hinduism, but it is not to be found in prophetic religions except Christianity [4, p 79]. For Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism the doctrine of incarnation is blasphemy [4, p 43]. The prophetic religions, on the other hand, believe in a prophet as an intermediary between God and human beings, but the concept of “prophet” is absent in Hinduism and other religions of Indian origin [4, p 149]. Gautama Buddha or Mahavira never claimed that they were prophets or messengers of God. Finally, Sikhism rejects both the concepts of “prophet” as well as *avatar* and lays great stress or emphasis on guru [4, p 255].

Thus, it is more than obvious that, **contrary to the popular opinion, all religions do not have identical views on the existence or the nature of God.** According to some religions, “God exists”, whereas according to some others, “God does not exist”. It is impossible to reconcile these rival truth-claims. Both these statements cannot be true. It is logically impossible to reconcile them.

Life after Death

Though all religions do not believe in the existence of God, all of them do believe in the existence of “life” after death. However, they have different views regarding the *nature* of life after death.

Here, again, the prophetic religions — Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam — have, broadly speaking, similar ideas. All of them believe in resurrection, the Day of Judgment and in heaven and hell. On the other hand, the

religions of Indian origin, namely, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism, have more or less similar ideas. All of them believe in bondage — the cycle of birth and death — and liberation (*mukti, nirvana* or *moksha*). They also accept the related doctrine of *karmawad*. According to this doctrine, depending on his or her *karma*, the soul of the dead person is born in a new body — sometimes in the body of a lower animal such as dog or owl. This process continues till the person attains *mukti* or liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

However, in Hinduism, both the idea of bondage and liberation, as well as heaven and hell appear to be co-existing. There are references in the *Puranas* of a person named Chitragupta taking note of all the actions of human beings in a register in accordance with which they are rewarded or punished by being sent to heaven or hell. *Yama* is regarded as the god of death. His agents bring the souls of dead before God, who sends them to heaven or hell on the basis of the account maintained by Chitragupta. Thus, according to the Hindu view, the cases of the dead persons are disposed of then and there on an individual basis, without waiting for the Day of Judgment. In any case, the idea of resurrection and the Day of Judgment are conspicuous by their absence in all religions of Indian origin, including Hinduism.

To be sure, the prophetic religions and the religions of Indian origin, which form two identical sets as far as the conception of life after death is concerned, vary among themselves regarding details. For example, all prophetic religions believe that on the Day of Judgment all dead persons will come alive with their bodies and taken in front of God, who will send them to heaven or hell, depending on deeds performed by them. But, according to Zoroastrianism, those sent to hell will not stay there permanently. It is suggested that there will be a period of great restoration and renovation in which even “wicked” people will be fully reformed and become perfectly righteous. *Ahriman* and his associates will be completely destroyed, and there will be a life of happiness and bliss for all in the kingdom of *ahura mazda*.

Similarly, though all the religions of Indian origin believe, broadly speaking, in the doctrine of bondage and liberation, they have different views regarding the *cause* of bondage, the *method* of liberation and the *exact nature* of the state of affairs after liberation. Buddhism, for example, rejects both soul and God, and therefore, it explains bondage and liberation without referring to these concepts. Jainism rejects God but accepts soul, therefore, its explanation of bondage is free from God, but is based on the concept of soul. According to Jainism, bondage is caused by the fusion of *karmic* matter with the pure soul. On liberation, soul regains its original pure state.

Sikhism believes in both God and soul. Sikh writings support both the doctrine of the conservation of individual souls, and, also at times, the doctrine of absorption in the *nirguna brahma*.

In Hinduism, according to Shankara's *advaita vedanta*, *nirguna brahma* is the one and the only reality. *Atma* (soul) is same as the *brahma*. The realization of its non-dual character by the soul leads to liberation (*mukti*). Ramanuja, on the other hand, maintains that God (*ishwar*) is personal and with attributes. Individual soul (*jiva*) is a *part* of God, and not identical with it. The liberated soul enjoys the life of perfection in *vaikuntha* (heaven). Ultimately, it becomes like God and enjoys fellowship with him. Atheistic Sankhya, which, too, is a part of Hinduism, explains bondage and liberation, like Jainism, without resorting to the conception of God.

Even if we ignore the differences, which exist *among* the prophetic religions on the one hand, and the religions of the Indian origin on the other, the differences *between* these two sets of religion are too serious to be ignored. Either soul exists or it does not. Either human beings exist after death with their bodies or they exist without their bodies. Either dead persons are reborn or they are not. Either resurrection or the Day of Judgment is real or they are not. Either liberation from the "cycle of birth and death" takes place or it does not. Either *karmawad* is true or it is not. It is not possible for the two contradictory assertions to be true at the same time. This is the most elementary rule of logic. To sum up, **all religions do not believe in the existence of God; and even though all of them believe in life after death, they have conflicting views on what happens after death.**

Prophets and Revealed Books

The prophetic religions appear to have broadly a similar *form*. All of them believe in one God, prophet, and revealed book, life after death, resurrection, the Day of Judgment, heaven and hell. But it will be totally wrong to infer a basic unity among them on this basis, because they have different views on (i) who is and who is not the prophet, (ii) which book is and which is not revealed, and (iii) who are sent to heaven and who are sent to hell on the supposed Day of Judgment.

The Zoroastrians regard Zarathustra or Zoroaster as the prophet, who was "called upon to preach the message of God for all mankind." They regard the *Gatha* or *Zendavesta* as the final authority in religious matters. The Jews, on the other hand, consider Moses their greatest prophet and the *Old Testament* of the existing *Bible* or *Torah* as revealed. The Christians treat Jesus Christ as their highest prophet and as "son of God", and the *Bible* as revealed, but, unlike Jews, they lay greater

emphasis on the *New Testament*, which deals with the life, teaching, death and "resurrection" of Jesus.

The Jews believe in the coming of a messiah, who will bring salvation to all faithful Jews, and will establish a kingdom of universal peace, where lion and lamb will drink at the same fountain without any further fear. However, they refuse to accept Jesus as their messiah. According to them, the messiah is yet to come. The Jews believe in angels and prophets, but not in incarnation of God. For the Jews, Jesus was not even a prophet, because he indulged in blasphemy by claiming to be one with God. For Christians, on the other hand, Jesus was the incarnation of God and greater than any earlier prophet including Moses. Finally, Islam regards Mohammed as prophet and *Koran* as revealed. The cardinal belief of Islam is contained in *kalima*, "there is no God, but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet (*rasul*)". This is considered so important that it is the first thing to be uttered in the ear of a new born male child! Islam accepts Jesus Christ as a prophet, but it does not accept that he was son of God. Christians, on the other hand, do not regard Mohammed as a prophet. Thus, among Semitic religions, **Christianity accepts Moses as a prophet, but regards Jesus Christ as the highest prophet and as the son of God, whereas Judaism refuses to accept Jesus as Messiah, prophet or son of God. Similarly, Islam accepts Moses and Jesus as prophets, but treats Mohammed as the greatest prophet. Judaism and Christianity, on the other hand, refuse to accept Mohammed as prophet.**

According to Christianity, on the Day of Judgment those who have faith in Jesus and Christianity will go to heaven while the non-believers will burn eternally in hell-fire. According to Islam, those who have faith in Islam will go to heaven and others will go to hell. It seems that in almost every religion, which believes in heaven and hell, a place in hell is reserved for persons who do not have faith in that particular religion!

It will be totally naive and unrealistic to suggest that these differences among various religions are not *fundamental*, for these beliefs form the very basis of these religions: belief in Mohammed and *Koran* are as fundamental to Islam as the belief in Jesus and *Bible* is to Christianity. In fact, these differences provide the justification for their existence as separate, identifiable religions, and have been a source of large scale violent conflict among these religions. It is also not possible to logically reconcile these conflicting fundamental beliefs. The statement "Jesus is messiah" is regarded as true by Christians and false by Jews. "Jesus is son of God" is regarded as true by Christians and false by Jews and Muslims. "Mohammed is messenger of Allah" is regarded as true by Muslims but false by Jews and

Christians. Now, all these statements, and several others, such as “*Bible* is revealed” and “*Koran* contains words of Allah” are either true or false. If the Christian claim regarding the prophet is true, then the Jew belief on Jesus is false and vice-versa. If the Islamic claim on Mohammed is true, then the Christians and Jews rejection of the belief is false and vice-versa. It is not possible for all these claims to be true simultaneously.

Veda and Varna-vyavastha

All the religions of Indian origin believe in the doctrine of bondage and liberation. This, again, may create a misleading impression about their basic unity. However, as mentioned earlier, they have different views on God, soul, the cause of bondage, the method of liberation and the exact state of affairs after liberation. Besides, Hinduism believes in the infallibility of the *Vedas* and upholds the *varna-vyavastha*. These two beliefs that are fundamental to Hinduism are rejected by Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Guru Nanak was the founder and the first guru of Sikhism, which is a guru-centered religion. Guru Gobind Singh founder of the *Khalsa* (the military brotherhood of Sikhs) was the tenth and last guru. Since him, the Sikhs regard *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS) and the *Akal Takht* as the highest religious authority. But this is not accepted by Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. The Buddhists attach highest importance to the teachings of Gautama Buddha as contained in *Tripitakas* and their other religious books. Jainism, on the other hand, has its own separate religious literature, namely, *Angas*. Jainism is often described as a “religion of *tirthankaras*”. The Jain religious literature mentions twenty-four *tirthankaras*, Vardhamana Mahavira being the last one. Vardhamana Mahavira is the one who has been given highest importance by the Jains. Thus, **all religions attach highest importance to their own religious literature, irrespective of whether they regard it as revealed or not. An attitude of faith towards their religious scriptures and founders is the fundamental “common” trait of all religions, but, ironically this cannot be a source of unity, but only of conflict.**

Moral Codes

The potential synthesizer of religion may maintain that, though religions differ on factual issues like the existence of God, soul, nature of life after death, the prophet and the revealed book, etc.; these tenets are not *central* to them. They may assert that morality is the “essence” of all religions, and, as far as morality is concerned, all the religions have more or less similar ideas.

Firstly, it is not correct to maintain that the ideas mentioned earlier in this article are not fundamental to religion, because, as pointed out earlier, the very

existence of these religions as separate, identifiable religions is rooted in them. Secondly, the ethical ideas of various religions are also linked to these factual beliefs. The ethical ideas of prophetic religion are, for example, linked to God, prophet, revealed book, resurrection, Day of Judgment, heaven and hell. Heaven can be regarded as the highest ethical goal only if those who believe in the existence of heaven. Similarly, *moksha* can be regarded as the ultimate ideal only if one believes in the cycle of life and death. Again, a Muslim follows *shariat* because he regards it as divine. The Hindus, too, treat their *dharmashastras* as revealed. The Buddhists follow the teachings of the Buddha, because they regard him as the greatest ethical teacher.

Most importantly, it is also not true that all religions have similar ethical ideals. Let us, first of all, consider what is the highest end of life according to different religions? And secondly, what is the right method according to them for attaining this end?

Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism regard liberation (*moksha*, *nirvana* or *mukti*) from “bondage” or from “the cycle of birth and death” as the highest ethical end. The prophetic religions, on the other hand, do not believe in rebirth. As the idea of the cycle of birth and death is itself not regarded as real by them, the question of trying to attain “liberation” from it simply does not arise. For prophetic religions, going to heaven or “salvation” is the highest ethical end. Thus, contrary to popular belief, **all religions do not share a “common goal”**.

The differences among various religions become even more glaring when we turn our attention to the *method* of attaining the ethical goal. Even religions, which, on face value, seem to be sharing a common goal are found to be advocating different moral codes. According to Judaism, for example, salvation can be attained by obedience to the laws of Moses. According to Christianity, however, salvation can be attained by having faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. According to Islam, salvation can be attained by strict obedience to the commandments of Allah as expressed through his messenger, Mohammed.

Similarly, Jainism recommends *triratna* (three jewels) for attaining liberation, whereas Buddhism prescribes *astangika marga* (eight-fold path). In Hinduism, Shankara and Ramanuja, prescribe different methods for attaining liberation. According to Shankara, knowledge of *brahma* alone can give liberation. Ramanuja, on the other hand, emphasizes *bhakti* (devotion). *Bhagavad Gita* talks of three different paths: *gyan marga*, *karma marga* and *bhakti marga* (the paths of knowledge, action and devotion).

Sikhism seems to have incorporated both Shankara and Ramanuja [See editorial note at the end].

It is possible to give many examples of conflicting ethical ideas within religions. But I do not want to over argue my case or to bother my readers with excessive details. By now it has become fairly obvious that the so-called unity of all religions is a myth. However, before concluding this essay, I want to mention some relatively important ethical instances that come to my mind. Let us, for example, consider the issue of violence and non-violence. On one hand, we have religions like Jainism and Buddhism, which emphasize non-violence. And, on the other hand, we have religions like Islam and *Khalsa panth* of Sikhism, whose founders themselves were warriors. Jainism is opposed to violence to such an extent that the Jains gave up agriculture. They did not want to kill insects while plowing! Now, no one in his senses will maintain or should maintain that the ethical stance of Jainism on the issue of violence is similar to that of Islam, Sikhism or even Hinduism.

Varna-vyavastha is another important example of divergent ethical attitudes among religions. Hinduism is the only religion that upholds *varna-vyavastha* - a system of graded inequality based on birth. No other religion accepts it. Buddhism, in particular, specifically rejects *varna-vyavastha*. It will be a travesty of facts to say that Hinduism and Buddhism have a similar attitude towards *varna-vyavastha*.

Worshipping God is yet another important issue on which religions have a conflicting approach. According to Jainism and Buddhism, one can attain liberation by ones own efforts without worshipping God. God is not mentioned at all in either Jain *triratna* or in Buddhist *astangika marga*. Obviously this view is not shared by theistic religions with their stress on “God’s grace” for attaining liberation or salvation. The attitude on the issue of idol-worship, too, is as sharply divided. Buddhists worship idols of the Buddha. The Jains worship the idols of Vardhamana and other *tirthankaras*. Idol-worship is a part of Hinduism as well. But Islam is very strongly opposed to idol-worship and so is Sikhism. It is easy to show that there is a wide diversity in methods of worship and other rituals of different religions. People, who regard all religions as basically same, admit these differences. But they regard these as merely “external forms” of religion. However, for people who sincerely believe in a particular religion, these so-called external

forms are no less important.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, on fundamental questions about God, nature of life after death, morality, etc., *all* religions do not have *identical* beliefs. Some beliefs and some ethical ideas are, no doubt, shared by some religions to some extent, but even these religions have many other fundamental differences. In other words, **no two religions share all their fundamental beliefs**. If they did, they would not have remained two separate religions. Therefore, there is no rock-bottom unity among different religions. Instead, what we find is conflicting truth-claims and discord. The thesis that all religions are basically same can only be maintained by a person with inadequate knowledge of fundamental beliefs of different religions, or by a person who has a non-serious attitude towards religions, or by a person who is so carried away by his enthusiasm to reconcile various religions that he loses his objectivity and becomes selective in his use of religious data. Synthesizers of religion have often been motivated by a desire to prevent religious conflict and to promote communal harmony, which are indeed commendable aims. However, rationalism and humanism or rational humanism is what we really need for achieving fellowship among human beings, and not a confused and illogical approach towards religion.

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Editorial Note: Information on Sikhism given by the author is based on the available literature and most of that is correct but some are likely to be different according to some Sikh authors. However, the author has pointed out that Sikhism has some unique principles: i) Sikhism rejects both the concepts of ‘prophet’ as well as ‘avatar’ and lays great stress or emphasis on ‘guru’; and ii) does not believe in *varna-vyavastha*.
