

Does Philosophy of Religion Solve Religious Conflicts?

Dr. Laxmikanta Padhi

Associate Professor in Philosophy

University of North Bengal

Darjeeling- 734013, West Bengal

and

UGC-IUC Associate, June-2018, IAS, Shimla

We philosophize when we reflect critically upon what we are actually doing in our world. What we are doing, of course, in the first place, is living. And living involves passions, faiths, doubts and courage. The critical inquiry into what all these things mean and imply is philosophy.

ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that, religion is ubiquitous. Nevertheless, attempting to offer a definition of religion which captures all and only what are taken to be religions is notoriously difficult. Historically, philosophical reflection on religion had two kinds of motivations: first, God or *Brahman* or *Nirvāṇa* or whatever else the *object* of religious thought, attitudes, feelings, and practice was believed to be, and, second, the human religious *subject*, that is, the thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and practices themselves. Thus, the spectacular and extraordinary growth and vibrancy of philosophy of religion provides a wide range of exciting topics for debates like, those involving attacks on religious belief and conflicts and those involving arguments for religious beliefs. The definition of religion may be referred to an individual or group identity capable of political mobilization and affecting the legitimacy of governments and government policy concerning the sociology and ontology of religious beliefs and conflicts. Some may argue that people who do violence are, by definition, not religious and do not really understand the meaning of religion.

Almost all of us will agree with the fact that, the conflict between the Muslim world and the West is essentially political but on a popular level, religion is also seen as one of its root causes. What I feel in this paper is that all religions provide its followers a set of goals to achieve in life, and in doing so, provides a meaning to each follower's life. To be religious necessitates neither a total absence of reasoning nor a positively irrational approach to religion. Religion and ethical decision making is not simply the province of philosophers or theists. Our choices reveal our values and responsibilities to the world. These values are neither unreflective nor superficial. Thus, what I propose to conclude that Philosophical analysis of religion helps us to make our values and choices deep and thoughtful for which there is every possibility of conflict resolution.

Introduction:

Religion is a belief in the existence of God or a spiritual being. As such, it is a key component of individual and group identity. It provides a spiritual meaning of life, loyalty and association. Broadly speaking, definitions of "religion" tend to fall into one of two classes. One sort of definition is substantial or doctrinal; a given religion is defined in terms of the beliefs its adherents accept that make them adherents of that religion, and religion generally is

characterized in terms of beliefs that all religions are alleged to share. Another sort of definition is functional or pragmatic; “religion” is defined in terms of what it is alleged that all religions do or what the social function of religion is alleged to be. Some definitions, of course, are somewhat less than objective. Marx’s claim that religion is the opiate of the people is not proposed as a scholarly and neutral definition of religion – or, even if it is presented as neutral, it isn’t. It is a functional definition rather than a substantial definition. “Religion is the superstitious acceptance of the belief that God exists” is a non-neutral substantial definition. “Religion is the act of getting right before God” is a non-neutral definition that is partly substantial and partly functional.

There is no doubt that, religion is ubiquitous. Nevertheless, attempting to offer a *definition* of religion which captures all and only what are taken to be religions is notoriously difficult. Central to some religions is a personal God and other spiritual entities; for other religions, there is no God or spirits at all. Some religions view the eternal, personal existence of the individual in an afterlife as paramount to understanding Ultimate Reality and much more important than temporary earthly existence. Others see what we do in *this* life as fundamental, with little if any consideration of the hereafter. Other differences among the religions abound. But as diverse as religions are, several components seem to be central to the world religions: a system of beliefs, the breaking in of a transcendent reality, and human attitudes of ultimate concern, meaning, and purpose. Given these three elements, the following line perhaps captures what most take to be the essence of the concept of religion: a religion involves a system of beliefs and practices primarily centered on a transcendent Reality, either personal or impersonal, which provides ultimate meaning, quality and purpose to life.

Our world is in many ways a religious world, with roughly eighty-five percent of the population affirming some form of religious belief. But religion and belief are diverse for which the differences are multifarious. There are also similarities as all religions include beliefs, ideas, and practices that centered on a transcendent Reality - a Reality which provides ultimate meaning and purpose of life. It is said that “Reality is one; sages call it by various names”: *ekamsadviprāḥbahudhāvadanti*. All religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam laid stress on *Dharma*. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Kant, Swedenborg and Spinoza are all striking examples in the interesting history of Western philosophy for the high pedestal on which they have placed morality, duty and righteousness, and adored them all as the only means to the attainment of the goal of life. Each religion lays greater stress on certain aspects of *Dharma*. *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* claims: “*Yato-bhyudayaniḥśreyasa-siddhiḥsadharmaḥ.*”

“That which leads to the attainment of *Abhyudaya* (prosperity in this world) and *Niḥśreyasa* (total cessation of pain and attainment of eternal bliss hereafter) is *Dharma*.”

What is philosophy of religion?

Metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are disciplines within philosophy. Metaphysics is the enterprise of constructing and assessing accounts of what there is. Epistemology is the enterprise of constructing and assessing accounts of what knowledge is and how it can be attained. Ethics is the enterprise of constructing and assessing accounts of what makes actions right or wrong, what makes persons good or evil, what possesses intrinsic worth, what sort of life is worth living, and how these matters are related. Philosophy of religion combines these enterprises in offering philosophically accessible accounts of religious traditions and assessing those traditions. Nothing very complex is involved in offering philosophically accessible accounts of religious traditions; the idea is simply to offer clear and literal expressions of key doctrines.

Philosophy of Religion as a distinct discipline is an innovation of the last 200 years, but its central topics - the existence and nature of the divine, humankind's relation to it, the nature of religion, and the place of religion in human life - have been with us since the inception of philosophy. Philosophers have long critically examined the truth of and rational justification for religious claims, and have explored such philosophically interesting phenomena as faith, religious experience, and the distinctive features of religious discourse. The second half of the twentieth century was an especially fruitful period, with philosophers using new developments in logic and epistemology to mount both sophisticated defenses of, and attacks on, religious claims.

The expression “philosophy of religion” did not come into general use until the nineteenth century, when it was employed to refer to the articulation and criticism of humanity's religious consciousness and its cultural expressions in thought, language, feeling, and practice. Historically, philosophical reflection on religious themes had two foci: first, God or *Brahman* or *Nirvana* or whatever else the *object* of religious thought, attitudes, feelings, and practice was believed to be, and, second, the human religious *subject*, that is, the thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and practices themselves. The first sort of philosophical reflection has had a long history. In the West, for example, discussions of the nature of God (whether he is unchanging, say, or knows the future, whether his existence can be rationally demonstrated, and the like) are incorporated in theological treatises such as Anselm's *Proslogion* and *Monologion*, Thomas Aquinas's *Summas*, Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, and al-Ghazali's *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. They also form part of influential metaphysical systems like Plato's, Plotinus's, Descartes', and

Leibniz's. *Vedanta* and classical Buddhism included sophisticated discussions of the nature of the *Brahman* and of the Buddha, respectively. Many contemporary philosophers of religion continue to be engaged with these topics.

Thus, Philosophy of Religion is currently a major field of study, and the range of topics encompassed within it is considerable. Nevertheless, its scope is fairly narrow, for philosophy of religion is simply the philosophical reflection on religious ideas. The terms "philosophical reflection" and "religious ideas" need elucidation. "Philosophical reflection" in this context includes the careful analyses of words, reasons and evidences for claims, hypotheses, and arguments. These analysis themselves include fundamental issues about the nature of reality (metaphysics) and the way in which we come to know things (epistemology).

Regarding these fundamental issues, philosophy of religion and, of course, philosophy itself has taken new directions in recent times. While philosophical reflection on religious ideas has been occurring for centuries, even millennia, it underwent a momentous setback in the early-to-mid twentieth century through the work of the logical positivists. Logical positivists held, among other things, that for a claim to be true and meaningful it must be empirically verifiable. As religious claims were for the most part taken to be empirically unverifiable, philosophical reflection on religious themes was widely considered to be a specious endeavor and religious ideas were often taken to be meaningless. However, due to the work of a number of leading philosophers who were responding to positivism and defending the philosophical viability of religious beliefs - philosophers such as John Hick and Alvin Plantinga - by the 1970s the field began to take a significant turn. Today, philosophy of religion is flourishing and it is not uncommon to see philosophy journals, anthologies, and monographs devoted exclusively to religious themes. Philosophy of religion is sometimes part of a larger philosophical project. For example, for Hegel, religion is the self-representation of Absolute Spirit in feeling and images. As such, it is a stage in a historical process that culminates in philosophy. Descartes provides another example. His *Meditations* introduce ontological arguments for God's existence to help resolve skeptical doubts.

Philosophical analysis of religion is often not welcomed with open arms by systematic theologians in theology. This suggests that the God of philosophers has little or nothing to do with the God of Abraham, Isaac or *Brahman*. Theologians say that philosophers are applying their analytic tools to an idol, an exaltation of their construction. Conversely, they hold living God simply not to be susceptible to analytic scrutiny. The mystery of God, as worshipped and adored in the community of faith, is beyond the capacity of human and philosophical mind to analyze which is considered as a tension noted between the philosophers and the theologians.

If someone gives emphasis on the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam then it can be found that historically, the monotheistic traditions have included the belief that there is only one God - a personal God who is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omni-benevolent (completely good in every way), and thus worthy of worship. This God is the creator and sustainer of the world. Furthermore, a distinction is often made among monotheists between *theists*, who believe that God is distinct from the world and yet actively involved in the world (guiding human history, for example, and offering divine revelation); *deists*, who believe that God is distinct from the world and not actively involved in the world; and *panentheists*, who believe that God permeates and is co-dependent with the world.

Besides the monotheistic traditions, Hinduism and Buddhism have also received more attention by philosophers of religion in the English-speaking world than other traditions have received. The school of thought within Hinduism which has received the most attention is *Advaita Vedānta*. The view of God, or *Brahman*, for those affirming *Advaita Vedānta* is called *monistic pantheism* “monism” is from the Greek term *monus* which means “one” or “single”; “pantheism” is from the Greek terms *pan* which means “all” and *theos* which means “God”). On this view, *Brahman* is all; *Brahman* is one; *Brahman* is everything. This is not the only or even the most prominent form of Hinduism; there are also theistic and *polytheistic* (many gods) forms of Hinduism. But it is the most discussed form within the philosophy of religion, and so it will receive more attention here than other forms.

CONFLICT AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION:

It is defined as a relationship between two or more parties that centres on religious differences, disagreement, interest, divergence, incompatibility, clash of wills and the like. it may involve feeling of hatred and opposition. It is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of social change’ and ‘the way we deal with conflict is a matter of habit and choice’. As long as people live together, work together, and interact with each other, disputes remain inevitable between sub-groups or individuals in a group, or between different groups. Humans do not have a violent brain. There is nothing in our neuropsychological make up that compels us to react violently. How we react is shaped by how we have been conditioned and socialized.

Bertrand Russell (1957) observes that religion spawns many interpersonal conflicts like, war, intolerance and hatred - all conflicts in the name of religion. He suggests that religion has done more harm than good to society and its members. Philosophical discussion on conflict pose questions like,

1. Do people recognize both interpersonal and intrapersonal religious conflicts?
2. Do conflicts arise more over thoughts than over actions?

3. How are conflicts resolved?

Intrapersonal conflict is the conflict humans face within themselves, it is a conflict between 'should' and 'want'. 'Should' is always driven by the values, religious beliefs, upbringing etc. 'Wants' on the other hand are driven by the environment which tempts humans to indulge overlooking 'should'. Inter-personal conflicts are the conflicts on personal grounds, such as between church members, staff and leadership. 'Interpersonal' conflict is the typical disagreement between two or more people and over 90% of all conflicts are in this category. Given the fluid nature of conflicts, it is difficult to separate causes and effects and draw clear conclusions, so a holistic approach that takes contextual variables into account is required. Religion may be one of these variables.

But Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* in 1996 had marked that the conflicts of world society would no longer be based on ideological antagonism but on the value systems of the world religions. Some philosophers argue that the real motivation behind so-called religious violence is in fact economic and political, not religious. Others will argue that people who do violence are, by definition, not religious. The Crusader is not really a Christian or a Hindu, for example, because he doesn't really understand the meaning of Christianity or Hinduism. It is impossible to separate out religious from economic and political motives in such a way that religious motives are innocent of violence. How could one, for example, separate religion from politics in Islam, when Muslims themselves make no such separation?

It may be the case that the Crusader has misappropriated the true message of Christ, but one cannot therefore excuse Christianity of all responsibility. We need a phrase that is more exact than "Islamic terror." These acts may be committed by people who call themselves Muslims, but they violate essential principles of Islam. The Quran prohibits aggressive warfare, permits only war in self-defense, and insists that peace, reconciliation and forgiveness are the true Islamic values. It also states firmly that there must be no compulsion in religious matters, and for centuries Islam had a much better record of religious tolerance than Christianity. *Jihad* is a beloved spiritual value that, for the majority of Muslims, has no connection at all with violence. Osama bin Laden was not inspired by Wahhabism but by the writings of the Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by President Jamal Abdul Nasser in 1966. Thus, we need a code of religious tolerance for international cooperation to protect us from religious conflict and to maintain peace. For Hinduism, the real challenge in the modern world is finding a way to avoid getting bogged down in various forms of violence either in the name of nationhood or religion. In Buddhist scriptures, all forms of mental, verbal and physical abuse, whether directed towards oneself or others, are defined as possible examples of 'violence'.

ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE CURRENT CRISIS:

As we are all agreed, the conflict between the Muslim world and the West is essentially political but on a popular level religion is seen as one of its root causes. Islam is regarded in the West as an essentially violent faith that impels worshippers to acts of terror and on the Muslim side claim to be inspired wholly by the Quran. Secularists sometimes regard all religion as essentially divisive and obscurantist. There is a symbiotic relationship between religion and contemporary politics: each influences and exacerbates each other. It is, therefore, essential and let us look at those dimensions that give an accurate apprehensions of the precise role of religion in the current crisis, and makes some practical recommendations for the future in the following way.

Apprehensions

- First, none of the so-called “world religions” condones or encourages killing. Recent studies show that at their inception, they were all rooted in a disciplined rejection of violence. All promote the ideals of compassion, justice and respect for the sacred rights of the individual. This is no less true of Islam than of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Confucianism or Daoism.
- It is true, however, that all these faiths first developed in periods of great violence and that their scriptures often bear the marks of the warfare and aggression of their time.
- Historically it can be observed that when warfare becomes endemic in a region, religion gets, sucked into the conflict and becomes part of the problem.
- Modernity has privileged some at the expense of others; from the very beginning, people were victimized by the modernization of their region
- The “fundamentalist” movements are by no means always violent, however. Most “fundamentalists” simply try to live what they consider a good religious life in a world that seems increasingly hostile to faith and their counter-offensive against the mainstream is peaceable.
- It is a mistake to view a “fundamentalism” as typical of the tradition; “fundamentalisms” are innovative movements; even though they claim to represent the faith, they are in fact unorthodox- even anti-orthodox.
- “Fundamentalism” sometimes takes the form of “religious patriotism,” replacing the 19th century European model of nationalism with one based on religion. In the Muslim world, where Western secular nationalism was a foreign import, this religious national identity is regarded as a restoration of integrity, a return to the state of affairs that existed before the colonial disruption.

- From the very beginning - perhaps even from the Neanderthal period - human beings have been myth-makers. We are meaning-seeking creatures and perpetually create mythologies to explain our circumstances, especially when we are in distress. There is a great deal of mythology today; a diluted form of the extreme myths of the “fundamentalist” groups mentioned above has become widespread among the general public and even among politicians.

Practical Recommendations

1. All religious leaders should study the texts in their own scriptures that have incited their co-religionists to aggression and hatred, examining the context in which these texts were created and seeing how they relate to the tradition as a whole; and engage in a creative critique of text books and preaching methods. Before castigating other traditions, they should study the history of their own failings. Such self-criticism is regarded as imperative and central in all the major world religions. They should also make the faithful aware of the profound unanimity of the world religions. This should take priority.
2. In the same spirit, religious groups should discourage double standards, the demonization of the “other”, and polarizing, dehumanizing mythologies, which are against the explicit teachings of all the great traditions.
3. There should be serious discussion, in all religious traditions and at all levels of society, about the nature of religious texts and the way we read our scriptures. The rational bias of our scientific modernity has resulted in a new and unskillful literalism.
4. There should be a serious study of the ideology and mythology of “fundamentalist” or extremist religious groups. They should not be simply dismissed, ignored, or regarded with secularist disdain, because these teachings often express fears and anxieties that no society can safely ignore.
5. Secular conflicts should not be allowed to aggravate. If they do, the issues can become sacralized and this makes final reconciliation far more difficult.
6. During the second half of the twentieth century, there was a religious revival in many parts of the world. “Fundamentalism” is one example of this new religiosity, and it has always developed in a symbiotic relationship with a secularism/liberalism that is experienced as alien, invasive, aggressive or even lethal. Unjust, cruel, or divisive policies are the breeding ground for religious extremism.

7. It would be advisable for the media and politicians to refrain from such phrases as “Muslim terrorism or ‘Hindu terrorism’.” These atrocities violate the traditions of both Hinduism and Islam.

Proposed Conclusion:

According to Gandhiji, “in today’s world of religious disharmony ‘the need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions. We want to reach not the dead level, but unity in diversity. Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, climate and other surroundings is not only bound to fail but is a sacrilege. The soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts.” Let us understand *Dharma* and find out our own *Dharma*. One may or may not be religious, may or may not believe in God, but can be Dharmic. If we understand this system as an approach to a universal tradition, which shows how truth and spirituality can be integrated into the whole of life, then it can be of great value for formulating a global dharmic culture today.

Human beings are dependent on bonding and relationships, which renders them vulnerable and gives them the power to violate others. There is always a religious purpose for life. An Atheist can lead a meaningful life. Normal lives get happiness in the pursuit of something bigger - a religious as well as ethical life. Immoral acts are not necessarily irrational. People should see that our best shot at a meaningful life is achieved by pursuing a religious life. ‘Responsible’ means being accountable to word and deed. Having a sense of duty is to fulfill tasks with reliability, dependability and commitment to God. Our choices reveal our values to the world. These values are neither unreflective nor superficial. What I feel that religion provides its followers a set of goals to achieve in life, and in doing so, provides a meaning to each follower’s life. Without such guidance, one would likely conclude that life is ultimately meaningless. Therefore, for those individuals in the world who feel that there is no religious life, is either belief in a religious faith or all that is needed to change their minds? To be religious necessitates neither a total absence of reasoning nor a positively irrational approach to religion. What being religious does require, however, is that at some point or other one accepts certain beliefs without the possibility of their being grounded upon or refuted by argument. One may believe that there is a God, for example, even though he is convinced that arguments for the existence of such a being are utterly inconclusive. Let me end with a Shanti Mantra from the *Krishna Yajurveda Taittiriya Upanishad* (2.2.2). ॐ सह नाववतु । सह नौ भुनक्तु । सह वीर्यं

करवावहै | तेजस्विनावधीतमस्तु मा विदविषावहै || (Om, May we all be protected May we all be nourished May we work together with great energy May our intellect be sharpened (may our study be effective) Let there be no Animosity amongst us Om, peace (in me), peace (in nature), peace (in divine forces)

References:

1. Augustine, *City of God*, tr. John Healey, London: Dent, 1945.
2. B. Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), part V.
3. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957.
4. Brown, D., *Continental Philosophy and Modern Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.
5. Dwivedi OP (1990). *The Essence of the Vedas*, Visva Bharati Research Institute, Gyanpur, Varanasi.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1975).
7. Jernes H (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Vol. II), New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1958.
8. John Cottingham, 'The ethics of self-concern', *Ethics* no. 101 (July 1991), pp. 798–817.
9. John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* London: Longmans, Green, 1923.
10. Kant, Immanuel. 1997. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Ed. Mary Gregor. Introduction by Andrews Reath. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
11. Kant, Immanuel. 1999. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. Paul Geyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
12. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).