

## Appendix B



### An Extract from the Essay 'An Inquiry into the Meaning of Dharma'

MASTER: What does religion mean?

DISCIPLE: Why, that is common knowledge.

MASTER: Never mind, let us see what you know.

DISCIPLE: Suppose I say it is belief in life after death?

MASTER: The ancient Jews did not believe in after-life. Was theirs not a religion?

DISCIPLE: What if I say that it is believing in gods and goddesses?

MASTER: Religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism have no goddesses, and they have only one god—the Supreme Lord. Are these not religions?

DISCIPLE: Does religion mean belief in the Supreme Lord then?

MASTER: There are many beautiful religions in which there is no concept of the Supreme Lord. If you study the earliest hymns of the Rig Veda, you will see that, at the time these were composed, there were many gods and goddesses whom the Aryans worshipped; but there was no God. Vishvakarma,<sup>1</sup> Prajāpati,<sup>2</sup> Brahmā<sup>3</sup> and similar words that denote a Supreme God are not to be found in the older hymns—they occur only

in the comparatively recent ones. The ancient followers of Sāṅkhya too were atheists; and yet, they were not without religion for they believed in the causality between actions and their rewards and actively sought deliverance or salvation. Buddhism also is Godless. So how can I say that religion is simply believing in gods and goddesses? Observe, nothing is clear as yet.

DISCIPLE: Then we have perforce to borrow an expression from Western logicians—religion is belief in an other-worldly state of being.

MASTER: In other words, supernaturalism. Now see where you have arrived. Barring the spiritualists, the scientific community as a whole is of the opinion that there is no evidence of life beyond the veil. Where there is no life there is neither any dharma nor any need for it. Remember, when I say dharma I mean religion.

DISCIPLE: But, in a sense, dharma exists even among the most scientifically-minded people; for example, with Religion of Humanity (*sic*).

MASTER: Therefore, belief in an other-worldly state of consciousness is not what religion is.

DISCIPLE: Then you tell me how I should define it.

MASTER: The question is really a very old one. The introduction to the Meemāṃsā system of philosophy<sup>4</sup> is called '*Athāto Dharma-jigyāsā*'. The whole purpose of this philosophy is to provide an answer to the question of what religion is. Till now it has not been possible to arrive at an explanation that is universally acceptable. Nor is there any possibility that I shall be able to supply an answer that will satisfy all, but I can surely give you the opinions of scholars who have dealt with this question. First, the views of the propounder himself. Jaimini says, '*Nodanālakshmano dharmah*.' '*Nodanā*' seems to suggest action. Had he stopped at this, we should have found the explanation unexceptionable. But when he goes on to say '*Nodanā pravartako vedavidhirupah*', I begin to wonder if you will agree to accept this as dharma.

DISCIPLE: Never; for, in that case, we should have to recognize as many types of religions as there are holy books. Christians

may insist that religion is what the Bible says and Muslims may make a similar claim about the Koran. Let there be as many different ways to practice religion as there will. However, isn't there a general concept called religion that is commonly and invariably understood? If there can be religions, can't there be something called religion?

MASTER: One group of people, comprising scholars like Laugakshi Bhasker have described religion as '*Vedapratipadyaprayojan-avadartha dharmah*', the sum and substance of which is that religion consists of only sacrifices and oblations and has come to stand for a system of conduct that is prescribed, approved and corroborated by the Vedas. Likewise, in the Mahābhārata we have:

*Shraddhā karma tapashchryva satyamakrodha evacha,  
Sveshu dāreshu santoshah shaucham vidyānasoojitā.  
Ātmagyānam titikshā cha dharmah sādharāno nripa.*<sup>5</sup>

There are others who say, '*Dravyakriyāguṇādeenām dharmatvam*'; and yet a third group to whom religion is a sort of destiny. On the whole, the consensus among the Aryans seems to have been that religion was nothing but the performance of Vedic and popular rituals. As Vishvamitra says,

*Yamāryāh kriyāmanam hi shamsantyāgamavedinah,  
Sa dharmo yam vigarhanti tamadharmam prachakshate.*<sup>6</sup>

But it is not as though the Hindu scriptures do not offer an alternative point of view. Pronouncements like '*Dve vidye veditavye iti ha sma yad Brhamavido vadanti parā chyvāparā cha*'<sup>7</sup> demonstrate that the knowledge of the Absolute is superior to the knowledge of the Vedas and the sacrifices and oblations they prescribe. The broad idea of the Bhagavad Gita is but an affirmation of its own superiority over the comparative inadequacy of the ritualistic religion of the Vedas. Interestingly, within the precincts of traditional Hindu religion, there appears to lie a separate and distinct body of thought, beautiful and heart-warming, that seems generally to go against the grain of the Meemāṃsa philosophy and the concept of Hinduism that emanates from it. Wherever it occurs—whether in the Gita or in the Mahābhārata or in the Bhagavad Purāna—we find that it is Lord Krishna who is its deliverer. For this reason, I believe

that it was Krishna Himself who preached and spread this religion, and I wish to call this His own gospel. To illustrate the point I shall quote a few lines from the section of the Mahābhārata that describes the great war when Karna<sup>8</sup> was the general of the Kaurava forces.

Many people point to the Vedic laws as the authority that determines what dharma is. I have nothing against it. But the Vedic laws do not cover all of dharma or the entire gamut of its meanings. Therefore, the meaning of dharma has to be derived by inference.

It is for the creation and preservation of life and living beings that dharma has been established. Consequently, performing non-violent acts is tantamount to abiding by the rules of dharma. It is to mitigate the savagery of barbarians that dharma has been created. *Dhāran*<sup>9</sup> of life—this is what dharma does, and this is from where it derives its name. Therefore, anything by which life is preserved is dharma. It was Krishna who delivered these lines. Now here is the interpretation the pious huntsman of the Mahābhārata gave. It occurs in that part which describes the Pandavas' life of exile in forests. 'Whatever that is good for the people at large is Truth. Truth is the best means to the realization of dharma. It is through Truth that genuine knowledge is gained and good achieved.' Here dharma has been used to indicate Truth.

DISCIPLE: Our people have explained dharma purely as a code of ethics or a system of good behaviour. What about dharma as religion?

MASTER: Our countrymen never did understand the subject of religion as a separate and distinct entity. How can I possibly assign either word or meaning to an entity that does not exist in my intelligence?

DISCIPLE: I do not seem to understand this very well.

MASTER: Then let me read you a passage from an English essay I have with me here:

For religion the ancient Hindus had no name, because his conception of it was so broad as to dispense with the necessity of a name. With other peoples, religion is only a part of life; there are things religious, and there are things lay and secular. To the Hindu, his whole life is religion. To other peoples, their relationship with God

and to the spiritual world are things sharply distinguished from their relationship to with man and with the temporal world. To the Hindu, his relationship with God and his relationship with man, his spiritual life and his temporal life are incapable of being so distinguished. They form one compact and harmonious whole, to separate which into its component parts is to break the entire fabric. All life to him was religion, and religion never received a name from him, because it never had for him an existence apart from all that had received a name. A department of thought which the people in whom it had its existence had thus failed to differentiate, has necessarily mixed itself inextricably with every other department of thought, and this is what makes it so difficult at the present day, to erect it into a separate entity.

DISCIPLE: In that case, let us hear how Western scholars define religion.

MASTER: There is confusion there as well. Let us begin with the derivative meaning of the word religion. The popular view is that it has originated from the word *re-ligare* and therefore really indicates a bond—a social bond. This is not what the great scholars think, however. Cicero says that the word is derived from *re-ligere*, which variously means a regathering, an accumulation, or a system of thought. Many, like Max Mueller, agree. But whichever be the correct meaning, it is evident that the word is no longer used in its original sense. Just as man's perception of religion has developed over the ages, so has the meaning of the word evolved and enlarged.

DISCIPLE: We have no use for old and archaic connotations; tell me, to what shall I give the name religion?

MASTER: One last word. In its derivative meaning, the word dharma is somewhat akin to the word *religio*. Dharma = *dhri + man* (*Dhriyate loko anena, dharati lokam va*).<sup>10</sup> I am therefore selecting the word 'religio' as the correct equivalent of dharma.

DISCIPLE: So be it. Now let me have the modern interpretation of religion.

MASTER: Germans are foremost among the modern scholars. Unfortunately, I have no knowledge of the German language

myself. Therefore, for a start, I shall read out their views from Max Mueller's book.<sup>a</sup> Here is Kant's opinion:

According to Kant, religion is morality. When we look upon all our moral duties as divine commands, that, he thinks constitutes religion. And we must not forget that Kant does not consider that duties are moral duties because they rest on divine command (that, according to Kant, would be merely revealed Religion); on the contrary, he tells us that because we are directly conscious of them as duties, therefore we look upon them as divine commands.

Next comes Fichte.<sup>11</sup> According to him, 'Religion is knowledge. It gives to a man a clear insight into himself, answers the highest questions, and thus imparts to us a complete harmony with ourselves, and a thorough sanctification to our mind.' The views of the Sāṅkhya school are similar; only the words chosen to convey them are different. Then there is Schleiermacher. In his opinion, 'Religion consists in our consciousness of absolute dependence on something, which, though it determines us, we cannot determine in our turn.' Hegel<sup>12</sup> aims a taunt at him when he says, 'Religion is or ought to be perfect freedom; for it is neither more or less than the divine spirit becoming conscious of himself through the finite spirit...' In some ways, this takes after the Vedānta philosophy.

DISCIPLE: No matter what it takes after, not one among these four views strikes me as being in the least acceptable. What is Max Mueller's own view?

MASTER: He says, 'Religion is a subjective faculty for the apprehension of the Infinite.'

DISCIPLE: Faculty! Oh my God! At least religion one could have understood with some effort. What shall one make of faculty? Where is the proof that it exists?

<sup>a</sup> This is an extract from a hitherto unpublished essay in English by the author. A Bengali translation of it could have been supplied had one wished, but in Bengali the argument would have seemed strange, and many readers would have failed to grasp its essential points. The purpose of writing fails if those for whom one writes cannot understand what one intends to say. The reader must therefore condone my disagreeable act of omitting a Bengali translation. To those who do not read English, it will make no difference if they skip this passage [B.C.C.].

MASTER: Leave the Germans for the time being and listen to one or two Englishmen whose views I have collected. Tylor<sup>13</sup> says that religion exists wherever there is a belief in 'spiritual beings'. What the expression 'spiritual beings' means here is not merely ghosts and spirits but a supernatural condition that transcends the known world and known phenomena. Gods and goddesses and even the Absolute Being are included in its meaning. Therefore there is compatibility between his definition of religion and yours.

DISCIPLE: But such a belief must stand the test of proof.

MASTER: All truth must. Only illusion need not. According to Marx, religion is a mere illusion. Now listen to John Stuart Mill's definition.

DISCIPLE: But Mill was only an ethicist, and an atheist at that.

MASTER: His later writings do not give that impression. Of course, there are inconsistencies in many places; but, in spite of everything, his definition is pretty apt insofar as the more sublime schools of religious thought are concerned. He says, 'The essence of religion is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object recognized as of the highest intelligence, and is rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire.'

DISCIPLE: Rather neatly put, I think.

MASTER: Not bad at all. Now listen to a recent utterance of *Āchārya*<sup>14</sup> Seeley.<sup>15</sup> Of the modern interpreters of the nature and meaning of religion, he is one of the greatest. His *Ecco Homo* and *Natural Religion* have impressed many. One of his pronouncements has recently become familiar to Bengali readers.<sup>b</sup> It is: 'The substance of religion is culture.' But really speaking, this view is not exactly Seeley's own. He made this pronouncement by way of an explanation of the views held by a certain group of people, and of which he happened to be writing a critique at the time. His own view is quite wide-ranging. According to it, religion is 'habitual and permanent admiration', and I must quote him fully to explain what he means by it.

<sup>b</sup> In the work *Devi Chaudhurani* [B.C.C.].

The words Religion and Worship are commonly and conveniently appropriated to the feelings with which we regard God. But those feelings—love, awe, admiration, which together make up worship—are felt in various combinations for human beings, and even for inanimate objects. It is not exclusively but only *par excellence* that religion is directed towards God. When feelings of admiration are very strong and at the same time serious and permanent, they express themselves in recurring acts, and hence arise ritual, liturgy and whatever the multitude identifies with religion. But without ritual, religion may exist in its elementary state and this elementary state of Religion is what may be described as habitual and permanent admiration.

DISCIPLE: Indeed, a most beautiful construction. And I see that it is in accordance with Mill's exposition as well, for the 'strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object recognized as of the highest excellence' is the result of the same mental state that denotes 'habitual and permanent admiration'.

MASTER: This mental state is only a part of religion; but be what it may, let me not vex you any more with the erudition of scholars. I shall wind up this discussion with the exposition of Auguste Comte. This requires careful attention, for Comte is the propounder of a novel religion himself, which he has founded on this very exposition of the word. He says, 'Religion in itself expresses the state of perfect unity which is the distinctive mark of man's existence both as an individual and in society, when all the constituent parts of his nature, moral and physical, are made habitually to converge towards one common purpose.' In other words, 'Religion consists in regulating one's individual nature and forms the rallying-point for all separate individuals.'

Of all the different interpretations I have given you, this strikes me as the best; and if it be true, then Hinduism is the greatest of all religions.

DISCIPLE: Let me understand religion first. I shall understand Hinduism later if I can. What with the different views of so many scholars, my state is somewhat like that of the seven blind men trying to form an impression of an elephant's form.<sup>16</sup>

MASTER: True. Has ever a man been born who had imbibed the full and complete essence of dharma through contemplation alone? Just as no one can see the whole of the universe with his

eyes, so also, no man can grasp the whole of dharma by his intelligence. Let alone other men, I cannot say with certainty that even Shākyaśingha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad or Chaitanya understood dharma in all its different implications and shades of meaning. Doubtless, they saw more than what others did; but the whole of it they did not. If there has been anybody who, after attaining human form and existence, has succeeded in absorbing the whole of dharma in his consciousness and spreading it among the people at large, it is the author of the Bhagavad Gita. Whether the teachings of the Gita are the utterances of Krishna the avatāra, or any other man, I cannot say; but if dharma has been expressed and revealed anywhere in its entirety, it is in the Bhagavad Gita.

#### NOTES

1. The heavenly architect of Hindu mythology.
2. The Lord of creation, procreation and propagation.
3. *Ibid.*
4. One of the six Darshanas or philosophical schools expounded by the sage Jaimini, disciple of Vyas, the author of the Mahābhārata. Early Meemāṃsā had no clear notion of God and believed that expected results would follow from highly ritualized acts of sacrifice.
5. 'Respect for elders, good deeds, penance, integrity, equanimity, contentment with one's wife, purity of mind, learning, freedom from jealousy, self-knowledge and the ability to endure and tolerate—O King! These are the qualities that constitute dharma.'
6. Those actions that the Aryans, learned in the Vedas laud, constitute dharma; those they condemn constitute adharmā.
7. Knowledge is of two kinds: *para* and *apara*.—Mundaka Upanishad, Part 1, Chapter 1, Verse 4. *Apara vidya* is knowledge on the mundane plane. The Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda, *śikṣa*, *kalpa*, *vyākaraṇa*, *nirukta*, *chhanda* and *jyotiṣa* comprise the *apara* type of knowledge. *Para vidya* is the knowledge of the Absolute Being. See also, Chapter 26 of this volume.
8. An important character in the Mahābhārata. The first-born of Kunti, mother of the Pāṇḍava princes. The child of Kunti's illicit premarital union with the Sun-god, he was abandoned by his mother to avoid scandal and was brought up by a chariot-driver. He grew to become an invincible warrior and was befriended by Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kaurava princes. His parentage is not disclosed until the war between the Kauravs and the Pāṇḍavas has become imminent.

9. To bear, carry, or support.
10. 'That on which the universe rests.'
11. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), German philosopher-patriot and exponent of transcendental idealism. Fichte saw religion as resting upon practical reason and as satisfying man's needs insofar as he operates under the influence of moral law. He showed the path that totalitarianism was to take later.
12. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), German idealist philosopher who developed the notion of a forward motion of ideas and history through a dialectical mixture of thesis and antithesis producing a 'higher' synthesis. Hegelianism greatly influenced existentialism, Marxism, Positivism and analytical philosophy.
13. E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) is generally held to be the founder of cultural anthropology. His major work *Primitive Culture* (1871) was deeply influenced by Darwin's theory of biological evolution. In this he put forward his thesis that animism was the earliest form of religion.
14. Teacher.
15. John Robert Seeley (1834–1895), English historian and thinker. His *Ecco Homo* (1865) and *A Life of Christ*, were deeply influenced by Christian humanism.
16. An old Indian fable in which seven blind men try to form an idea of an elephant's shape and size by running their hands along its body. One feels the trunk, another the tail, and so on. Each thinks that the elephant has the same form as the part he feels, but none can visualize it in its entirety.