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Dharma and religion in Tagore's views

Iwona MILEWSKA*

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), one of the greatest contemporary Indian thinkers, discussed the problem of comparative study of religion and faith on the grounds of global pluralism and religious diversity. He presented his views in numerous poetical works but he also delivered many speeches, mostly addressed to Western audiences. In his writing, Tagore often uses the English term "religion" and the Sanskrit term *dharma* interchangeably. This article focuses on both key terms and on the question whether they may be seen as equivalent according to him. To answer this question one needs to consider their etymological meanings but also Tagore's concepts of the so called "Man the Eternal" and "Divinity in Man".

KEYWORDS

Rabindranath Tagore; universal religion; *dharma*; *The Religion of Man*; Indian thought; freedom; comparative methodology; religious studies; philosophy of religion

* Assistant Professor at the Oriental Institute, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland. E-mail: milewska.iwona@gmail.com.

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> The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end (*Gitanjali* in: Tagore, 1913: 30).[1]

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the most outstanding contemporary Indian thinkers, devoted a large part of his attention to the spiritual problems of human existence. Apart from his expressing his deliberations through poetry,[2] he also gave a more precise intellectual explanation of his views on this subject in publications of a more philosophical nature. The clearest description of his worldview is included in the book entitled *The Religion of Man* (Tagore, 1931). It is based on a series of lectures he delivered in Oxford, in 1930. In this work, he tried to explain what the concept of religion meant to him, as far as reason can capture this — in many respects irrational — issue. He generally tended to use the term "religion" when he talked about this phenomenon, but the Sanskrit term *dharma* also appeared many times. Now, being inspired by Tagore's deliberations, we should consider more closely the following question: can these terms really be used interchangeably? To answer this question, we should first compare the range of their possible meanings. When doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of Tagore's position on the prospects and purpose of comparative methodologies in religious studies.

When one uses a phrase "comparative studies in religion(s)" it is obvious that the term "religion", which origined in Western culture, has a set of various meanings, each loaded with a particular significance. Thus, it is important to establish at the beginning of our study which meaning of the concept is actually being compared. Clearly, the term "religion" is often referred to in dictionaries as an equivalent of the Sanskrit word *dharma*. However, both terms are very complex and it is therefore highly questionable if, when using them, various writers or the general public have the same meaning in mind. The focus of this paper will

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[1] The first version of *Gitanjali* (English trans. *Song offerings*) was written in Bengali. Only then Tagore himself translated it into English. Even if its English version sounded, most probably, not so perfect to the poet's ear it inluenced the European reception of Tagore's works. One of the first to see its beauty and deepness was W. B. Yeats, who wrote an extended introduction to the first edition of these poems. From what is said there we can see that Tagore, in his try to understand and express the world, extended the domain of words to the one of different genres of art. He tried different means to explain what seems to be inexplicable in rational terms.

[2] One of the best European specialists in Bengali language and literature, and translator of a large number of Rabindranath Tagore's works, William Radice has written about the range of his works: "Not only did he write prolifically in all literary genres (except verse epic); he also wrote over two thousand songs — words and music — that have become the national music of Bengal, painted nearly three thousand paintings, and founded a unique school and university [...] poems and plays, short stories, novels and autobiography. [...] He also brought out volumes of the lectures he gave in many countries on Religion, Art, Education" (Radice in: Tagore, 1996: 1–2).

be limited only to the essential similarities and differences in understanding of "religion" and *dharma* as they were used by Rabindranath Tagore. The crucial questions is: to what extent was he influenced by the meaning of the Indian term *dharma* when he used the word "religion" in his lectures and the book, *The Religion of Man*?

Firstly, let us revisit the dictionary definition of the term "religion". The verification seems important in that sense it shows how this term is understood not only by specialists but also by general public, as Tagore addressed his lectures and his book to both audiences. One of the dictionaries that might be cited here is the *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English*. It was edited, for the first time, nearly seventy years ago and since then it has been reprinted with only slight improvements. It indicates the unchanged understanding of the word. The definition given explains the modern concept of religion as follows: (1) belief in the existence of a supernatural ruling power, the creator and controller of the universe, who has given to man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body; (2) one of the various systems of faith and worship based on such belief: the great religions of the world, *e.g.*, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism; (3) life as lived under the rules of a monastic order; (4) matter of conscience; something that one considers oneself bound to do (Hornby et al., 1980: 712).

As we can see, the above formulations present a very broad range of possible meanings. They cover at least three major notions of the word "religion" (particular monastic order can be treated as inclusive as far as certain systems of faith are treated). These are: belief in a supernatural power that is higher than a human being, the name for any system of faith understood as a complex bunch of detailed rules and particular rituals gathered under the same name and, finally, a matter of conscience of each individual man. It seems that the easiest task for any specialist working on the subject is to describe religion in its second definition. The comparative studies of religions have been done for years and have given some interesting results of more or less clear descriptions of similarities and differences between particular systems of beliefs and rituals forming separate religions. However, one may ask whether they really touch the germ of this phenomenon called "religion"? This was one of the major questions put forth by Tagore. If something is connected to the belief of an individual human being, can we really describe it using only the description of a particular set of rituals and laws characteristic for Christianity or Hinduism, *etc*.? This we can do in strictly rational terms, but is it sufficient for a definition to be complete? Can one accept this interpersonal discussion or exchange of ideas in which only the outer appearances of this phenomenon are described at full length? Tagore's answer was no. He was not interested in comparative studies of this kind and neglects the comparative methodology only used in this way. What he tried to show is, first of all, the importance of the unique individual experience. So, he

emphasised that the only way to understand the phenomenon of religion is to share a description of one's own experience with others, in as detailed a way as possible. This is what he proposed to call a "comparative methodology". Just by trying to express and share one's own unique religious experience, we can exchange religious ideas and our views on the topic. Nevertheless, many such comparisons still may result in only what he defines as knowledge, yet k n o w l e d g e does not touch the truth as far as any b e l i e f is concerned. It is not enough to u n d e r s t a n d the deeper nature of the human being in their relationship with divinity. He claimed that:

> The world of our knowledge is enlarged for us through the extension of our information, [whereas] the world of our personality grows in its area with a large and deeper experience of our personal self in our own universe through sympathy and imagination (Tagore, 1931: 129).

In his conversation with Albert Einstein, which took place in 1930, Tagore tried to explain to this outstanding scientist his own understanding of the difference between a man's material and spiritual aspects of life (or rather Man, as he preferred to call a human being) by saying:

> Science is concerned with that which is not confined to individuals; it is the impersonal human world of truths. [However] religion realizes these truths and links them up with our deeper needs; our individual consciousness of truth gains universal significance. [...] Religion applies values to truth, and we know truth as good through our own harmony with it (Tagore, 1931: 222).

Naturally, one of the vital questions here is what he had in mind when he spoke about truth in its relation to religion. When he came to the explanation of the phenomenon called "religion", especially as it is understood in the West, he again said that it may be experienced only in the perspective of each individual; it is individual who should seek a divinity in oneself. Only through this discovery, he explained, can one name every human being "Man, the Eternal", Man, who is divine. Man, who has found divinity deeply within himself. He claimed that this divinity of Man is to be f e l t rather than u n d e r s t o o d as its deep nature is irrational. It can be experienced rather than discussed because it extends the world of knowledge as defined above.

The next question is to what extent was Tagore's thought and his way of explaining the phenomenon of religion rooted in Indian tradition? We need to reflect about whether an understanding of the foundations of Indian philosophical and religious tradition proves to be a precondition for understanding his theory as such. One can be misled, since in *The Religion of Man* he often labels a spiritual experience with the term "religion" rather than anything else. Maybe, as he addressed the European audience, he decided to use a well-known

word to describe it, ignoring all divergences and various aspects differentiating the Western term, "religion", and the native concept of *dharma*. The important question here is did he really mean "religion" in the Western sense of the word or in the Indian sense of *dharma*, which he apparently identified with religion? Let us look closer at the term *dharma*, exploring its definition. What are the equivalents given for the term "religion" there? It is worth mentioning that the dictionary here taken into consideration is the one entitled, *A dictionary English and Sanskrit*, edited by Monier Monier-Williams, one of the most influential European Indologists of the nineteenth century. This dictionary is widely known and has been used since its first edition in 1851, wherein the word "religion" has equivalents in the following Sanskrit terms: (1) *dharma*; (2) *īśvarabhaktiḥ*; (3) *devabhaktiḥ*; (4) *bhaktiḥ*; (5) *īśvarasenā* (Monier-Williams, 1989: 674).

As we can see, the first equivalent for the term "religion" is "dharma". Terms such as *īśvarabhaktiḥ*, *devabhaktiḥ*, *bhaktiḥ* and *īśvarasenā* translate to "religion" as a concept in which the personal relations of man and god are the most important. Let us focus here only on the first suggested equivalent: religion as *dharma*. Many other questions implied by the remaining meanings, like the difference between the concepts of *īśvara* and *deva*, have to be omitted due to the particular difficulties in their respective interpretations. They may form separate topics of complex deliberation and, at the same time, are irrelevant to the major topic of this article. As far as the concept of *dharma* is concerned, we have quite a number of difficulties with the full and deep exposition of its range of meanings. Similarly to the method used above with the term "religion", let us look at the appropriate entry given in Monier-Williams' dictionary. It says that *dharma* is: (1) that which is established or firm, a steadfast decree, statute, ordinance, law; (2) usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty; (3) right, justice (often as a synonym of punishment); (4) virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, good works; (5) nature, character, peculiar condition or essential quality, property, mark, peculiarity; (6) sacrifice; (7) religious abstraction, devotion (Monier-Williams, Leumann, & Capeller, 1995: 510)[3].

This Sanskrit noun *dharma* is derived from the root *dhṛ*. Major meanings cover the following: (1) to hold, bear (also bring forth), carry, maintain, preserve, keep, possess, have, use, employ, practice, undergo; (2) to preserve soul or body, continue living, survive (when in connection with *ātmānam*, *jīvitam*, *prāṇān*, *deham*, *śarīram*, *etc.*); (3) to place or fix in, bestow or confer on; (4) to conceive, be pregnant (when with *garbham*); (5) to inflict punishment on (when accompanied with *daṇḍam*); (6) to draw the reins tight (with *raśmīn* or *praharān*); (7) to fulfil a duty (with *dharmam*); (8) to be firm, keep steady; (9) to continue living, exist, remain (Monier-Williams, Leumann, & Capeller, 1995: 519).

[3] Here there are chosen only the meanings which refer to the main topic of this article. Secondary meanings are omited.

It is clear that the range of dictionary meanings for the word *dharma* is much broader than that of the term "religion". First of all, it is understood as something that is established or steadfast or firm (this meaning comes out directly out of the first meaning of the root *dhṛ* from which this noun is derived). Does it mean that the concept of *dharma* is what belongs to the obvious truths that should not be discussed? Tagore's opinion seems to follow this line of thinking. In *The Religion of Man* he gave a more detailed explanation of how he understood *dharma*. His first observation was:

> In Sanskrit language, religion goes by the name *dharma*, which in derivative meaning implies the principle of relationship that holds us firm, and in its technical sense means the virtue of a thing, the essential quality of it; for instance, heat is the essential quality of fire, though in certain of its stages it may be absent. [...] *Dharma* represents the truth of the Supreme Man (Tagore, 1931: 141).

By giving examples he also stated that *dharma* may be simultaneously understood as the most important part of Man. Additionally, he emphasised that *dharma* is "the humanity of human beings" (Tagore, 1931: 152). He said, "civilization is to express Man's *dharma* and not merely his cleverness, power and possession" (Tagore, 1931: 147). He thought that freedom is the most important factor of Man's life on the earth and as such it "enables us to realize *dharma*, the truth of Eternal Man" (Tagore, 1931: 153). In the preceding part of the book he explains his understanding of the phenomenon of freedom by saying that:

> Freedom in the mere sense of independence has no content, and therefore no meaning. Perfect freedom lies in a perfect harmony of relationship, which we realize in this world not through our response to it in knowing, but in being (Tagore, 1931: 170).

He also adds:

> In India, poetry and philosophy have walked hand in hand, only because the latter has claimed its right to guide men to the practical path of their life's fulfilment. What is that fulfilment? It is our freedom in truth (Tagore, 1931: 181).

Tagore and many other thinkers believed that the concept of *dharma* is one of the most important ideas of Indian culture. As shown above it may be understood at extremely broad and different levels. It can concern the individual human being or a society as a whole. Such a wide variety of meanings referring to different levels of understanding might be confusing for readers, especially Westerners. To give an example, let us cite Richard Gombrich, who says that *dharma* "is an image of the world's construction and a program for human conduct that are mere reflexes of one another" (Gombrich, 1978: 10). In his understanding, he seemed to be close to what Tagore had in mind. Gombrich also admits:

> If the semantic field of a word is so wide as to designate everything that both is and should be the case, it is certainly the term extremely difficult to be understood or translated to other languages. No wonder that it gives trouble to translators. [...] [It] is also the sum of all actions prescribed by tradition (Gombrich, 1978: 10–11).

Gombrich tried to show the correspondence between at least two possible interpretations of the term *dharma*. He finished his text with a surprising statement: "On the whole I think that *dharma* is a bad thing. First of all it is a horrible intellectual mess" (Gombrich, 1978: 19). As one can see, Gombrich only deliberated on the first and the second meanings of *dharma*. He neglected the others, especially, and what is most interesting to us, the last one: "religious abstraction, devotion". Clearly, he only tried to deal with the issue in rational terms. Therefore, he could not find one proper explanation to this complex set of meanings. Perhaps to fully reveal the meaning of *dharma*, the best way would be to explain it exactly in the way Tagore did. Thus, let us summarize how he defines this concept in his *Religion of Man*. For Tagore *dharma* is: (1) the innermost nature, essence, truth, ultimate purpose in our self; (2) higher nature of man that seeks transcendence; (3) the way of life rather than religion; (4) a will to transcend the limit of self and realize the divinity of man (Tagore, 1931: *passim*).

According to Tagore, the most important aspect of religion and *dharma* was that both concepts could be identified with the will to transcend the limit of the self-centred being towards an ideal state of perfection. Religion, as well as *dharma*, is intended:

> [to inspire] in us works that are the expressions of a Universal Spirit; it invokes unexpectedly in the midst of a self-centred life a supreme sacrifice. At its call, we hasten to dedicate our lives to the cause of truth and beauty, to unrewarded service of others, in spite of our lack of faith in the positive reality of the ideal values (Tagore, 1931: 15–16).

This is the explanation he found most proper for both terms. From their broad range of meanings, in the content of his book he stressed this explanation as the only vital one, the one that touches the germ of the concept of transcendence of oneself, which leads to divinity. He called it "divinity of Man". Any other explanation to him seemed secondary or derivative. What is worth noting in that this particular meaning is included in both sets of definitions cited above from the English and Sanskrit dictionaries.

Regarding the question asked at the beginning of this paper, whether "religion" and *dharma* can be used interchangeably, we should stress in line with the author of *The Religion of Man* that their core meanings can overlap if we focus on a deep individual experience of divinity rather than the social, cultural or ritual phenomena they imply. Although, the concept of religion and *dharma* differ in many respects, Tagore believed both concepts may be equally applied to

every human being regardless of their culture. Whether this individual religious or dharmic experience can be articulated and rationally captured is a different matter. Certainly its understanding is culturally determined because each religious or dharmic tradition and its possible linguistic expression is internalised and unconsciously absorbed by the individual raised in a particular milieu. Also, that is why one can only compare different religions to a certain extent. However, Tagore's main thesis is that both religion and *dharma* signify the infinite search of a man for his or her divinity, and to fulfil this universal human need we are able to carry out comparative studies of religion. As Tagore strongly believes, it is possible to find a common background or similar features in various spiritual paths, let us call them religions or *dharmas*, whether they originated in the West or the East. His dream was that human beings achieve the point "when the streams of ideals that flow from the East and from the West mingle their murmur in some profound harmony of meaning" (Tagore, 1931: 87).

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